

University Road

Leicester LE1 7RH · UK

Tel: +44 (0) 116 252 2611

Fax: +44 (0) 116 252 5005

Dr David N Edwards BA MLitt PhD FHEA

Direct tel: +44 (0) 116 252 2881

e-mail: dne1@le.ac.uk

Joanna Ciesielska : ‘Social inference from mortuary remains in medieval Nubia: A multidisciplinary approach to the analysis and interpretation of Christian cemeteries at Ghazali, northern Sudan.’

This is a very interesting and generally successful research project which makes a significant contribution to the mortuary archaeology of medieval (Christian) Nubia, and more specifically to the archaeology of the important monastic centre of Ghazali. The project presents much new evidence relating to more than 100 excavated tombs, presented and discussed in the main text as supporting appendix. Significant variabilities between and within the different cemeteries/burial groups are detected and explored, some successfully confirming prior assumptions relating to the site as a whole and its spatial organisation, while other results prove more equivocal, and at this time of less certain significance. Interesting results were provided by isotopic studies, a research field still in its infancy in Nubian contexts. Such results will make a useful contribution to the future development of such studies in this region.

Introduction: This outlines, in quite general terms, the ‘state of research’ in relation to medieval Nubia, if largely restricted to cultural (rather than bioarchaeological/ anthropological) studies. The range of data to be studied comprising the “mortuary remains” are also explained, including both formal/architectural features of burials, spatial patterning and possible external (textual) evidence as well as the biological characteristics of the buried. In respect of the latter the use of isotopic analysis marks a potentially interesting and innovative approach. A general framework for this particular study is presented and some potential sources of diversity amongst burial populations indicated. The overall chapter structure of the project is also here explained, in addition to the separate (non-chapter) Introduction and Conclusion.

Chapter 1 (pp.15-21) : presents a brief historical introduction to the development of medieval Nubia, its historic kingdoms and overall religious history. This provides some essential basic historical background to such a study, although little concerning the development of the Nubian Church or its institutions.

Chapter 2 (pp.23-40) : provides an introduction to what is known of Christian burial practices in medieval Nubia. Some observations on some aspects of the development of Christian burial practices in the late antique and medieval world, mainly based on textual sources, and some reflections on the development of local traditions, not least in relation to observed changes in Nubia in the post-Meroitic period. Possible

other sources of variability in grave forms are also discussed leading into a section considering 'Christian burial customs' more specifically the known variability of grave architecture (superstructures and substructures), which provides the basis for the Ghazali study. Other potential sources of information such as a grave stele are introduced, if not at this stage explaining their potential value as sources of information for researchers. The treatment of the buried bodies in burials is then discussed, with useful clarification of some of the more distinctive Christian practices such as protection of the head, the shrouding of bodies as well as some brief observations on the deposition of artefacts in Christian Nubia burials, rare, as is common in other Christian contexts.

Chapter 3 (pp.41-134) provides a very large core element to the thesis, in 5 sections (0-5). The site and fieldwork history of the site was first introduced. The next section (1) then introduced the Ghazali cemeteries and their organisation and established their main characteristics and likely significance. The results of some radiocarbon sampling across the site were also presented, if with some equivocal results (which perhaps requires further clarification?). Section 2 presents largely descriptive information concerning the four cemeteries (1-4, although cemetery 4 does not seem to be located), supported with some often excellent illustrations. Summary descriptions are provided for each cemetery (if not in an entirely consistent format) on funerary architecture and specific burials features such as the protection of the head and 'body furnishings', interspersed with some comparative observations and interpretation. Section 3 provides a brief discussion (c.2pp. + images) of textual information recovered from grave stele at the site, if with limited outcomes, apart from confirmation of the presence of at least one female.

The final large section summarises the anthropological/bioarchaeological data relating to the excavated burials (MNI=126). This presents the basic demographic data for the primarily male (monastic) cemetery 2 and three smaller samples from other cemeteries (1,3,4) with (perhaps surprising) sex profiles. Further data, for example relating to pathological lesions and other details were recorded and included in Appendix 1, but not further explored if apparently to be separately published. As well as basic demographic patterns basic data on 'stature' and stress markers were considered. Some general observations in relation to comparisons between cemetery populations were offered and the interesting question about whether there might be Egyptian of components among monastic communities, a question that reemerges with other analyses. The final sub-section (4.3) was devoted to presenting the isotopic investigations, developed with a collaborator Dr Robert Stark, focused on isotopic variation potentially relating to population dietary variability and mobility, particularly interesting and relevant questions in the context of a site such as Ghazali with potential links to the Baiyuda interior, as well as likely presence of distinctive monastic lifestyles/foodways. This contains interesting methodological material and makes good use of comparative zooarch samples from nearby sites and modern river fish. An extensive discussion of oxygen isotope markers was presented, if with an uncertain conclusion in this chapter.

Chapter 4 (pp.135-153) This chapter reverts to consider more general background issues concerning how and in what ways mortuary data may be studied, drawing on a range of well-known (if largely 'prehistoric') theoretical approaches developed in various archaeological realms over the last century, often framed in terms of more processual and derivative discourses. This concludes with a series of 'hypotheses' ultimately relating to the exploration of burial data - if without clarification of how and in what ways these might be 'tested' and how these may relate to the more general explanations of research aims presented at the start of the next chapter.

Chapter 5 (pp.155-207) provides a more substantial discussion of the data previously presented and discussed, and particularly if and how social distinctions may be manifested in the cemetery data from Ghazali. A central feature of the data and its analysis concerns possible distinctions between the monastic (cemetery 2) and presumed non-monastic/lay cemeteries nearby (1,3,4). The anthropological data demonstrates well a largely adult male burial population, likely mainly the monastic community also documented in the funerary stele. The more limited samples studied from the other cemeteries present a less clear if complex picture, nonetheless interesting. The formal/structural variability of grave forms, below and above the ground is further discussed. This, in many respects, confirms previous observations from elsewhere in Nubia, and indeed in other periods. This also draws attention to the predominance of mudbrick in the construction of 'monastic' burials, and possible explanations, if without a much closer engagement with potentially comparable sites (monastic or lay) elsewhere in Nubia. Distinctions evident between the 'box-graves' in cemeteries 1 and 3 are also considered. Similarities are noted with burial forms associated with potential agro-pastoralist burials of the Bayuda interior, as one regional comparison of such widely encountered grave forms.

Comparisons were also drawn between isotopic data for monastic and lay populations. Distinctive markers for the monastic populations are again of particular interest, and possible explanations are considered. Some of the results will clearly be wider interest for isotopic research beyond specific concerns if this period. Strontium and oxygen isotopes suggest considerable diversity within the monastic population albeit without further exploring here what 'long-range mobility' might relate to. Variability amongst the lay population raise some interesting questions, including the possibility of buried individuals originating the river valley.

Further discussions are developed concerning internal variability detected within the 'monastic' cemetery. Variability of grave monuments in forms and scale, potentially indicators of variable status are also discussed, although the differences from political and ecclesiastical centres such as Old Dongola might merit more explicit recognition? A number of statistical analyses were undertaken of both above and below ground features. Internal variability indicated in isotopic signatures was further examined, if with equivocal results. Further discussion of potential monastic hierarchies are also discussed, again with a lack of clear outcomes it seems. Issues of personal property are also discussed, as well as the incidence of female burials and possible explanations in such a context. The chapter finishes with the presentation of some brief conclusions concerning the spatial distribution of funerary features. Some spatial patterning and clear distinctions are emphasised, if some might consider it premature to locate this in monastic participation in 'the market economy'. Interesting differences between lay and monastic have certainly been detected. The existence of occasional idiosyncrasies in burial treatments are also interestingly highlighted. The specific constraints of such a study of a medieval Christian cemetery are also acknowledged. A separate and rather different set of Conclusions (pp.209-214) are then presented, offering some further observations and reflections.

This thesis is certainly very interesting and clearly a quite successful research project overall with significant results. The first such modern study of a monastic cemetery which also allows comparisons with 'lay' burials in a single location, this makes a significant contribution to the mortuary archaeology of medieval (Christian) Nubia, as well as the site itself. It has some unusual features, not least in combining both anthropological/bioarchaeological analyses as well as the archaeological data concerning burial practices, which might more usually be separated in PhD projects where specialisation of research interests and skills is more commonly. This is a strength to this study, as a truly multidisciplinary study, demonstrating quite

wide-ranging skills in conducting independent scientific research, if also at times placing constraints on what can be achieved within a single thesis project. Necessarily, it has - understandably - not proved possible to pursue a number of avenues which might have been explored further in such a study. That some significant anthropological data are indicated as being published elsewhere, is a case in point.

A specialist anthropologist may be better qualified than myself to comment further on this, but it was noticeable that chapter 1, while providing an overview of the current state of knowledge of a medieval/Christian mortuary archaeology, the nature and scope of more specifically bioarchaeological/physical anthropological studies of medieval/Christian sites were not considered or reviewed. While a number of these were subsequently referenced, this seems an omission, not least as the scarcity of previous studies makes this research so important. Such background would also be useful in explaining the more specific goals, and value, of this project. There is also little reference at this stage to the existing bioarchaeological literature relating to Nubia in all general, to better locate this study. While much of the most recent wave of cemetery studies from the Fourth Cataract regions have yet to be published, there is a not insignificant body of publications which might usefully be acknowledged at an early stage.

On a similar vein, in Chapter 2, it might be suggested that in the course of providing an overview of the main cultural (rather than bioarchaeological/ anthropological) features of Christian Nubian burial, it might have been appropriate to illustrate known forms/grave typologies of medieval Nubian burial? This might perhaps be the place to draw out potential observable variables in medieval Christian practice as well as current thinking is concerning differences between monastic and lay cemeteries (for example) , or the possibility of regional variability. Previous general studies, by Adams for example, have been both limited in scope and geographical coverage, while much new data has been collected in the 21st century. Again anthropological studies have also been very limited, if with some notable exceptions. It might have been appropriate to demonstrate a greater familiarity with some of the pioneering excavations in Christian Nubia, not least in early 20th century, not least where large numbers of medieval burials were excavated?

Chapter 3 is rich in data and descriptive presentation of the varied material recovered in the four cemeteries at Ghazali. The structure can at times be frustrating for a reader, not least where the presentation as well as comparison and interpretation of material can become interwoven at this early stage. Adopting a more structured approach which allows a more systematic and progressive structure would, to my mind, be desirable. This would be useful and probably necessary due to the complexity of the data being explored, both concerning the more tangible aspects of excavated burials, as well as the interesting as well as varied bioarchaeological data. A greater separation of these at the initial stage of data presentation might have worked better perhaps, then allowing a reintegration of these various forms of data in later interpretative sections?

Structurally, the subsequent Chapter 4 perhaps sits less well, as a more general discussion of social inferences from mortuary remains, half way through the thesis. The relevant parts to this surely should provide a point of departure. Acknowledgement of some of the theoretical background, and challenges which archaeologists may face are appropriate within a doctoral project and in developing such research, but a more critical assessment of the usefulness and relevance of such work to studies of historic/medieval Christian burial might also be expected? This might fit better at an early stage, in introducing the project as a whole, and its expectations? There is a large body of medieval mortuary archaeology which might better have informed this Nubian study. The extent to which the 'hypotheses' which come out of this chapter fit well with other goals might be questioned, and perhaps reduced to more

basic aims relevant to the available evidence: exploring variability amongst burial practices, and aspects of biological variability between/within populations? As returned to in the conclusions it is not clear what the hypothesis might be: [that 'social distinctions may be detected in cemetery data?'] or in fact whether that is the rationale for undertaking all mortuary archaeology? Asking meaningful questions that we can expect to answer is always crucial. The thesis is always at its strongest when clearly focussed on answerable questions, confronted with evidence.

Further interpretation of the data in the crucial Chapter 5, drawing out possible social implications of the data contains much interesting material and there are clearly significant results here. This reviewer found the structure lacked clarity and consistency, based around 2 sub-headings (compared to 27 numbered subheadings in Chapter 3, for example). The fundamental distinctions between the 'monastic' cemetery and others emerges quite clearly but the several other interesting issues could often be more clearly expressed, not least in integrating different strands of data relevant to similar topics. The further investigation of what can be determined in term of the internal organisation of cemetery 2 could, to my mind, be clearer; we can be sure that all cemeteries are not 'randomly constructed' surely? There is a wealth of archaeological data from the medieval Christian world which should guide our expectations, perhaps. The core results of the statistical analyses would merit clearer explication (p.170) although how significant (socially) such variability perhaps needs addressing further? Much ingenuity is demonstrated in explaining patterns in the data, while the data on tombstones and property perhaps distract from the core issues at this stage in the thesis, while neither seem to be able to add significantly to interpretations of this data. The apparent absence of more obviously high-status burials, of types known from Old Dongola, Faras etc might be significant here? From a wider perspective the relative homogeneity of burial practices seen here might, to some, seem more persuasive? Here again the final conclusions, with their reliance on the authority of external Egyptian, and textual as much as archaeological sources (p.205) of evidence perhaps undermines the value of the Nubian evidence. Some of the expectations expressed that mortuary studies might ever be 'straightforward' (p.207) are perhaps also surprising.

More positive conclusions might perhaps have been presented in the final Conclusions, and these are perhaps, again, not very clearly expressed, in relation to the stated aims elsewhere. Clear final statements of how Ghazali relates to known Nubian practices would be helpful. In terms of future work some specific indications of what kinds of data might be appropriate - not least as the data already collected has not yet been exhaustively analysed. To understand Ghazali better what might be looked for? In terms of meaningful 'questions we ask', what in fact might these be? The overall results are clearly interesting and relevant and raise questions for our understandings of medieval burial (and populations) in different parts of Nubia, but in what specific ways is never really explained or pursued further. Differences between religious and lay communities, and between different elements of lay populations (urban/rural/farmer/herder /by regions etc) might all be related to these results. Progress has been made in some areas, not in others. Larger assemblages of what kinds of data? Is it a matter of 'consistent methodology', to allow us to directly read social identities from burial data? This is surely not what is meant? This final statement perhaps needs revisiting?

The substantial Volume II of Appendices with tabulated dated from excavated burials at Ghazali, demonstrates the work that has gone into the data-collection aspects of the project. This provides a valuable overview of skeletal biology and pathologies etc, if not all further analysed in the thesis. Might this merit some more explanation, again perhaps making clear the particular circumstances of this study; not least that this is not a final and complete report? In terms of possible differentiation between monastic

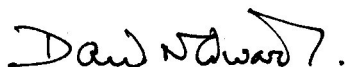
and lay communities, the incidence of markers of 'farming' lifestyles for example, commonly observed in a number of Nubia populations by Judd and others (e.g. Gabati II), might be relevant? Large numbers of fractures are recorded but not further discussed in main text.

This is a useful list of many post-Meroitic and Christian cemeteries in Nubia, if not drawn on in the body of the thesis. Occasional typographic errors noted. Chittck 1957 = Chittick. de Villiard = de Villard. There are some omissions evident e.g. Mills 1965, 1966, in Kush, cited in bibliography but not in Appendix. In relation to the specific concerns of this PhD, this general information is perhaps also not essential (except as in terms of familiarity with the broader archaeology) while few sites have been excavated and/or published. To be most useful, accompanying maps to locate sites might also be helpful; where regional variability might be one issue of relevance. The 'Location' information is otherwise very variable.

A few other presentational issues are noted, although the quality of the figures is generally very high. Illustrations only start in Chapter 3, on.p.42, where some orientation/explanatory figures might have been helpful in introduction and first chapters. Location of Cemetery 4 is - I think- not clear on site plans. While the wider Nubian literature does not seem to have been much explored and some significant omissions in bioarchaeological/anthropological literature cited. Might, for example, Dzierzykay Rogalski's study of the Faras bishops be cited or Neilsen's Scandinavian Joint Expedition results? Are there not comparisons to be drawn with burial forms known from othrr known monastic centres (Old Dongola, Faras)? An illustrated typology of known medieval grave forms might also be useful at an early stage to contextualise Ghazali.

Recommendation: this is a useful and generally successful research project, analysing substantial bodies of data in a number of interesting ways. The candidate seems to have a good general understanding of the research field, although not always displaying this effectively. This project represents a significant addition to medieval Nubian mortuary archaeology, with important additional original elements, particularly in archaeological science. In places innovative methods are used, often with success and certainly interesting results, much of it of publishable standard. The multi-disciplinary approach adopted perhaps poses additional challenges for the researcher, and at times the integration of diverse strands is perhaps not fully convincing. A specialist anthropological reviewer may have further comments on some technical aspects of that research. That further analysis would be possible seems clear, but within the constraints of this multi-stranded PhD project, a comprehensive study would not seem achievable.

A number of issues and potentially less convincing elements have been noted which, in the UK practice would nevertheless allow a Positive outcome, subject to 'corrections', subsequent to a viva voce. Most of those issues are very much in terms of ensuring the most effective presentation of the material; in a number of places a clearer progressive structure working towards a single set of definitive conclusions is desirable. Adopting a more consistent chapter-heading-subheading structure and adapting and re-ordering the text to accommodate this would be satisfactory. That some elements may, by the end of the project, seem less necessary or relevant than earlier in the process (e.g. Meroitic and post-Meroitic burial practices) might be borne in mind. This would provide an opportunity to edit out some less useful elements and to further develop and elaborate the more interesting positive outcomes of the project, strengthening the final thesis. There are many issues here which it would be interesting to pursue further in a viva voce.



David N Edwards PhD University of Leicester, UK