Invisible Archaeologies

Hidden aspects of daily life in ancient Egypt and Nubia

edited by

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Access Archaeology

Archaeopress Access Archaeology

Archaeopress Publishing Ltd
Summertown Pavilion
18-24 Middle Way
Summertown
Oxford OX2 7LG

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-78969-375-1
ISBN 978-1-78969-376-8 (e-Pdf)

Front cover: Window at el-Khandaq town, Sudan (Photograph Loretta Kilroe)

Back cover: el-Khandaq town, Sudan (Photograph Loretta Kilroe)

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Introduction

Loretta Kilroe

The societies of ancient Egypt and Nubia are some of the best studied in the field of archaeology. Their abundance of written sources, tomb remains, and temple monuments have historically provided scholars with key insights into the royal court, temple rituals, and lifestyles of elite officials. However, this focus on written and elite culture has often meant that our picture of ancient lifeways is selective and incomplete. A tomb autobiography, intended to promote the deceased's achievements for the afterlife, can tell us nothing of aspects of past transgressions he wished to hide. A deposit filled with intricately wrought trinkets, buried inside a temple, conveys nothing of the people responsible for their manufacture. A ruined town, while preserving architecture, cannot tell us of the memories and relationships of the people who once lived within its walls. Or can they?

Over the past 20 years, archaeologists have begun to use material culture to broach broader cultural questions relating to ancient lifestyles. Research into topics such as the social meaning of pottery (Eckert 2008), and the role of memory in activity (Dobres 2001; Hamilakis 2013) has broadened our understanding of ancient pathways, while successful attempts to access the lives of individuals in communities other than elite men have widened the scope of anthropological assessments (e.g. Meskell 1998; 2002; David 2017; Li 2017; Hinson 2018). The application of theoretical models to Egyptology – including landscape archaeology (Richards 2005; Shirley 2008), communities of practice (Stark 2006; Feldman 2014), and culture-contact relations (Schneider 2010; Hahn 2012) – has been particularly fruitful. Such methodologies are becoming of increasing interest to Egyptologists, who are harnessing the potential these hold to expand upon our understanding of the ancient communities under study (e.g. Smith 2003; Stevenson 2009; Hulin 2013; Paul Van Pelt 2013; Walsh in press). My fieldwork pertaining to the analysis of Egyptian and Nubian ceramics (Kilroe 2019; in press) continually impressed upon me the complex ways that material culture reflects not only network exchanges and manufacturing techniques, but also local identities and adaptive behaviours that are often poorly represented in official sources. As such, it seemed timely to bring together doctoral and early-career researchers working on these 'invisible' archaeologies within the discipline, to forge links and to encourage the sharing of ideas.

'Invisible archaeologies: hidden aspects of daily life in ancient Egypt and Nubia' was held on the 17th November 2017, at The Queen's College, University of Oxford. This conference was made possible with the generous support of the Griffith Institute and The Queen's College. Oxford was the ideal setting for such an event, with an anthropological focus increasingly encouraged by its chairs; Professor John Baines (1976–2013) and Professor Richard Bruce Parkinson (2013–current). The day

featured an international contingent of 13 speakers, presenting on a diverse range of subject matter to an encouraging audience of 100 delegates. An introduction was given by Professor Richard Bruce Parkinson, who gave a fascinating insight into the historic involvement of The Queen's College in the field of Egyptology, and featured a keynote lecture by Professor David Wengrow, University College London, entitled 'Making visible the invisible: African foundations of Ancient Egypt'.

This publication features eight of the speakers from the conference and delves deeper into their current research into the more invisible aspects of ancient Egypt and Nubia. Amongst these papers, a key theme of the conference quickly emerges, discussing invisible groups within the ancient community. Alex Loktionov in his paper, 'Tortured, Banished, Forgotten (and frequently Ripped Off)? Experience of Ancient Egyptian Criminal Judgment and its Consequences through the 2nd Millennium BCE', deals with sources relating to prisoners, and considers how we can reconstruct the impact that judicial punishment would have on Egyptian life; both in this world and the next. Siobhan Shinn, in her paper 'Communities of Glyptic Practice in Predynastic Egypt', explores the evidence for a specific learning environment within and between which craftsmen shared knowledge, techniques, and ideas, acting as a background to the creation and distribution of early seals in the Predynastic period.

The invisible relationships between individuals can take many different forms in the material culture remains. Marissa Stevens, in her paper 'Family Associations Reflected in the Materiality of 21st Dynasty Funerary Papyri', uses textual evidence to conceptualise elite perspectives on family groups towards the end of the New Kingdom. Kate Fulcher, in her paper 'Practising Craft and Producing Memories in ancient Nubia', uses scientific analysis to reconstruct the use of colour at the site of Amara West in Sudan, to reveal how painted decoration produced and embodied memory and experience within the community. Jacqueline M. Huwyler, in her paper '(Re)Shaping Identities: Culture-Contact Theories Applied to the Late Bronze Age "Egyptian" Pantheon and People', applies anthropological methodology to Egyptology to identify how interactions with foreign groups influenced ideology and identity within the Nile valley.

The crucial role funerary sources play in our reconstruction of the ancient world is never more evident than in Egypt, and burial practices are an important source for understanding Egyptian perspectives on the world around them. Ilaria Davino, in her paper 'Elite and common people. Redefining burial practices in ancient Egypt', tackles this complex subject by assessing burial customs and behaviours, assessing how they may relate to ideological belief throughout the Pharaonic period. Taichi Kuronuma, in his paper 'Displayed graves: A study of Predynastic Naqada Burials as the device for the mortuary ceremony', assesses the ideological implications of mortuary practices in Predynastic Egypt, and analyses the use of grave goods as a means of display. Antonio Muńoz, in his paper 'Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, a landscape for the Afterlife: Reciprocity in shaping life histories', uses landscape archaeology

to develop a holistic understanding of the Theban necropolis and the relationship between the tombs and the wider surrounding environment.

This publication seeks to contribute towards the growing focus on these and other understudied groups and topics in ancient Egypt and Nubia, and to encourage further collaboration moving forward. All opinions cited in the articles are of the relevant author.

On behalf of the organising committee, we are extremely grateful to our keynote speakers, Professor Richard Bruce Parkinson, and Professor Wengrow, for speaking at the conference. Further gratitude goes to our authors, speakers, volunteers, and all who attended the conference and made it a success.

Unreserved thanks are due to The Queen's College and the Griffith Institute for their financial support, without which the conference would not have been possible. Further credit is due to the library staff at The Queen's College for allowing tours of the Peet Library, as well as the Catering and Conference staff whose assistance and support were invaluable.

Loretta Kilroe, Editor. Oxford 2019.

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