
Rosetta

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Eileen Goulding. *What did the poor take with them? An investigation into ancient Egyptian Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasty grave assemblages from Qau, Badari, Matmar and Gurob*. London, Golden House Publications, 2013. Pp viii & 130. \$ 50.00. ISBN 13 978-1906137328 (Pbk)

Rennan de Souza Lemos
Museu Nacional, UFRJ

This book is the publication of the author's MPhil thesis submitted to Birkbeck College, London. The book presents a comparison between the grave assemblages of the New Kingdom non-elite cemeteries at Qau, Badari, Matmar and Medinet el-Ghurab. This comparison aims to answer the question of whether changes in non-elite grave assemblages reflect those of the elite. It is a very intriguing research question, especially in the current context when new data concerning the non-elite are coming from the ground at sites like the cemeteries at Amarna.

Many scholars have recently addressed the lack of Egyptological knowledge concerning the non-elite, despite early 20th century attempts to approach the subject from textual evidence, which suffered from some interpretative problems related to the level of literacy of different groups in ancient Egyptian society. Material culture plays a privileged role in the investigation of what is generally called non-elite, and recent scholarship has realised this. Examples are the MPhil theses by Humphreys on Third Intermediate Period non-elite burial practices at Matmar,¹ Petkov on non-elite child burials at Medinet el-Ghurab in the New Kingdom,² and Booth on the quality of life of the inhabitants of the South Tombs Cemetery at Amarna.³ Other MPhil theses on the bioarchaeology of individuals at the South Tombs Cemetery have been done at the University of Arkansas.

Goulding's book is part of this panorama of new interest in the non-elite. Its chief merit is the author's realisation of the potential of old archaeological reports to provide bases

¹ Ruth Humphreys. 2010. *Matmar: revisiting burial practice of the non-elite during the Third Intermediate Period*. MPhil Thesis, University of Birmingham.

² Johanna Petkov. 2014. *Child and infant burials in New Kingdom Egypt: a Gurob case study*. MPhil Thesis, Monash University.

³ Emmelia Booth. 2014. *Redefining quality of life for the non-elite. Amarna: a case study*. MPhil Thesis, Cardiff University.

for the construction of new research questions. Another merit of the work is its identification of the potential which digital methodologies offer to archaeological research. However, the book lacks theoretical discussion of the data and as such it does not offer many new insights for interpreting the material culture of non-elite cemeteries.

Chapter 1 introduces the work and establishes the bases from which the author constructs her interpretation. She addresses previous contributions to the topic, although does not criticise the problems present in these works, as for example the use of the expression “middle class”, which seems anachronistic when applied to remote Antiquity. Following the selected literature, Goulding identifies a change in burial practices from the 18th to the 20th Dynasty. This consists of a shift in grave furniture from daily life to religious objects (p. 1). The whole book is based on this assumption and here we identify a major theoretical problem, also present in other works. The problem is related to our lack of understanding about what is ritual/religious or not. Ritual studies and post-processual archaeology made us aware of the fact that we should avoid aprioristic differentiations and emphasise the ritualisation processes, which contextually determine things as ritual/religious. Thus, one object can be considered in some contexts useful for daily life activities while in others it can be used as part of a religious ritual.

In chapter 2 the author reviews some archaeological reports that could offer a data set for her thesis. She highlights Amarna as a suitable site to be included in the data set, avoiding its inclusion, however, on the grounds that it does “not serve as a typical, non-elite grave site” (p. 3). This assertion is problematic in two different ways. The first has to do with what should be considered a typical or atypical non-elite site. Although scholarship has approached the non-elite, no one has proposed a definition for non-elite. As we do not have a definition, we cannot easily determine what is a typical non-elite site, nor can we characterise the non-elite in socio-economic terms as the author does in the title of the book. The reviewer’s current research on the non-elite cemeteries of Fadrus, Amarna and Medinet el-Ghurab indicates that social interaction and interchange between different groups, considered alongside literacy hierarchies, offer us clues to build such a definition. Literacy is something touched upon only briefly by the author while addressing Deir el-Medina (p. 3). She considers the site unsuitable

for inclusion in a non-elite data set, and we do agree with her. The high levels of literacy found at the village indicate that the artisans formed a sort of intermediate social group, which has not been defined by scholars. Future research has necessarily to deal with such theoretical concerns, and anthropology of consumption, development studies and sociology may offer interesting insights for achieving this goal.

Subsequently in chapter 2, Goulding presents a description of each of her chosen sites and its archaeological reports. Worth mentioning is the author's perception of the methodological problems concerning the lack of contextual information in these reports. We share with her the problems related to Medinet el-Ghurab. Anyone interested in analysing burials from Medinet el-Ghurab is limited to Brunton and Engelbach's report, which is the only one that contains a grave recording table (p. 9).

In chapter 3 Goulding presents her hypotheses. The main one of which consists of readdressing the shift from 'daily life' objects to 'religious' ones in graves. Following this line of thinking, the author considers the changes in funerary furniture in non-elite graves as a reflex of the beliefs and practices of the elite. A major problem should be underlined concerning this. Firstly, this view ignores the agency of the "common people" as well as the possibility of variations in beliefs according to social groups. This has been addressed by some scholars⁴ and remains an open question to be investigated. Material Culture Studies have recently discussed the relationships between humans and things and their entanglements, or mutual dependence relations. Rather than considering material culture as a mere reflex of social status, we should take it as an element of social relations and emphasise interchanges between different social groups through materiality. This would help us to comprehend the dynamics in which non-elite groups took part and their position in society.

Also in chapter 3 the author presents her methodology. As she addresses on page 11, the artefacts from the chosen cemeteries have been categorised into two major

⁴ Such as K. Cooney. 2007. *The cost of death: the social and economic value of ancient Egyptian funerary art in the Ramesside Period*. Leiden: Nino; and J. Baines and P. Lacovara. 2002. Burial and the dead in ancient Egyptian society: respect, formalism, neglect. *Journal Social Archaeology* 2 (5), p. 5-36.

groups: daily life objects and religious objects. As already emphasised, this arbitrary subdivision should be avoided, especially if one admits taking an 'interpretive approach' (p. 11). As the data set was organised after this arbitrary subdivision between sacred and profane, without emphasising context, the results of statistical analysis presented in chapter 4 do not necessarily reflect reality, though they remain a valid discourse about the past.

Chapter 5 presents analysis of some categories of artefacts from the chosen cemeteries. The author presents analytical tables for supporting her interpretation of the funerary assemblages. Chapter 6 concludes the book admitting future research is needed to answer some of the proposed questions.

The database provided at the end is the main part of the book. It expresses the sheer quantity of data the author had to process and its compilation must be stressed as one of the most positive aspects of the book. However, the work would be greatly improved by the inclusion of a discussion concerning Digital Humanities. The database should have been addressed as a form of discourse for supporting interpretation. As recent discussions in the area emphasise, there is no such thing as an objective reconstruction of the past but instead, a discourse about the past. The organisation of the database tells much more about the author's bias than about the past itself. It is vital to note the existence, however inevitable, of such biases in order to make an effective contribution to the study of the past. Also, as the database was constructed using spreadsheet software, repetition of rows in tables would make it difficult to handle in future research. The construction of a relational database with different tables in a proper DBMS would solve this problem.

Goulding's book has the merit of raising discussion on the non-elite, a subject that is yet to be fully explored in Egyptology. All people with an interest in investigating the non-elite in ancient Egypt and Nubia should read this book – though with a critical mind. The deficiencies and problems of Goulding's book are themselves suggestive of fruitful avenues to be explored.