

gender stereotypes (e.g. man/woman, culture/nature) through a selective use of the archaeological evidence. To conclude, while the book lacks the theoretical rigour and the detailed treatment of its disparate evidence necessary to advance a convincing new interpretation, it nonetheless succeeds in highlighting the diversity of ways in which the anatomical female body was modelled in the early agricultural societies of Europe and the Near East.

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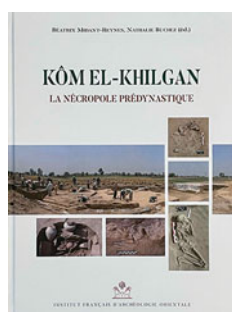
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BÉATRIX MIDANT-REYNES & NATHALIE BUCHEZ (ed.). 2021. *Kôm el-Khilgan: la nécropole prédynastique*. Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale; 978-2-724707-717 paperback €94.



The volume under review presents the results of the French campaigns in Kôm el-Khilgan, a site located in the province of Dakahlia (Eastern Delta, Egypt). The excavations, undertaken on behalf of the Institut français d'archéologie orientale, have unearthed the remains of a Predynastic cemetery (c. 3800–3100 BC) and Hyksos occupation levels from the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1700–1550 BC). It is the former data that are discussed in this report, which provides new data and interpretations on the funerary practices and development of a society that is still little-known: the Lower Egyptian Culture (LEC), previously known as Ma'adi-Buto Culture.

The book is divided into two main parts. The first concentrates on the presentation of Kôm el-Khilgan and discussion of the results. After a succinct introduction to the site, Chapters 1 and 2 describe the geoarchaeological context and the general stratigraphy, respectively.

Chapter 3 focuses on the data analysis, outlining the methods used to identify the chronological phases of the site, and providing analysis of trends in burial practices linked to chronology and the age and sex of the deceased. The exceptional multiple burials are also discussed here, along with the overall organisation of the graves (e.g. position of the corpse, placement of grave goods) and their spatial distribution in the necropolis. The chapter closes with a description of the ceramic and lithic remains deposited in the graves. Chapter 3 deals with a great many themes—too many to discuss here in depth—but it is worth underscoring the clear division of the cemetery into age groups; as is seen in other LEC cemeteries,

juveniles and children were buried in specific sectors of the necropolis. Some infants were inhumated in pot-burials—a practice common in many societies. It is a pity that more attention was not afforded these burials, which could have been better situated in the context of identity and childhood archaeologies.

The next chapter (“Conclusion and discussion”) contextualises Kôm el-Khilgan within the LEC. Here, the authors situate Kôm el-Khilgan at the centre of the debate about acculturation dynamics. Midant-Reynes and Buchez draw on concepts from French sociologists and anthropologists such as Jean-Pierre Albert, Maurice Godelier and Alain Testart. This is a refreshing approach in a discipline increasingly centred around Anglo-American literature. For the authors, studying the LEC is a matter of ‘acculturation’, understanding ‘culture’ as a system of communication, or people sharing a set of defined behaviours. Their terminology, therefore, shares interesting parallels with the notably cited ‘communities of practice’, although the former (acculturation) emphasises communication and symbols whereas the latter (communities of practice) stresses materiality and action.

Understanding ‘rituals’ as sequences of actions according to a previously defined programme, Midant-Reynes and Buchez contrast the mortuary behaviour of the northern LEC with its southern counterpart, the Naqada Culture. While the Naqada Culture is based on exhibition in funerary rituals and was increasingly interested in lavish display, the LEC was defined by simple rituals, with few material remains. To the authors, this shows the cultures functioning differently, with two different symbolic systems. Through these lenses, they review the historiography and evidence from the funerary and domestic records to re-evaluate the cultural dynamics behind the homogenisation of the Egyptian societies in the late fourth millennium BC. According to classic narratives (for a summary, see Köhler 2020), the simple northern Ma’adi-Buto Culture was annexed or conquered by an increasingly complex entity in the southern Naqada region—the so-called ‘Naqada expansion’. The culture-historical underpinning of this narrative has been critiqued recently, and the division between a southern Naqada Culture and a northern LEC rejected by some (i.e. Köhler 2020 and responses).

Midant-Reynes and Buchez understand the increasing presence of southern elements in the funerary culture of the LEC as a process of assimilation and acculturation, and the adoption of a system of values and communication different to the existing local one. Isotopic and DNA evidence is regrettably scarce in Egypt, making it difficult to obtain a multidimensional understanding of these processes. As Egyptologists currently have only material culture to work with, the authors’ conceptual model is challenging and relevant for colleagues interested in diffusion dynamics. Despite a somewhat outdated emphasis on symbolism, their terminology is a way forward to better understanding diffusion without remaining anchored in culture-historical paradigms.

The second part of the report comprises a catalogue of the 240 burials. Each grave has a summary description that includes the state of disturbance; sex of the individual; age according to teeth and bones; and position in the grave. This is followed by a thorough description of the structure of the grave and a complete archaeoanatomical statement of the skeleton. The description is closed with a reconstruction of the burial informed by the

archaeothanatological approach. This includes the stages of construction of the grave, deposition of the body and closure of the burial. The catalogue also provides images of the tomb, drawings of grave goods, and a table summarising the offerings.

The plans could be improved upon. Only a selection of graves is plotted, and these provide information regarding phases and distribution of certain tomb types. It would have been useful to include a complete plan of the 240 graves labelled with their identity number, rather than just points: if the reader wants to convert the spatial information into GIS for their own research, they will have to combine multiple maps to create a final site plan. Researchers will probably find themselves lost as they try to link unlabelled points on the plans to the excavated graves. Point-plots are a useful device for summarising spatial information in a quick and simple way. This type of map does not provide an adequate sense of the layout of the necropolis, however; important dimensions such as the size, shape, orientation, or arrangement of the graves are missing.

These minor points notwithstanding, Midant-Reynes and Buchez have compiled an outstanding report. They are aware of the partial extent of their excavations and are conscious of the limitations of archaeology when presenting their interpretations. The authors should also be congratulated on the speed of publication. Numerous expeditions in Egypt (and elsewhere) delay their reports for decades and, in many cases, these are never published. The discussion will certainly be of interest to anyone exploring acculturation, ethnogenesis and diffusion processes in prehistory. Archaeothanatologists and childhood archaeologists alike will also appreciate its valuable data. Excavations at Kôm el-Khilgan continue and are now in the hands of Sayed El Talhawy's team, who have already unearthed 73 tombs from the Predynastic period. The results of their campaign are also eagerly anticipated.

Reference

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