

***Life and Death at a Nubian Monastery: The Collected Funerary Epigraphy from Ghazali.* By Grzegorz Ochała. Turnhout: Brepols, 2022. 339 pp. \$138 paper.**

Nubian studies have entered an age of organization, primarily at the hands of a new generation of Polish archaeologists and epigraphers. Grzegorz Ochała, the founder of the Database of Medieval Nubian Texts (DBMNT), has been central to this movement. In this volume, he offers another major contribution to the cause, an edition of all funerary epitaphs from the medieval Nubian monastery of Ghazali. The inscriptions themselves are only a means to an end, Ochała's purpose being "to propose an historical and socio-cultural synthesis of the monastic community as viewed from the perspective of the funerary epigraphy" (11).

This synthesis spans an introduction and nine chapters in the first part of the book. The first chapter surveys the archaeology and epigraphy of Ghazali itself, one of only four sites from Christian Nubia securely identified as a coenobitic monastery. The site has been visited often, but only first excavated by Peter Shinnie and Neville Chittick in the 1950s. A Polish excavation begun in 2012 under Artur Obluski has employed more modern, scientific methods, and Ochała's book is a direct result of that excavation. The epigraphic finds have been substantial, including 137 wall inscriptions forthcoming in a separate work, and the funerary inscriptions presented here, which include material found by Lepsius in the 1840s; Shinnie and Chittick in the 1950s; and the Polish excavation in the 2010s.

Chapter 2 surveys the archaeological context of the funerary stelae. This survey produces "the only surviving annual date in the epigraphic material from Ghazali," a stela dating between AD 764 and 773 (27), and the conclusion that funerary epigraphy ceased at the start of the eleventh century, at the time of "large-scale reconstruction works" at the monastery (29). Chapter 3, a survey of the materiality of the funeral stela, notes that terracotta dominates (61%) over sandstone (36%), with marble used in only a single stela (33). The use of terracotta suggests the transport of fired clay from specialized workshops in the Nile Valley. Chapter 4 is one of the shortest, a brief reprise of Ochała's earlier study of funerary language use: while native Nubian is exceptionally rare in funerary epigraphy, local Greek was exceptionally competent, and local Coptic suggests that southern Egypt and northern Nubia "formed a kind of cultural unity" (41).

Chapter 5 presents an "overwhelmingly technical" analysis of funerary epigraphic phenomena which Ochała sees as "a step towards standardizing the studies of epigraphic material from the region" (45). The lack of clear palaeographic groups in these stelae suggests "that funerals did not happen all that often" (50). Chapter 6 presents the formulae of the epitaphs, on which more in a moment. Chapter 7 ("The Community and its Members") is the longest, and by far the most rewarding. Study of the monastic titles appears to support Obluski's earlier claim that the monastery's hierarchy was relatively egalitarian (84). Ochała's tentative prosopography, combined with estimates of the monastery's size, suggests that we know more than 20% of the monks who lived at Ghazali over its institutional lifetime.

But some of Ochała's onomastic conclusions are puzzling. If Baptistes and Kerikos are basically unique names, what supports these resolutions from the abbreviated forms of Bap() and Kê(), respectively? Likewise Ionas, where Iôn() seems insufficiently

distinguishable from Ioannes. (And presumably “Ionannes” (74) is a typo, but if not, it too seems unwarranted.) How we achieve Pirmeni from P̄rm is even less clear. Ochała is generally correct that Ghazali’s onomastics are in line with general Nubian and Egyptian trends. But Table 7.2 hides the ball: it shows *only* the similarities, while the onomastic differences between Ghazali and other sites would be equally revealing.

A brief note on chronology (Chapter 8) and a summary conclusion (Chapter 9) follow. A number of main themes and arguments persist through the entire work. First, and contrary to previous generations of scholars studying Ghazali, the comfortable place of Coptic in Ghazali’s monastic community indicates a “strong cultural Egyptian influence on Nubian monasticism” (15) and not the presence of ethnic Egyptians. Second, the high-quality Greek used in these epitaphs proves the “high level of literacy at the monastery” (16). Finally, these texts, both Coptic and Greek, give us an intimate look at Nubian eschatology and the Nubian belief “that human fate, including death, is determined by God” (16).

The funerary inscriptions themselves – along with plates, indices, and concordances – make up the final two-thirds of the volume. Following the leaders in Nubian epigraphy, Jacques van der Vliet and Adam Łajtar, Ochała organizes the texts by type and formulary, rather than by language. Thus, we have epitaphs with the prayer “God of the Spirits” in both Greek and Coptic, followed by epitaphs invoking God’s providence, command, and will, also in both Greek and Coptic.

Ochała presents every text in a consistent format: excavation number, findspot, present location, language, material, dimensions, description, palaeography, bibliography, and transcription with translation. But of the 223 discrete entries, many are fragmentary, small fragments, or, in several cases, mere letters. Thus the bulk of Ochała’s analysis relies on a relatively small group of texts, and the rest result in diminishing returns. This is frustrating, and doubly so when we consider how much information from earlier excavations is lost or was never recorded.

Still, Ochała’s work is impressive, and necessary. My own initial forays into Nubian prosopography, onomastics, and demography were completely foiled by the baffling editions of funerary epigraphic material from Ginari and Sakinya. One can only hope for more volumes like Ochała’s for the sites first studied before the modern scientific period of Nubian studies, and more from him for years to come.

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doi:10.1017/S000964072400009X

***The Emperor and the Elephant: Christians and Muslims in the Age of Charlemagne.* By Sam Ottewill-Soulsby. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023. 363 pp. \$39.95.**

For too long, the history of Carolingian diplomatic relations with the Islamic world has been written largely based on the Latin sources, and the Christian–Muslim encounter has too often been filtered through the distorting lenses of the crusades and the mythic Carolingian world of the *chansons de geste*. Enduring yet contradictory narratives have