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Front cover: Miniature figurines from a shrine deposit of Tell el-Farkha, Dynasty 1. Robert Słaboński
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Contents

List of papers presented	v
List of posters presented	xi
Foreword.....	xiii
Introduction.....	xv
1. Revisiting Walter B. Emery at Saqqara: Exploring Emery's excavations, a re-evaluation of his field notes (1946–1956).....	1
<i>Rinus Ormeling</i>	
2. The placement of the Predynastic grave goods and its role in mortuary context: A case study of the cemeteries at Naqada.....	22
<i>Taichi Kuronuma</i>	
3. Who are the Naqadans? Some remarks on the use and meaning of the term Naqadans in Egyptian Predynastic archaeology	40
<i>Agnieszka Mączyńska</i>	
4. Remarks on ancient Egyptian cartonnage mummy masks from the Late Old Kingdom to the end of the New Kingdom	56
<i>Emanuele Casini</i>	
5. Generous patrons, loyal clients? Some remarks on patronage of Middle Kingdom elites	74
<i>Martina Bardoňová and Věra Nováková</i>	
6. Military expeditions of King Hatshepsut.....	90
<i>Filip Taterka</i>	
7. Egyptian artists in the New Kingdom: Travelling artists and travelling ideas?	107
<i>Inmaculada Vivas Sainz</i>	
8. Material culture and social interactions in New Kingdom non-elite cemeteries	121
<i>Rennan Lemos</i>	

9. New finds of Greco-Roman Period decorated wooden coffins from Abusir South	136
<i>Marie Peterková Hlouchová</i>	
10. The Egyptian land-based layer: Between god(s), cosmic sacredness and fertility beliefs.....	150
<i>Guilherme Borges Pires</i>	
11. Identity and the protagonist in Greek and Egyptian narrative poetry: The construction of cultural identity in Homer's <i>Odyssey</i> and the <i>Tale of Sinuhe</i>	159
<i>Maxwell Stocker</i>	
12. The south face of the Helicon: Ancient Egyptian musical elements in ancient Greek music.....	173
<i>Daniel Sánchez Muñoz</i>	
13. Oil press installations and oil production in ancient Egypt	186
<i>Jose M. Alba Gómez</i>	
14. Artefact (re)contextualisation: Comparative context analysis from the Egyptian collection in Zagreb – preliminary research report.....	209
<i>Porin Šćukanec Rezníček</i>	

Chapter 8

Material culture and social interactions in New Kingdom non-elite cemeteries

Rennan Lemos

Abstract: The paper aims to discuss inequality and social interactions in non-elite cemeteries in the New Kingdom. It is based on a comparative study of the cemeteries of Fadrus in Lower Nubia (early 18th dynasty), Tell el-Amarna (late 18th dynasty), and Medinet el-Ghurab (19th and 20th dynasties). Comparison of the sites revealed more than historical and regional specificities. Rather, the material culture of the cemeteries shed light into a complex set of interactions between various groups. Drawing from different interactions identified in the material culture of burials, the paper proposes the definition of ‘sociological profiles’. The concept emphasises agency and the fluidity of social interactions that contextually define different, unapproachable past groups. Even past groups cannot be approached directly from material culture, their interactions and negotiations are still traceable in the movement of different categories of objects across burials.

Keywords: non-elite, social interactions, inequality, cemeteries

Introduction

This paper describes the initial stages of my research on inequality and social interactions in non-elite cemeteries in Egypt and Nubia (Fig. 8.1). It will also provide a critique of past research in developing analytical approaches to New Kingdom non-elite cemeteries that combine a theoretical/qualitative assessment with a quantitative assembling of data. However, this paper focuses on the theoretical aspect of our discussions on the topic, drawing conclusions from the distribution of objects across cemeteries. We aim to contribute to a greater understanding of social groups other than the elite, by developing the concept of sociological profiles, which aims to address indirectly real, unapproachable social groups through the residues of their interactions in non-elite cemeteries. The purpose of the discussions presented here is to offer other

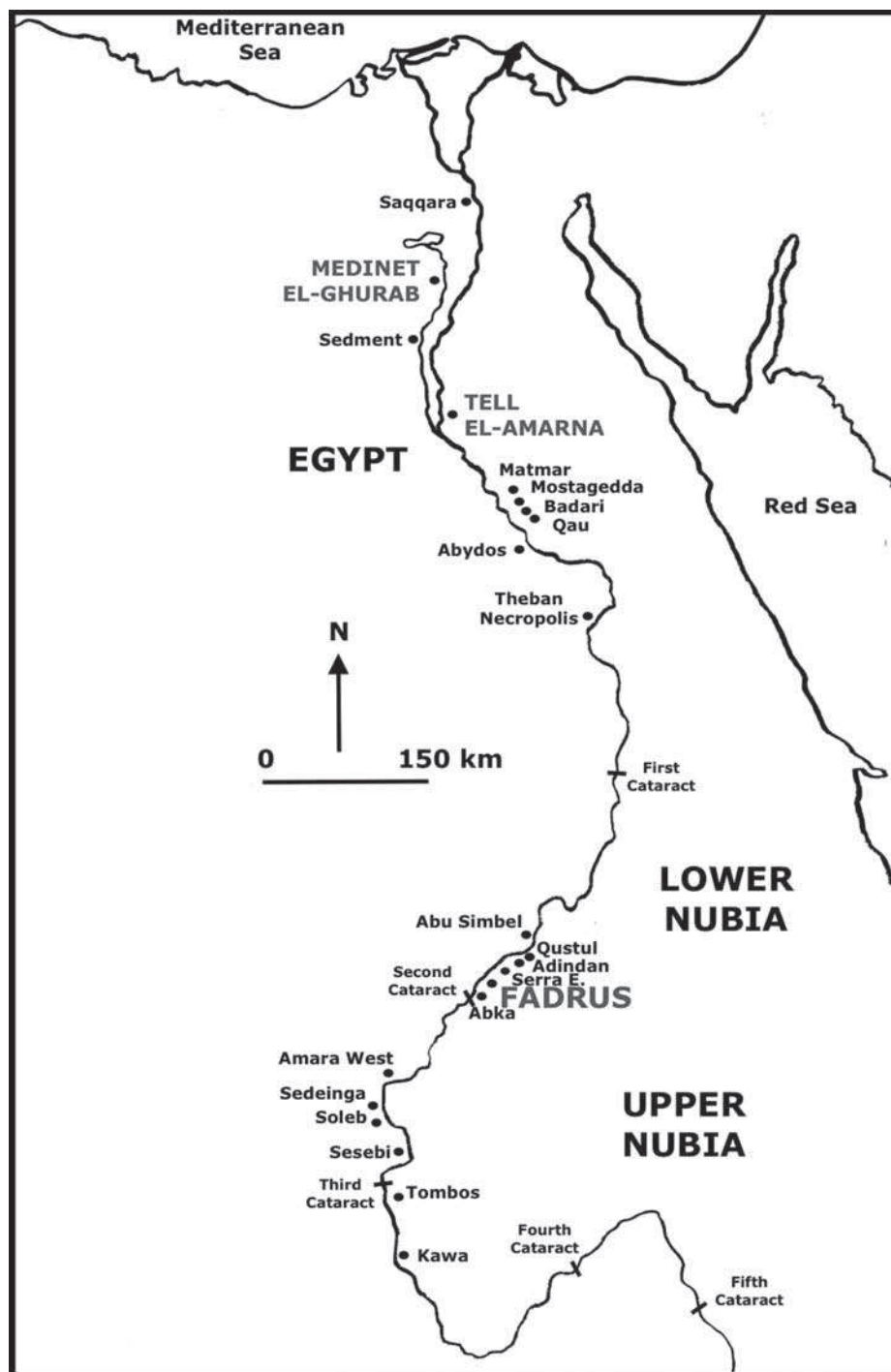


Fig. 8.1: Map of Egypt and Nubia showing the approached sites (uppercase) (by Rennan Lemos).

insights to the understanding of the totality of the mortuary experience (Richards 2005) and to explore possible variations in beliefs, practices, identity, and inequality (e.g. Baines and Lacovara 2002, 6; Cooney 2007, 276). We believe the discussions proposed here, which will focus on a comparative regional examination of material from three different non-elite cemeteries, will be valuable especially in the light of current approaches to mortuary data in Egyptian archaeology, which have been largely unsatisfactory in addressing these different aspects outside the elite sphere.

The non-elite cemeteries chosen for this comparative study cover the period from the early 18th dynasty to the 20th dynasty, facilitating observations in potential changes in practices, beliefs, identity, and inequality across a regional and temporal framework during the New Kingdom. The three main cemetery sites examined are those from Fadrus (early 18th dynasty) (Säve-Söderbergh 1991), Tell el-Amarna (late 18th dynasty) (data of which has been made available online by the Amarna Project), and Medinet el-Ghurab (19th and 20th dynasties) (Brunton and Engelbach 1927). The comparison of these sites across the New Kingdom provide a particular opportunity to examine any innovations brought about during the Amarna Period in terms of sociability outside and within elite mortuary practice and propose an interpretation for long term cultural reproduction and change in the mortuary realm (Lemos in press).

A quick note should be made on some of the problems that arise from working with older excavation reports. Such reports can often be lacking in certain types of information regarding archaeological context, detailed description of graves, and typologies of objects recorded. This is certainly the case in the excavation reports for the cemetery at Medinet el-Ghurab, which lacks important information on the objects found within burials, as well as a detailed assessment of potential disturbance/robbery. The case for the cemeteries of Fadrus and Amarna is quite different, as the sites were excavated following the standards of modern archaeology. However, it is important to be aware of the potential for the differences in these reports in influencing the interpretations and observations between these cemeteries.

Diversity of social interactions has been identified after a comparison of material culture present in different types of burials belonging to distinct groups. This was probably the major challenge to be faced while trying to develop an approach that distances itself from current perspectives. Indeed, a processualist *modus operandi* is still the main characteristic of these types of studies, though this appears to be rapidly changing. This processualist perspective is based on the identification of epistemologically *real* social groups/classes in the archaeological record (Richards 2005; Goulding 2013; cf. Meskell 1998; Grajetzki 2010). The processualist approach in funerary archaeology emphasises quantities and technical characteristics of objects, which in Egyptian archaeology is expressed in the application of blurred notions such as 'poor' vs. 'rich' or 'elite' (Grajetzki 2003; Goulding 2013). On the other side, anthropological theory indicates that quantities of objects within burials do not necessarily reflect social status (Stevenson 2009, 181). Material culture should not

be understood as reflecting social relations, but as part of complex social networks (Hicks 2010; Hodder 2012). Material culture entanglements with human beings inform about diversified forms of interaction between different social groups and other forms of conceiving wealth and inequality in the cemetery record. Therefore, the divisions I made so far are based on the presence or absence of material patterns in the cemeteries. This is based on the idea of opening space for other forms of creating identity and inequality other than based on quantities of objects.

According to Kemp ‘any divisions or groupings that we make will inevitably be arbitrary, a reflection of the relative social fluidity of ancient Egypt’ (Kemp 1989, 307). In order to avoid such aprioristic definitions of social groups, we have proposed the definition of ‘sociological profiles’. The defined profiles follow a relational approach to poverty in anthropology. A relational view on poverty and social status differentiates a ‘historically constituted poverty’ from social inequality based on categorisations (Bourdieu 1984; Mosse 2010). Each profile includes different levels of possibilities of interactions amongst distinct real social groups. We believe the social interactions between past groups can be perceived in material flows of artefacts and re-significations of materiality in burials.

Here I propose the definition of three sociological profiles: 1) non-elite, 2) sub-elite, and 3) elite. It should be noted that any categorisations we make do not necessarily equal ancient, non-elite modes of categorisation. Discussing more appropriate terms for referring to the sociological profiles and consequently improve the definitions remains a future challenge. Another challenge that remains is the definition of possible ways of assembling data compatible with non-elite ways of expressing identity and inequality through objects assemblages in burials. Each profile is understood as a broad category through which unknown past social groups moved, negotiating their identity as groups contextually within a given hierarchical structure:

1. ‘Non-elite’ (N) is understood as a category that includes those who did not have wider opportunities of access to goods. Therefore, the groups included in this category interacted with others in a more limited way. These groups were not able to effectively negotiate their position in society.
2. The ‘sub-elite’ (S) category includes those who circulated more or less effectively in various social contexts. The different uses of materiality in this category offered possibilities of contextually being part of different social groups.
3. ‘Elite’ is a category that comprehends a restrictive group, with which other groups could interact in order to have access to patterns linked to the elite. Members of the elite would occupy positions within bureaucracy and be identified in reliefs in their decorated tombs.

Table 8.1 illustrates these conceptual definitions and prior observation of data coming from the chosen cemeteries. It associates the profiles to the material record found in the cemeteries. Although I accept that it was not possible to completely avoid aprioristic assumptions, the table may provide a general guide to interpretation.

Table 8.1: Schematic table of sociological profiles (by Rennan Lemos).

<i>Sociological profile</i>	<i>Burial type</i>	<i>Texts</i>	<i>Iconography</i>	<i>Preservation of the body</i>	<i>Material culture</i>
Non-elite	Pit	None/ simple texts	None/ simple iconography	Bones/cartonnage/ vegetal coffins	None/small quantity/ pottery deposited with specific intentions
Sub-elite	Pits/shafts/with or without ramps and chambers/ reused tombs or other sacred spaces	Small quantity/ simple texts	Yes/simple iconography	Tentative of mummification (?)/ vegetal coffins/ fragile wooden coffins/catonnage	Great quantity of pottery/objects made of special materials/ objects deposited with specific intentions
Elite	Tomb chapel	Yes	Yes	Mummification/ elaborated coffins and sarcophagi	Fine objects deposited in high quantity

The table above must not be understood as a rigid guide for interpreting burials, but rather, as a starting point for the awareness of possible material relationships present in cemeteries, as one characteristic mainly identified in one profile may also be contextually seen in another. Examples of this would be the burials containing decorated wooden coffins at Amarna (Kemp and Stevens 2008, 35–41; Stevens et al. 2016, 29–32), a pattern that would be identified with sub-elite and elite persons in other contexts. The main characteristic of this approach is the opening of space for the fluidity addressed by Kemp.

Examining non-elite cemeteries

The majority of literature on Egyptian funerary practice has focused on the well-known sources of the elite even when attempting to highlight different ‘status’ levels (e.g. Smith 1992). This has led to a generalised perception of mortuary customs, based on an inaccurate notion of cultural reproduction and social interactions. It also illustrates the dominance in Egyptological research on monumental tombs of elite members regardless of the behavioural diversity in mortuary contexts (Richards 2005, 49). Patterns found in elite contexts were taken as a general blueprint of burial customs, even though various aspects of society did not fit well in this model. The function of elite funerary objects became the basis for describing typical burials, which reinforced a notion still present in the discipline of a rigid culture in terms of social structure.

In order to overcome this tendency, we must transcend the idea the elite produced the majority of the available sources. If we turn the focus from individual monumental tombs to whole cemeteries, the quantity of single burials with their own specificities would provide a greater understanding of funerary practices and social relationships. We should also consider that the reuse of elite tombs and temples as burial sites and places of secondary burial, as attested throughout the Theban necropolis. Including

these types of burials would make the development of a model for interpreting social interactions even more complex.

By shifting the focus from individual tombs to cemeteries, we can gain a greater awareness of the diversity of funerary practice (Richards 2005, 52). It also presents us the opportunity to examine a greater variety and complexity of social interactions that may not be influenced or dictated by elite material patterns. Such conceptions of the origination and popularisation of elite cultural practices throughout society are still common in Egyptological scholarship and thought. An example regarding the funerary record can be seen in the 'democratisation' hypothesis developed by conservative intellectuals (Willems 2008, 133–141). This idea applies an elitist and moralist vision to the past based on notions of a 'high culture' which is inherently superior to the cultural practices of 'inferior groups' (often framed through cultural or racial terms). This general mode of thinking may also be found in recent studies on the non-elite, with the common assumption that non-elite groups copy practices and patterns generated within the elite (Goulding 2013, 15).

Studies on non-elite cemeteries may improve by moving from an elitist perspective to a vision that incorporates social specificities and complex networks of social interaction in which possibly different social groups took part. The specificities of the type of data and context found in non-elite cemeteries should also be stressed as singular social expressions. This would gradually improve our ability to uncover not only the socioeconomic dynamics in which non-elite and other intermediate groups played various roles, but mainly would open space for the realisation of non-elite agency and creativity – something that remains to be explored.

A database of burials

The above discussion and critique has largely developed from my analysis of the material data from the cemeteries of Fadrus, Amarna and Medinet el-Ghurab, as described in my MPhil thesis (Lemos 2015). This dataset comprises 259 burials from Fadrus, 172 from Amarna and 56 from Medinet el-Ghurab. The total of 487 burials includes 569 bodies and 1788 objects deposited within burials or found elsewhere in the cemeteries.

The burials have been selected prior to contextual analysis and evaluation of the information provided in the reports. The burials have been sorted into four tables in a relational database. Relational databases are extremely useful in this context as they facilitate the manipulation and cross-reference of different categories of data. My database of burials utilised software (FileMaker Pro 12) that permitted us to 1) establish quantities of types of burials attributed to different sociological profiles, 2) identify the types of objects attributed to each profile, and therefore 3) to cross-check different material categories in order to identify objects linked to various profiles. These procedures allowed us to observe social interactions given in the distributions of categories of objects across distinct sociological profiles. It is worth highlighting

the database was developed following a clear theoretical model, rather than as reproduction of past forms of categorisation. It should therefore be understood as an interpretative tool.

The tables that form the database are: 1) site, 2) burial, 3) body, and 4) objects. Each table gathers information considered important to contextual interpretation and the establishment of associations with other categories in the database. The tables are related to each other through classificatory keys attributed to the categories of data. This made us able to create interactive queries from which result significant indexes for interpreting social dynamics in the cemeteries.

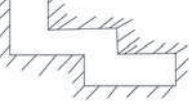
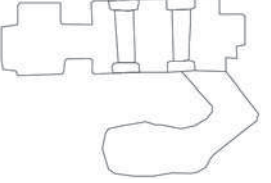
The cemetery of Fadrus, excavated and published by the Scandinavian Joint Expedition to Sudanese Nubia (Säve-Söderbergh 1991), is the largest cemetery excavated in Lower Nubia. The burials included in our database comprise 103 pits (P), 75 side niches (SN), 43 end niches (EN), 3 double end niches (DEN), 29 chambers in pits (CIP), 2 double chamber in pits (DCIP) and 1 triple chamber in pit (TCIP). We have attributed 218 burials from Fadrus to the non-elite profile, while 37 have been attributed to the sub-elite profile. The categories of objects in Fadrus have been distributed according to the sociological profiles and types of burials.

The categorisations proposed do not consider material culture as reflection of social hierarchies in the cemeteries. On the contrary, material culture is understood as a fragmentary record of social interactions between past groups, which may contextually have been linked to one of the sociological profiles outlined. Those interactions were given in the cemetery in the distribution of objects amongst the various burial types.

The burials from Amarna were attributed to the non-elite profile. In the cemetery, there are no variations in burial type, with the exception of one chamber in pit (Kemp 2007, 22), characterising a uniformity that differs from the picture found in the city with different types of houses (Spence 2010; Kemp et al. 2013, 67, 74). We believe social interactions in the cemetery can be more emphatically observed in the landscape level considering the whole area of the necropolis, rather than in the burial types and objects distribution. Unlike the pattern observed at Fadrus and Medinet el-Ghurab, proximity of elite tombs with non-elite burials at Amarna may indicate other forms of construction of social spaces and creation of new material patterns (Table 8.2). Objects found at Amarna associated to non-elite burials may also be identified in sub-elite burials both in Fadrus and Medinet el-Ghurab.

The burials from Medinet el-Ghurab include pits, side niches, double side niches, chamber in pits and shaft tombs. The site provides a more complex set of interactions amongst different profiles. This was interpreted as a development after the Amarna Period, where new forms of sociability might have appeared. Medinet el-Ghurab also presents other categories of artefacts including objects commonly linked to the elite. For instance, a canopic jar lid was registered in relation to one tomb at Medinet el-Ghurab. Its presence within the tomb is not understood as a simple indication of status, but as a possibility of providing a specific material pattern even without being part of a certain

Table 8.2: Comparison of burial types from Fadrus, Amarna and Medinet el-Ghurab (by Rennan Lemos).

Amarna	Fadrus	Medinet el-Ghurab	Schematic model
Pit	Pit (shaft)	Pit (sand)	
Chamber in pit (brick vaulted tomb)	Chamber in pit (chamber in shaft; triple chamber in shaft; chamber with ramp)	Chamber in pit (brick coffin; bricks over the body)	
—	Side niche	Side niche (loculus)	
—	Double side niche	Double side niche (loculi)	
—	—	Shaft tomb	
Tomb chapel	—	—	

group. Therefore, this could be identified as a new form of interaction. The burials from Medinet el-Ghurab have been distributed through the non-elite and sub-elite profiles, and have also been compared with Amarna and Fadrus in terms of material culture.

Conclusion

Comparison of the material culture present in the sites revealed a complex context of social interactions based on the identification of flows of objects through different types of burials. Contrast between Fadrus and Amarna revealed a context of major possibilities of interaction amid different sociological profiles at Amarna, which is liable to increase at Medinet el-Ghurab. Interchanges of different material patterns associated with different burial types shed light into the mechanisms of interaction allowed in specific contexts. The contact of distinct social groups creates a context of major possibilities of interactions, but at the same time reinforces structural hierarchies – what we believe remains unapproachable at least in the cemetery context. It also creates boundaries based on categorisations.

Cemetery sites consist of landscapes of interaction where contacts and negotiations of positions took place in different social spaces. Fadrus may be interpreted as a site where interactions between different sociological profiles existed, though inserted in a more rigid structural context. Medinet el-Ghurab may be situated in a higher position within structural hierarchies, with less rigid interactions and more possibilities of interchanges. This tendency might have originated during the Amarna Period, when minor groups inserted in the lowest profile were included in the same landscape as elite tombs – what may have followed the inclusivity of Akhenaten's religion. Interaction of various groups can also be seen on Amarna's city plan, with different types of houses linked to each other. However, social interactions in the city might have reinforced hierarchical identities, what we believe is also attested in the cemetery.

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Appendix

Chart 8.1: Distribution of types of objects through burial type and sociological profiles at Fadrus (by Rennan Lemos).

Object type	Profile		Burial type									
	N	S	P	SN	DSN	EN	DEN	CIP	DCIP	TCIP	ST	
Dagger	X	X	X	X				X				
Ring	X	X	X	X		X		X				
Toe ring	X			X								
Kohl stick	X	X		X				X				
Bandage	X			X								
Hammerstone		X						X				
Bracelet	X	X		X		X			X			
Breccia		X						X				
Earring	X	X	X	X		X		X	X	X		
Box		X		X				X	X			
Cosmetic box		X						X				
Coffin	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X			
Pin	X		X									
Shell	X	X	X	X		X	X	X				
Link		X						X				
Beads	X	X	X	X		X		X		X		
Headrest	X		X									
Feet recess	X		X									
Stick fit		X						X	X			
Metal fit		X						X				
Scarab	X	X	X	X		X		X				
Heart scarab		X							X			
Mirror	X			X								
Statuette?		X						X				
Horseshoe		X							X			
Flask		X						X				
Faience fruit	X			X								
Awl	X			X								
Inlay		X						X				
Kohl	X			X								
Slab (libation?)		X						X	X			
Axe		X		X				X				
Mask	X	X		X		X		X	X	X		

(Continued)

Chart 8.1: Continued

Table 1.617 continued.

Object type	Profile		Burial type								
	N	S	P	SN	DSN	EN	DEN	CIP	DCIP	TCIP	ST
Razor	X	X		X				X			
Animal bones		X							X		
Palette	X					X					
Grindstone	X			X							
Polishing stone		X						X			
Tweezers	X	X	X	X				X			
Pendant	X	X	X	X		X		X	X		
Pyramidion	X	X		X		X		X	X		
Cosmetic plate	X			X							
Plaquette	X	X		X		X		X			
Arrowhead	X	X		X				X			
Zoomorphic pot	X			X							
Board	X	X		X				X			
Rivet		X						X			
Relief		X						X			
Seal	X		X								
Coffin stand		X						X			
Pot stand		X						X			
Bowl	X	X		X		X		X			
Kohl tube	X			X							
Vessel		X						X			
Ostrich shell vessel	X			X							
Kohl pot	X	X	X	X		X		X		X	
Libation pot		X						X			
Unguent pot	X	X	X	X		X		X			

Chart 8.2: Distribution of types of objects according to sociological profiles at Fadrus and Amarna (by Rennan Lemos).

Amarna	Profile	Fadrus	Profile	
	N		N	S
Ring	X	Ring	X	X
Kohl stick	X	Kohl stick	X	X
Bandage	X	Bandage	X	
Bracelet	X	Bracelet	X	X
Earring	X	Earring	X	X
Coffin	X	Coffin	X	X
Pin	X	Pin	X	
Scarab	X	Scarab	X	X
Mirror	X	Mirror	X	
Statuette	X	Statuette		X
Kohl	X	Kohl	X	
Slab (libation?)	X	Slab (libation?)		X
Animal bones	X	Animal bones		X
Pyramidion	X	Pyramidion	X	X
Board	X	Board	X	X
Kohl tube	X	Kohl tube	X	
Vessel	X	Vessel		X

Chart 8.3: Distribution of types of objects according to sociological profiles at Amarna and Medinet el-Ghurab (by Rennan Lemos).

Amarna	Profile	Medinet el-Ghurab	Profile	
	N		N	S
Amulet	X	Amulet	X	X
Ring	X	Ring	X	X
Kohl stick	X	Kohl stick	X	
Bandage	X	Bandage	X	X
Bracelet	X	Bracelet	X	
Earring	X	Earring	X	X
Shard	X	Shard	X	X
Coffin	X	Coffin	X	X
Pin	X	Pin	X	
Basket	X	Basket	?	?
Necklace	X	Necklace	X	
Beads	X	Beads	X	X
Scarab	X	Scarab	X	X
Mirror	X	Mirror	X	X
Statuette	X	Statuette		X
Stele	X	Stele		X
Golden leaf	X	Golden leaf		X
Miniature	X	Miniature		X
Animal bone	X	Animal bone		X
Pendant	X	Pendant	X	
Pot	X	Pot	X	X
Plate	X	Plate	X	X
Cup	X	Cup		X

Chart 8.4: Distribution of types of objects through burial type and sociological profiles at Medinet el-Ghurab (by Rennan Lemos).

Object type	Profile		Burial type				
	N	S	P	SN	DSN	CIP	ST
Needle		X					X
Amulet	X	X				X	X
Ring	X	X	X			X	X
Hair ring	X				X		
Kohl stick	X					X	
Bandage	X	X	X			X	X
Stick	X	X	X				X
Bracelet	X					X	
Earring	X	X	X	X		X	X
Cowry	X	X			X		X
Shard	X	X	X				X
Box		X					X
Toilet box		X					X
Coffin	X	X		X		X	X
Pin	X					X	
Necklace	X		X				
Spoon	X					X	
Shell	X	X				X	X
Beads	X	X	X			X	X
Headrest		X				X	X
Scarab	X	X	X	X		X	X
Mirror	X	X				X	X
Statue		X					X
Statuette		X					X
Stele		X					X
Casket		X					X
Golden leaf		X					X
Leather		X					X
Palm fruit		X					X
Spindle		X					X
Inlay		X					X
Miniature		X	X				X
Boat miniature		X					X
Animal bone		X	X				
Bone carving	X		X		X	X	
Oyster		X					X

Stone		X				X
Pendant	X		X		X	
Plaque	X		X		X	
Pot	X	X	X		X	X
Plate	X	X	X			X
Wristlet	X		X	X	X	
Relief		X				X
Shabti	X	X	X	X	X	X
Cup		X				X
Tigela	X	X			X	X
Bowl		X				X
Canopic jar		X				X
Kohl pot	X	X	X	X	X	X

Chart 8.5: Distribution of types of objects according to sociological profiles at Fadrus and Medinet el-Ghurab (by Rennan Lemos).

Fadrus	Profile		Medinet el-Ghurab	Profile	
	N	S		N	S
Ring	X	X	Ring	X	X
Kohl stick	X	X	Kohl stick	X	
Bandage	X		Bandage	X	X
Bracelet	X	X	Bracelet	X	
Earring	X	X	Earring	X	X
Box		X	Box		X
Coffin	X	X	Coffin	X	X
Pin	X		Pin	X	
Shell	X	X	Shell	X	X
Beads	X	X	Beads	X	X
Headrest	X		Headrest		X
Scarab	X	X	Scarab	X	X
Mirror	X		Mirror	X	X
Statuette?		X	Statuette		X
Inlay		X	Inlay		X
Animal bone		X	Animal bone		X
Pendant	X	X	Pendant	X	
Plaque	X	X	Plaque	X	
Relief		X	Relief		X
Bowl	X	X	Bowl	X	X
Kohl pot	X	X	Kohl pot	X	X