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Prehistoric Infants and Child Burials in Egypt and Sudan: Anthropological, Paleopathological and Paleo-Environmental study

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the partial fulfillment of the requirements of the MA program
“Environmental Archaeology”

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Abstract:

Investigating the evidence of infants and children in the prehistoric period is surrounded by several constraints and challenges. This is in part due to the low preservation of subadult skeletal remains in the archaeological record, and/or burying them outside the main graveyards, while also due to excluding them from the archaeological interpretations in many other cases. Such facts contributed to defining the research objectives, questions, and methodology, and also contributed to increasing the sources of inaccuracy of the research results. However, with the absence of textual, artistic, and illustrated evidence, subadult burials becomes the only source of information about infants and children during the prehistoric period. Therefore, searching for the evidence of such burials through the archive data was the first step prior to extracting all the possible information which aided in producing data tables for all the 22 sites selected for the current study , where each burial in each site is described using the same attributes including the burial numbers, burial type and location, number of occupants, types and frequency of grave goods deposited in the burial, the position of body, head and face, sex, age, depth of burial, and any recorded pathological condition. Producing comparable attributes was crucial for further data analysis. The results of analyzing and interpreting such data proved to be of great significance in inferring a wide range of information about how children were viewed and treated by their families and peers, while also helped in detecting the similarities and differences in the mortuary practices which were performed towards infants and children, when compared to that of adults. Moreover, the research offers a model for the evolution of the mortuary spaces related to infants and children in prehistoric Egypt and Sudan. Therefore, the research is considered as a significant step towards the inclusion of children in the archaeological interpretation, and towards the introduction of the archaeology of childhood as a developing discipline.

Key words:

Prehistory

Subadults

Funerary practices

Mortuary spaces

Paleopathology

Bioarchaeology

Grave goods

Burials

Nile Valley

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1. Introduction:

1.1. Setting:

The prehistoric period in Egypt and Sudan has witnessed a rapid development in terms of the increasing social complexity and the rapidly developing ideologies and beliefs. Such developments were not only reflected in the variety of the used raw materials, and the produced material culture, but more importantly reflected through burial practices, and in the way those ancient societies treated their deceased, especially the younger age group. Therefore, investigating the evidence of infants and children among the prehistoric societies of both regions, comes as a major target for the current study.

In this regard, the burials of infants and children in the prehistoric sites of Egypt and Sudan are used as main source for a wide range of information, especially when considering the absence of textual and illustrated evidence during this early period. In addition, burials of infants and children with what it contains of skeletal material, grave goods, and evidence of body treatment, can all provide insights into the presence of specific mortuary practices, and how those societies viewed, and treated children during their life and death.

The evidence of their burials is even more unique since it is recorded in both the settlement and cemeteries, and in diverse types of burials. However, this evidence is characterized by being limited and surrounded with many constraints. The fragility of children's skeletal material, its low visibility, and its poor preservation conditions plays a significant role in enhancing the impact of these constraints. In addition, natural and artificial taphonomic factors, together with the burial context, and in some cases the burial practices themselves, also contributes to the low visibility, low preservation, and poor representation of their bones.

In the current study, the evidence of infants and children in the prehistoric sites of Egypt and Sudan since Paleolithic, and towards the Neolithic and predynastic was surveyed. Based on such initial survey, 14 sites were included from Egypt, namely Tell el Farkha, Helipolis, Merimde beni-salama, El Omari, Minshat Abu Omer, Maadi, Wadi Digla, Gerzeh, Mahsna, Badari, Nag ed deir, Armant, Adaima, A-group cemeteries, and Gebel ramlah, while 8 sites were included from Sudan, namely Jebel sahaba, El Barga, R12 cemetery at Dongola Reach, El Kadada, Es sour, Qala'at shenan, Kadero, and Esh shaheinab (Map.1). These sites span the time between Neolithic and the predynastic/protodynastic period in both regions. All of the recorded infants and child burials from these sites were accurately described, compared, and the data were analyzed.

Almost all of the sites discussed and investigated in the current study temporally fall within the Holocene epoch, since most of the sites date to the Neolithic and Predynastic periods. On the other hand, few of the mentioned examples fall within the terminal Pleistocene. This means that the sites included, do not only reflect the cultural variability of these periods, but also reflect the changing climatic and environmental conditions happening through the prehistoric period especially the fluctuation between aridity and humidity. These fluctuations had their great impact on the subsistence patterns of the early inhabitants of both regions, and a further impact on the development of their ideologies, beliefs, and social structure. Such impact is further investigated and used while making inferences about infants and children during the prehistory of Egypt and Sudan (Map,1,2).



Map.1 Map showing the sites included in the current study