ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP-REVIEW

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by Margaret Patterson

"Vessels of Innocence: Child Pot Burials in Predynastic Egypt" Sara Ahmed Abdelaziz Mostafa

At the beginning of April Sara Ahmed Abdelaziz Mostafa gave a talk to us via Zoom about her research on Predynastic pot burials of children. She opened with a photo from a completely different culture – of buddha statues dressed up in infants' clothes, which are intended to guide the souls of babies to nirvana. She told us that she's interested in how societies think about the souls of children, and this struck her as an example from a culture different to the one she's studying and the one she lives in yet still showing concern and care for little children after their deaths.

Pot burials are a feature of many different periods of Egyptian history – Mostafa showed us an image of the Petrie Museum pot burial (which is on display in the museum) which was found at a predynastic site but it is a later intrusive burial that dates to the Old Kingdom period. And also an image of a Graeco-Roman period pot burial – showing that as a tradition it persists throughout the whole of ancient Egyptian culture. Mostafa explained that she became fascinated by pot burials early in her career as an Egyptologist and so decided for her research project for her MA (which she has recently obtained from UCL) she would look at the origins of this practice.

And so this is why she studied predynastic pot burials. Mostafa told us one of her first questions was whether or not this is a specific burial practice – it's often referred to in the literature as if it's just a quick solution to the problem of having a dead infant and no coffin. But is it really, or is it a way of burying a child that was chosen from among a range of different options? One thing she's particularly interested in is the personhood of these infants – they are often ignored in archaeological studies because the studies concentrate on children who can participate in activities in the community (where there is more evidence for how they are part of the community).

Her research is the first time that anyone has attempted a systematic study of these predynastic infant pot burials, and so she had to construct her methodology from scratch. To get the data to analyse she had to look at the published reports for a variety of predynastic sites and compile a list of the burials and the features of the pot burials she was interested in. She also had to find a theoretical framework within which to analyse the data, and she had to overcome a lot of challenges due to the significant differences in identification, documentation and even recording of evidence between the reports she was using (many of which were quite early in the history of the field of archaeology, so not as thorough as modern standards would require). The sites she looked at pot burials from covered a wide spread across the geography of Egypt, in Lower Egypt she looked at burials from el-Gerzeh, Minshat Abu Omar and Maadi, while from Upper Egypt she looked at burials from Sebaieh East, Adaïma, Hemamiyah and Badari. Across all the sites she had a corpus of 72 pot burials to investigate.

Before moving on to what she found out Mostafa took a moment to situate us in the Predynastic Period. It has multiple phases, and these are characterised by distinct cultures which are also different across the geographical spread of the country. For instance sites that typify different cultures include Maadi, which is in Lower Egypt and was a key site around 4000-3500 BCE, and Badari which is in Upper Egypt and flourished around 4400-4000 BCE. The chronology of this complex period was hotly debated for many years, but nowadays there is some degree of consensus – and the rise of more sophisticated techniques like radiocarbon dating has made the dates for different periods and cultures more robust (as compared to the relative dating one could previously get from things like typologies of pottery vessels). Mostafa is looking at burials from this complex period because this is when the funerary traditions that carry on into Pharaonic Egypt were established. The pot burials she's analysing are primarily from the mid-Naqada II period to the late Naqada III period (which is just prior to unification of Egypt).

In terms of theory Mostafa told us she wanted to do something a bit different, and to focus on analysing these pot burials from perspectives that aren't often used. The three primary theoretical areas she chose were firstly to look at mortuary practices and what these pot burials tell us about how the communities they come from engaged with their dead. Secondly she chose to look at them from the perspective of the archaeology of emotion – this is a way of looking at the archaeological evidence to try and think about how the people who were doing this were thinking about the things they were doing. Of course this can be difficult to interpret, and in a sense one can never really know the truth about what ancient people were thinking and feeling – things like the repertoire of emotions that people consider themselves to feel can be culturally determined and without texts telling us this how can we know what these were for the predynastic Egyptians? But nonetheless this is still a fruitful way to look at the evidence. And thirdly she was thinking about the evidence in terms of what it can tell us about children in predynastic Egyptian communities – in particular their personhood and their status. Were they actually considered people whilst infants? Had they lived long enough to be considered real members of the community?

Having given us the background and theoretical underpinnings of her project Mostafa now moved on to the evidence she has looked it. She started in Lower Egypt with the sites of el-Gerzeh, Minshat Abu Omar and Maadi. The first of these is a cemetery site that was excavated by Petrie, who recorded 298 burials of which 5 were pot burials. Minshat Abu Omar is another cemetery site which had 20 pot burials, which were found predominantly alongside other child burials in a particular area of the cemetery, this was excavated by a German team. In contrast the site of Maadi is a settlement site, which had 54 infant burials of which two were pot burials. The first thing Mostafa noted here was that infants were buried both in cemeteries and in settlements, and pot burials were found in both contexts. She also pulled out some interesting facts about specific burials – for instance at el-Gerzeh one pot burial was placed with an adult female burial: was this perhaps the infant's mother? At Minshat Abu Omar there is evidence that the pots are everyday pots reused as a coffin – signs of having been placed over fire, and of the previous contents. And at Maadi one of the pot burials might've have a structure above it (although what this might've been isn't clear) and the child was buried alongside other pots and grinding stones.

As Mostafa had mentioned earlier, she encountered quite a few challenges in interpreting the data she had to work with and she talked us through some of the specific challenges on these three sites. The source of her information for the burials at el-Gerzeh are the original handwritten tomb cards from Petrie's excavation – these have little drawings on them but no explanations or other contextualising text. She thinks it's possible that there were more than just the 2

pot burials at this site, but this unclear documentation means she hasn't been able to identify them. At Minshat Abu Omar there is a disconnect in the report of the excavation between the identification of a feature as a "pot burial" and the descriptions of the items. Some features that are called "pot burials" don't appear to have any human remains, so don't appear to be a burial at all. There is a particular way the pot has been broken that many of these features called "pot burial" share, but that's not a consistent diagnostic feature either. So she's not sure how the excavators were defining "pot burial", or even if there **was a consistent definition. And at Maadi there is so little documentation that it's difficult for her to know for sure what human remains were buried in what fashion.**

Mostafa now moved on to the Upper Egyptian sites that she has looked at. At Sebaieh East there were 21 pot burials – this is a cemetery site near modern Luxor which was investigated in the early 20th Century by De Morgan but it's now lost (this sort of statement always astonishes me, why did the early 20th Century archaeologists not write down precisely where they were working!?). The information from this site includes photographs, which shows that these pot burials look quite different from the Lower Egyptian examples – sometimes multiple pots in a pit, sometimes just one. And the pots involved differ a lot. At Adaïma there were 15 pot burials, which were found only in a single area of this cemetery – just one part of the eastern cemetery, and all the burials here were of children (many more than just the pot burials). So this appears to be a site that had a designated area for the interment of children. At Hemamiyeh there were 2 burials, and at Badari there were 3 – there's no visual documentation of the burials in these two settlement sites but from the notes they appear to've been very rich burials. One had a macehead as part of its grave goods, and other items included fragments of ivory tusk and flint flakes. One at Badari was wrapped in linen and goat skin. The burials at Adaïma also had rich grave goods including quite a lot of jewellery. Overall Mostafa said there was more evidence of wrapping and grave goods than at the Lower Egyptian sites – but Sebaieh East still had indications that the pots were re-used everyday pots.

The challenges for these four sites included a lack of clarity for numbers of pots in both Adaïma and Sebaieh East – the excavators just mention the burials they thought were noteworthy without giving the total numbers. They also appear to get quite carried away with their interpretations – for instance making unjustified extrapolations about how these were burials that had "no signs of ceremony". In Hemamiyeh and Badari there is also a lot of encroachment onto the predynastic archaeology, which makes the evidence less clear.

The biggest challenge Mostafa faced for the whole project was, as she put it, bias bias bias! For all of her research she's working with old excavation reports and publications and the way that these archaeologists approached their research is not the way we would today. There was a general lack of care from excavators – like they might only take away the "nice" objects or burials from a site and then write that they could've collected more but it wasn't worth it. So there is an unknown amount of material that was dug up, not properly investigated at the time and then discarded – evidence that is now forever lost. The interpretations the original excavators make are often unfounded – for instance hypothesising that damage to the infant bones meant that these pot burials were of the victims of violence, whereas Mostafa said it was much more likely that this would happen during or after the burial due to the weight of the earth on the grave. Infant bones are very fragile and easily damaged post-mortem (presumably getting even more so as the millennia go by in the ground). She also pulled out a quote where the investigator had said that every day pots were most likely used by "housewives" to bury their children, based on nothing more than the general cultural attitudes of the investigator and no actual evidence.

So the majority of her work has been to overcome these challenges and pull out some real interpretations from the available data. Mostafa started this part of her talk by talking about the age of the children who were buried in pots. First she had a caveat – it's hard to tell the age from the records she has and this is complicated by the fact that infant bones are fragile (as she mentioned just earlier) so were in poor condition when excavated. However she has enough data to note a pattern – of those where she could tell the age most are under 1 year of age, the second biggest grouping are between 1 & 5 years old and then there are a few children older than that. So pot burials appear to be most appropriate for very young infants.

The infants were buried with a wide variety of grave goods. Most of them had beads, but there were other more unusual items as well such as a macehead for one burial. About 13 of the pot burials were accompanied by other pots – Mostafa said that this might not sound like a high number, but it's a significant proportion of the 72 burials she's studying. So this means that the burials are not as simple as she'd first assumed – it's not a case of just putting a child in a pot and burying them, these children of less than 1 year old are being interred with grave goods. And this means that it is clear to Mostafa that this gives infants and neonates a status of personhood – they were considered worthy of a proper burial. It isn't something that happens for all children of that age (there are many non-pot burials of infants at these sites), but clearly a lot of people did want to do this so it reflects a care for children that age within the community. The fact that it's not a straightforward burial practice reinforces that – the child had to be wrapped, be given gifts, be placed in a pot and sealed before interment which often took place in a cemetery and sometimes even a part of a cemetery set aside for children.

Many of the previous interpretations that Mostafa had read say that this is a cheap, logical and expedient way to bury a child – convenience rather than care. But she disagrees – as she had just explained, this is an elaborate process that people took care over. Other theories she read emphasised the cheap aspect of it and positioned it as a lower class thing – poor people who can't afford coffins use pots. But when you look at the grave goods this doesn't seem to be the case – a child whose parents can bury jewellery with their infant is not from a poor family. She did note that one must be careful interpreting grave goods in this way – burials can also be performative, and a family might use an ostentatiously rich burial of a child to manipulate how their status was perceived in the community. But she thinks this is unlikely to be the case for all of these burials. These burials are also in contrast to many other burials at these sites – again this is not the cheapest and most expedient way to bury an infant, many infants were buried directly in the ground. And some of the infants from the pot burials show signs of having gone through a process of desiccation before being interred in a pot. So these pot burials are not necessarily a cheap way to bury your infant, but this is not a simple binary of exclusively cheap or expensive – some of the pots do show signs of previous use in a domestic context so they aren't custom made for the funeral.

Mostafa now moved on to some of her own thinking about why these infants were buried in pots. One thing she sees as important is that the pots that these children were buried in (and the ones they had as grave goods) are practical objects that are used within the community. She see it as a way of saying that this child belongs to the community – the pot was made by someone in the community, it has a social history of who used it, and now the latest in the chain is the child who is buried within it. It brings the child into the activities of the community even in their death. She has also more specifically considered how it links the deceased child with their mother – not in the dismissive sense of housewives burying their babies in the cookware that was to hand, tho! Instead she's thinking about the emotional connection that burying the child in something that the mother has used and handled regularly would bring – is using a pot that belonged to the mother a way of extending the mother-child bond into the

grave? Pots also often have womblike connotations – this is something that comes up both in later Egyptian culture (when we have texts) and in other cultures. The examples Mostafa mentioned included Bantu speaking communities, and also some Old Kingdom texts that use a metaphor of coming out of a pot for being born.

So far Mostafa had discussed her group of 72 pot burials from these 8 sites as a whole, but they obviously covered a vast sweep of time and so she had also considered what they could tell her about the evolution of the practice over time (and how that fit into the overall cultural changes in the same period). Her earliest examples from Maadi date back to the Naqada I to early Naqada II periods, and these were the pot burials which had grinding stones in their grave goods. This is also the case for adult burials during the same periods. Later on in the Naqada II period the pots which are used for the burials might be imported – she has an example where the infant was buried in a pot from the Levant. This mirrors developments in the cultural context – there are more signs of contact with cultures outside Egypt and more imported goods in general. The practice continues to evolve into the Naqada III period, and again the features of the pot burials mirror changes in the culture around them.

Pot burials are not solely an ancient Egyptian phenomenon – for instance Mostafa told us that there are examples in Anatolia and Sudan. In fact in Anatolia and in Israel there are sites that have up to a thousand pot burials, so many more than in the Egyptian sites her examples come from. So one of the questions that she wants to take on further in future is whether this burial practice spread into Egypt from the Levant, or whether it developed in northeastern Egypt and spread out to the Levant. She also mentioned that sites much further afield, like Bulgaria, have examples – and she finds it fascinating that this might be a more universal practice of bringing the deceased children into the community.

Mostafa wrapped up her talk by giving us an overview of her research results so far, and talking about the questions she'd like to investigate further. She's found that these infants were given the same sorts of burial practices and grave goods, and were allocated a space in cemeteries just like adults. So clearly even infants of less than a year old had status as a person within their communities. The choice of pots used for the interments is related to the socioeconomic changes during the Predynastic Period. And she believes that using a pot for the burials is a way of extending community identity to the child who did not live long enough to make one for themselves.

In future she wants to investigate potential links to the Levant or African communities. She's also interested in moving time forward through the sweep of Egyptian history up to the present day. This brings her into the field of ethnoarchaeology, and there has been some previous work done in the 1970s investigating burials in Khartoum in Sudan. This work by Janice Boddy investigated burials where infants (in particular stillborn children) were wrapped in linen, placed in a pot and then buried within the house enclosure. And Mostafa would like in future to extend this study to Egypt in a systematic fashion. She's been asking villagers in Egypt when she has the opportunity, and so she knows that some communities do still bury deceased infants in the home. And a lot of the women she has spoken to were quite emotional at the idea of burying a child like that in a cemetery – that it would feel like leaving them alone and abandoned. Mostafa returned to this in the Q&A session and said that this really does feel like an active choice – that these bereaved families are choosing to keep their infant with them and to immortalise them in that way, not just burying them quickly in a convenient fashion as some earlier archaeologists had rather dismissively said of the Predynastic burials.

I found this a really interesting talk – in particular it was interesting to see that even with her only sources being the rather sketchy and biased reporting of archaeologists working before the development of current methods she was still able to bring a modern approach and answer the sorts of questions we're interested in today. I also like the way that Mostafa brought across the point that these little children were people and were a loved part of their communities. And it really illustrated how the Predynastic Egyptians are people just like us and that there's a continuity of emotion even if not actual practice between these ancient people and the modern people who live in the same land.