

Six decades of collaborative bioarchaeological research on the Nile

GEORGE J. ARMELAGOS and **DENNIS P. VAN GERVEN**, 2017, *Life and Death on the Nile: A Bioethnography of Three Ancient Nubian Communities*, Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 244 pp. ISBN 9780813054452

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Life and Death on the Nile is a rollicking reminiscence that looks back at the roughly six decades of research collaboration undertaken by Dennis Van Gerven, George Armelagos, and colleagues in Sudanese Nubia. At its core, this volume reads as an ode to a great friend and scholar: George Armelagos, a mentor to countless biological anthropologists and to whose memory this volume is also dedicated.

Bioarchaeology within Nubia, modern Sudan and contexts within Southern Egypt, over the last century has largely been driven by dam building projects. The research presented by Van Gerven and Armelagos utilizes the lens of dam building and associated threats of flooding to the destruction of sites as the initial impetus for undertaking bioarchaeological research at Wadi Halfa, and subsequently at Kulubnarti. Though dam building along the Nile has historically posed challenging ultimatums to either excavate and document sites or lose the contexts forever, such infrastructural projects have also provided a strong fillip for incentivizing archaeological research in the region, ultimately setting in motion a deep discourse on the history and archaeology of Nubia that has expanded well beyond the limits of dam building flood zone impacts. The excavation of cemeteries, and associated analyses, in particular has seen intensive focus as a primary area of research for examining human experiences within ancient Nubia. It is to this area of the discipline that the subject volume contributes most fully.

The Nubian material presented by Van Gerven and Armelagos serves primarily as a synthesis of previous research, a magnum opus of sorts, presented as a career in retrospect. The tone of this volume in many ways lends itself to the *bildungsroman* genre, with numerous anecdotes of personal history and development, chance discoveries, and resultant advancements in the fields of biological anthropology and paleopathology, such as the recovery of a mandible from a tire track leading to the inadvertent discovery of a 12,000 year old Mesolithic cemetery at Meinarti.

Life and Death on the Nile is thematically driven, being presented through seven focussed chapters ranging from a look at the transition from racial categorizations to the development of the biocultural model, assessments of growth and development, pathology, and a number of unique case studies comprising cases of hydrocephalus, neoplasm, and scoliosis, among others. In this way each chapter takes on its own singular part of the broader narrative, allowing for a deep-dive into the topic(s) addressed in each individual chapter. As a whole, the volume makes clear that, while “big” diseases like plague, smallpox, and syphilis, have shaped history in drastic ways on grand and obvious scales, the small scale diseases of microbial infection, diarrhea, and parasites have equally played a pervasive and more quietly pernicious role in shaping human history.

Each chapter provides the reader with a detailed background summary to the main theme that both situates the material within its broader academic historical context—be that a history of racial categorizations in anthropology or a background to osteoporosis—as well as provides a foundation for the reader to appreciate the subsequent presentation and discussion of research findings from Wadi Halfa and Kulubnarti. The volume thus effectively strikes a balance between textbook and research monograph.

The thematic materials presented within the initial six chapters are anchored within Chapter 7 through development of the “bioethnography” approach, a term coined in effect by Van Gerven and Armelagos, and developed through the biocultural model as a central unifying tenet to their bioarchaeological research, being premised on two overarching principles: 1.) human evolution is the result of an interaction between biological and cultural systems, and 2.) human evolution isolated from its cultural context is unintelligible (p. 21). As Van Gerven and Armelagos posit, at its root all anthropology is ethnography. While ethnographic research traditionally entails detailed observation and discussion with living populations, bioethnography

relies on observations of lived experiences and cultural viewpoints derived from preserved skeletal markers and cultural practices reflected in burials, essentially providing a biologically driven ethnographic reconstruction for deceased individuals lives within a cultural context. While shortcomings and challenges related to the removal of human agency in the constructing of bioethnographies can easily be levelled against such an interpretive method, the presented attempts to more broadly define and nuance the experiences of populations living in ancient Nubian contexts is commendable for lending a humanizing lens to the discussion of biological markers of growth and pathology.

To develop such bioethnographic syntheses, in part, Van Gerven and Armelagos rely on the principles of strong inference, which stresses the need for multiple hypotheses to avoid or inhibit confirmation biases that abound in single hypothesis approaches. This is to say that, keeping an open mind and not seeking to fit data to preconceived notions of “what happened” are integral and imperative to unbiased research and opens the door for opportunities to identify previously unrecognized trends and associated interpretations.

The research results presented within this volume also take on parsimonious viewpoint, gauging results along three lines of certainly true, probably true, and possibly true. In this way questions of confidence can be clearly stated while not also requiring such smoking gun evidence as to avoid any level of human inference. For instance, Van Gerven and Armelagos point out that it is certainly true that natural mummification occurred in Nubian contexts, while it is only probably true that impaired individuals received assistance from their community, such as a documented individual with scoliosis who likely received a “great deal of social support” (p. 184), while also admitting that explicit evidence of such cannot be confirmed.

The highly relatable and anecdote rich retrospective synthesis presented in this volume is appreciated as a singular source for summarising a number of broader biological anthropological questions examined at Wadi Halfa and Kulubnarti, as well as for the insights “behind the scenes” to the development of research along the chain of events from field excavation to laboratory analyses to final publication synthesis. This volume will be of the greatest benefit to individuals interested in the history of biological anthropology in Sudan and to biological anthropologists seeking a broad synthesis and retrospective of research findings from Wadi Halfa and Kulubnarti. A welcome contribution to the history of biological anthropology and a fitting

testament to George Armelagos as a scholar, this volume will make a welcome addition to university libraries and anthropological research collections.

Robert J. Stark is a bioarchaeologist with a background in human osteology, stable isotopes, and paleopathology. His ongoing research focusses on contexts within Egypt, Italy, and Sudan, along with professional involvement in cultural resource management (CRM) archaeology in Ontario.

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