



## HYBRID CONFERENCE

## WHO WAS POOR IN PHARAONIC EGYPT AND ITS NEAR EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

### SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND VISIBILITY ACCORDING TO TEXTS, PICTURES AND ARCHAEOLOGY

A conference taking place within the framework of the FWF-Project (V 883-G):  
*Representations and Reality of Poverty in Ancient Egypt. The Poor, their Identities and their Practices* organised by:  
- Delphine Driaux (University of Vienna)  
- Bettina Bader (Austrian Academy of Sciences)

## HOST

Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW)  
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## ABSTRACTS

### KEYNOTE LECTURE

**Margaret Maitland** | National Museums Scotland

*Poverty, Stigma, and Inequality: Evidence from Middle Kingdom Egyptian Visual and Textual Culture*

Representations from ancient Egyptian visual and textual culture offer insights into social attitudes, suggesting that inequality and poverty were normalized in elite culture as part of the 'natural order' of the world. Visual representations of labourers were typically either standardized to show their conformity under elite authority or negatively stereotyped to demonstrate their social difference and potential deviance, which served to justify elite control. The justification of power for some and poverty for others underpinned the structural basis of inequality in ancient Egypt.

Characteristics associated with poverty, such as nakedness and infirmity, were stigmatized, while others associated with labourers in general, such as dirtiness and lack of self-control, were used to indicate their social inferiority. The dehumanization and 'othering' of labourers would have restricted the choices and opportunities available to them. Informed by sociological theory and poverty studies, this paper will focus on a case study from the late Eleventh Dynasty tomb chapel of Baqet III at Beni Hassan, in particular its scenes of the rendering of accounts and punishment of tax defaulters. Using this and other examples from Middle Kingdom elite visual and textual culture, this paper will consider how social attitudes towards poverty were cultivated to stigmatize, shame, and disempower the lower classes. While these attitudes could sometimes be resisted or subverted, they ultimately served to maintain the social status quo.

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## SESSION I: STUDYING THE POOR, SOCIAL SCIENCES & THEORIES

Delphine Driaux | University of Vienna

### *Writing the History of the Poor: An Introduction to a Complex Field of Study*

Whether in Near Eastern studies or in Egyptology, the poor (and poverty more generally) are a subject that remains relatively unexplored. There are several reasons to explain this situation. First is the matter of choices made by scholars who have focused on certain subjects and social groups perhaps easier to study or at least considered more appealing. Then there are the issues of definition(s). Nowadays, there are economic criteria that define poverty on the basis of a conventionally fixed threshold. However, it is not possible to apply this kind of criteria to antiquity. It would be anachronistic and on such a basis, most of the poor of today would then appear to be the rich of the past. Poverty in ancient societies can therefore only be a relative poverty which, as some sociological studies have shown, can take many forms that are not just economic ones. Furthermore, there is the problem of sources, the nature of which may partly explain the limited number of scientific studies dedicated to the poor. Indeed, most texts and images that have survived to the current day were produced only by and for the elites. The need for other sources is therefore imperative, making the contribution of archaeology crucial as it provides evidence coming directly from the poor themselves, even if this is not without raising other concerns.

This paper will thus expand on all the different reasons that make it difficult to write a history of the poor, and will introduce the questions and problems that will be discussed over the two and a half days of the conference.

Beatriz Jiménez Meroño | Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

### *Aporophobia in the Two Lands? On Poverty and Social Exclusion in Ancient Egypt*

Poverty in ancient Egypt is a topic of increasing relevance to researchers, who are exploring new questions about society and the appropriate disciplinary approaches for studying it. A comprehensive study requires the use of social sciences, which provide the necessary tools for Egyptology.

Sociology, in particular, allows us to address issues that have been previously overlooked. Social exclusion is an aspect of Sociology that has received little attention in Egyptology. It is a mechanism used to regulate individuals or groups who deviate from the social norm and place them on the margins. By studying social exclusion, we can gain a better understanding of ancient Egyptian society. If we assume the existence of poor individuals in ancient Egypt, the application of Sociology is of great interest, as they would possibly be part of a group that would be rejected or marginalised, that is, socially excluded. Likewise, Adela Cortina's ethical studies have highlighted the existence in many societies of aporophobia, that is, the rejection of the poor. Therefore, this contribution aims to study ancient Egyptian poverty from the viewpoint of social exclusion, using an interdisciplinary approach and a sociological perspective that, when combined with Egyptian sources, enables us to comprehend the social reality of poor individuals in ancient Egypt, exploring if they were socially excluded and if the ancient Egyptian society was aporophobic.

Lorenzo Verderame | Sapienza, Università di Roma

### *Poverty in Ancient Mesopotamia*

Poverty has become in the course of time a main topic in the political agenda as well as in historical, economic, sociological, anthropological, and interdisciplinary research. Most, if not all, the academic historical overviews and synthesis on poverty deal with the modern era or start from the 1500, as if the phenomenon of poverty is specifically linked to the process of industrialisation or globalization. In their perspective, poverty is strictly related to economy, markets, and concept of classes, that are considered “modern” phenomena, besides important studies on Early Middle Ages or Roman society have proved differently.

This paper disentangles the topic of poverty in ancient Mesopotamia from two opposite points of view. First, it discusses the approaches to the definition and conceptualization of poverty in social sciences and how these models and theories may fit or explain ancient Mesopotamian evidence. Second, it analyzes Mesopotamian primary sources, beginning from lexical definition of the two opposite poverty / richness. It surveys the semantic values of the terms for poor and rich and the different area of relevance (hunger, wellness, social relevance, power, hygiene) according to different types of sources, from administrative documents to literature, with a particular emphasis on wisdom literature and proverbs. Finally, it considers evidence in Mesopotamian literature for an emic perception of class conflicts between a rich and powerful élite and a poor and controlled mass.

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## SESSION II: POVERTY, TEXTS & WORDS

Aml Mahmoud | Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities

### *Poverty in Ancient Egypt: A Literary Reflection of a Prevalent Issue*

Poverty has long been a persistent problem that has plagued societies throughout history, and ancient Egypt is no exception. This paper aims to explore the theme of poverty as reflected in the literature of ancient Egyptian civilization. By examining a diverse range of literary sources, including texts, inscriptions, and papyri, this study sheds light on the socio-economic conditions and the lived experiences of impoverished individuals in ancient Egypt. Drawing upon the available corpus of ancient Egyptian literature, this research analyzes various literary genres, such as wisdom literature, moralizing texts, and narratives, to unravel the multifaceted aspects of poverty. It investigates how ancient Egyptian writers portrayed poverty, its causes, and its consequences, offering insights into the societal attitudes and perceptions surrounding this issue.

The study reveals that poverty was a recurrent theme in ancient Egyptian literature, reflecting the harsh realities faced by many individuals within the society. Literary texts often depict poverty as a result of misfortune, divine punishment, or systemic inequality. They also emphasize the suffering and hardships endured by the impoverished, highlighting their struggles for survival, limited access to resources, and social marginalization.

Moreover, this research explores the strategies employed by ancient Egyptians to cope with poverty, including reliance on communal support systems, charity, and the pursuit of alternative economic opportunities. It examines the role of institutions, such as temples and royal patronage, in providing relief to the poor and offering them avenues for social assistance.

By analyzing literary works from different periods of ancient Egyptian history, this study demonstrates the evolving perspectives on poverty across time. It highlights the shifts in societal perceptions, governmental intervention, and the changing dynamics of poverty relief measures in ancient Egypt.

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Overall, this research contributes to our understanding of poverty as a significant social issue in ancient Egyptian civilization. It underscores the importance of literary sources in reconstructing the socio-economic realities of the past and provides a nuanced perspective on the experiences of the impoverished individuals who lived in this ancient society.

Keywords: poverty in ancient Egypt; ancient Egyptian society; literary reflection

**Francisco L. Borrego Gallardo** | Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

### *"Love me!": on the Speeches of the Oor in Ancient Egyptian Texts*

Few testimonies from ancient Egypt allow us to give a voice to people in poverty, especially if they refer to this condition. However, a passage from the Prophecy of Neferty (§ Xa [ed. W. Helck]) stands out: *r(3) nb mh(.w) m mr wj* "every mouth is full of *mr wj*". In 1923, A. Erman wondered whether *mr wj* would reproduce the words of a cry for alms. After him, this expression seems to have been understood in different ways, with no agreement as to its translation or meaning. The scarcity of such expressions and laments in the mouths of apparently poor people is evident (e.g. *h3-n=j* "Would that I had..."). The paucity of these testimonies could be attributed to several factors. One of them is the divergences between the etic concepts of poverty used in historical and sociological studies and the emic set of categories, prototypes, and meanings of the Egyptian terms equivalent to it and the linguistic structures that convey them. This scarcity may also be explained by the nature of the decorum inherent in the high culture contexts where these testimonies are found. Furthermore, the Egyptian words for poverty appear to have a level of ambiguity that corresponds with those for its opposite, wealth. Also challenging are idiosyncratic expressions such as analytical constructions (e.g. *jwtj-n=f* etc. "who has not"), idioms and euphemisms. It is relevant to note that individuals involved in these situations rarely describe themselves or their interlocutors in this condition. Instead, they are usually referred to in the third person. Considering these aspects allows for a more nuanced analysis of the contexts and uses of these expressions, and drawing on parallels in other cultural spheres can also be helpful.

### *Stay Hungry, Stay Poorish. The Association between Hunger and Poverty in the Ancient Egyptian Language*

The little attention given to poverty in ancient Egypt is mostly due to the fact that the poor are hardly detectable in archaeological and textual evidence. In most cases, Egyptologists focussed on *Realien*, i.e. they sought to define poverty in ancient Egypt by collecting and scrutinising the very few findings and icons somehow related to the lower rungs of ancient Egyptian society. In this paper, on the other hand, I will take a linguistic approach, i.e. I will attempt to describe the historical development of a word translatable as "poor". By doing this, I envisage taking a first and necessary step toward an overarching and satisfactory definition of poverty in ancient Egypt. More broadly, such an approach might yield insights into the history of the ancient Egyptian socioeconomic system.

Ancient Egyptian had a wide range of terms translatable as "poor". One of these terms, "hkr" (𓂏𓂏𓂏 in hieroglyphic script and 𓂏𓂏 in demotic script), literally "hungry" and/or "indigent", deserves accurate study, as it occurs throughout ancient Egyptian's attested history, including the Coptic stage (Ⲛⲏⲕⲉ, Ⲛⲏⲕⲓ). In my paper, I will first undertake an etymological analysis of the root "hkr" and a semiotic analysis of the determinatives, specifically 𓂏 and 𓂏. Therefore, by taking into account the occurrences of "hkr" and Ⲛⲏⲕⲉ, Ⲛⲏⲕⲓ in some selected ancient Egyptian texts dating from the Old Kingdom down through the Late Roman Period, I will attempt to delve into how hunger and poverty ended up being closely associated in the ancient Egyptian language, as it happened in other Mediterranean languages, such as Italian ("morto di fame") and the Egyptian Arabic spoken in rural areas ("ḡa'an"). In doing so, I envisage shedding some light on how the ancient Egyptian idea of being poor changed over time and, overall, gaining a glimpse into the history of the ancient Egyptian socio-economic system.

### *Hunger, Tears, Laughs, and Blows Embodied Poverty as Metaphorical Device in The Poor Man of Nippur*

The Akkadian-language literary composition known by the name *The Poor Man of Nippur* (PMN, probably early I mill. BCE) features one of the most well-known representations of embodied poverty in the literature of the ANE: the "poor and needy" Gimil-Ninurta taking his revenge over the authorities and the society responsible for his condition. And yet – despite the number of studies dealing with this text – the topic of poverty *per se* has only been rarely and cursorily addressed.

PMN has often been categorised as an example of a humorous genre in the cuneiform literary tradition; at the same time, as a *belles lettres* composition deeply rooted in scribal culture and meant to be read by the classes of *literati*, it is expected that PMN was a sophisticated reflection about class-struggle and social injustice, exposing malfunctionings and contradictions within the power establishment. Gimil-Ninurta's poverty – which finds an immediate correlate in the crippling hunger which drives his actions from the outset of the plot – finds itself at the very core of this complex literary identity. It is, in fact, not only a prominent element used as a means to achieve a humorous aim, but it also takes paradigmatic and existential hues: as Milano (1998) aptly remarked, "The hunger of the Poor Man is not only hunger for bread [...]; it is the ancestral hunger of the poor *par excellence*."

In this paper I will take a step further in this direction: highlighting a shared background of tropes and motifs between the depiction of poverty and hunger in PMN and both Mesopotamian and biblical wisdom literature of the 'pious sufferer' (e.g., *A Man and his God*, *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, *Job*), ranging from vocabulary to cultural landscapes, I will try to show how Gimil-Ninurta's poverty is used as a metaphor for the human condition more at large, being the very key image to convey PMN's skeptical philosophical take, in line with other cognate examples stemming from the Ancient Near Eastern wisdom tradition.

Ahmed Altaher | Centre franco-égyptien d'étude des temples de Karnak; Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities

### *Graffiti as a Form of Self-presentation for the poor*

In ancient Egypt, the elite used to leave a stela or a statue at the temple as a method of self-presentation in the presence of deities. However, this was not available to the largest segment of ancient Egyptian society for several reasons, perhaps the most important of which is that leaving a stela or statue in the temple domain requires a large financial cost.

This paper deals with the practice of graffiti as a cheap alternative for the poor to express themselves in ancient Egypt, trying to investigate the groups that did this and the methods and ways they followed to leave a lasting memory of themselves in the sacred place.

When they leave graffiti in this sacred realm of the temple, they become one permanent unit with it, which ensures that their appeal will continue practically as long as the temple itself remains.

It shows that there is no reason to assume that graffiti was of less value than the more formal methods of ritual expression (such as stelae and statues).

Perhaps they can be interpreted as low-cost forms of representation and revival that fulfill the limitations and restrictions imposed on the poorer and illiterate levels of Egyptian society.

The available evidence suggests that the concept of self-expression in ancient Egypt was flexible enough to include different groups of society. The religious organization also ensured that the poor had cheap ways to express themselves. This type of graffiti can reveal social divisions, pluralism, popular practices, and beliefs, and provide a new perspective on the religious history of ancient Egypt. Therefore, it can be an exciting data source to study aspects of the popular piety of the poor.

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## SESSION III: POVERTY & REPRESENTATIONS

Romane Betbeze | Humboldt University of Berlin

### *Elite Women, Poor Women: the Intersection of Gender and Social Group in the Old Kingdom Textual and Visual Culture*

The decorative programs in Old Kingdom tomb chapels are fundamental sources for the study of the Old Kingdom society and societal conceptions, but they suffer from a twofold conceptual bias when it comes to their interpretation, since they were mostly produced by and for *male members of the elite*. As such, this specific visual and textual culture was mainly centered on the depiction of male high-status people and/or male subordinates and workers, although some women can also be represented. These people belonged to various hierarchical scales, their position within the society being the result of the combination of their social group, gender, ethnic origin, age, physical condition – among others, according to the intersectional theory framework.

In this paper, we will be focusing on the interpenetration of gender and social group, and its influence on the iconographic and textual representations of women in Old Kingdom tomb chapels. Indeed, women as elite members of the society were rarely depicted as an autonomous major figure but mostly as female relatives of the (male) tomb owner. At the extreme opposite of the society, female workers or low-ranking subalterns were even more seldom represented. Which characteristics do these "poor women" share with the "elite women" in images and texts? To which extent are these two categories of women visually and textually defined by their social group? Finally, building upon Spivak's well-known article: can these female elite members and subalterns act and speak? We will try to answer these questions through analyzing the iconographic attributes of these two groups of women, the scenes they are involved in, the people they are interacting with, and the texts they were associated to.

### *Unkempt Hair, Shaggy Beard: Hair in the Image of the Poor in Ancient Egyptian Funerary Depictions*

In ancient Egyptian funerary depictions, hairiness is not just used as an iconographical tool to depict the humble condition of the poor; it also carries a mythological dimension, framed by the antagonism between portrayals of the neglected poor and the meticulously groomed noble. Through an iconographical and textual study, we will explore the reflection of the poor in the funerary context, particularly as expressed through curious hair imagery.

During the Pharaonic period, common people were typically depicted wearing a loincloth and short hair for men or a simple dress and long hair for women. However, as early as the Old Kingdom, some individuals were portrayed with unkempt hair, disheveled appearances, or even baldness, sometimes accompanied by shaggy beards, especially in scenes depicting agricultural and craftwork activities within funerary representations of the underworld as of the living world. Scholars suggest that these depictions, crafted by the nobility, reflect the wealthy's perception of the poor and serve to enhancing their own social standing. The sporadic presence of these characters among other workers, particularly during the New Kingdom, suggests that they represent a stereotypical image of the poorest individuals. This use of hair as a symbolic adornment in depicting others raises questions about its significance and, more broadly, about the role of the poor in these funerary depictions.

The mention of disheveled people (*sps.(w)*) playing a role in the deceased's underground journey in funerary texts like the Coffin Texts and the Book of the Dead implies a deeper mythological significance than merely characterizing social status through appearance. Furthermore, the nobility's emphasis on grooming, through the use of wigs and regular shaving, underscores the importance of maintaining control over their hair growth and one's appearance, perhaps symbolizing broader concepts like self-discipline and respect for order (Maat).

Keywords: Book of the Dead, Coffin Texts, funerary representations, hairiness, hairstyle, mythology, self-discipline, social status, worker.

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## SESSION IV: POVERTY & SOCIETY

Danijela Stefanović | University of Belgrade

### *If I am a Cook, do you count me as a Poor Person?*

The Middle Kingdom / Second Intermediate Period profession marker *psjj* (cook / baker), the lexeme derived from the verbal root *psi* to cook, is attested in 16 written records (papyri, stelae, and graffiti), most of which originated from Lahun. Twenty-two individuals are identified as cooks, and in one case a dossier (i.e. a multiple attestation) is recognized: *psjj s3-ḥntj-ḥtjj / s3-ḥntj* is attested in the late Middle Kingdom pBerlin 10048 and 10090. Cooks worked in the *šn* ("provisioning quarter") of palaces, temples, and in teams for expedition troops as well as in households. Large households at Lahun have had servants who saw after the needs of the estate (cooks, weavers, etc.). Similarly, pBrooklyn 35.1446 reports a list of 95 servants in the household of a Theban official, including two cooks, among others. The present paper addresses the issue of the social standing of Middle Kingdom / Second Intermediate Period cooks. Were they poor people? What would be the mechanism for detecting their social standing? Are there any differences in the rank of mid-II millennia Egyptian cooks compared with contemporaneous attestations from cuneiform sources? Finally, other categories of food producers, namely *rḥtj* and *qfnj* (two categories of bakers), will also be addressed.



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Linda Hulin | University of Oxford

### *Fish, Fishing and Poverty in Egypt and the Levant*

The material record favours wealthy elites, since it was they who could afford to build and decorate homes with longer-lasting materials and to stock them with quantities of commodities and exotic goods; these same values, applied to their care of the dead, ensured their visibility in the mortuary record as well. Similarly, it was the wealthy who wrote about themselves, their cares, and their concerns; the poor were present only to illustrate the virtue of the rich who attended to their needs, or as examples of moral turpitude and misfortune. Archaeologists have taken the material evidence of wealth and through degrees of absence, used them as definitions of poverty. However, this really only illustrates the state of not being rich, rather than the state of being poor.

Social economists define six types of poverty in the modern world: absolute, relative, situational, generational, urban and rural; only the first, characterised by a lack of food and shelter, and therefore the lack of a material footprint, will be invisible in the archaeology of everyday life, although it may be recorded on the bones of the dead, through disease and damage. But poverty is a social condition, as much as a material one.

In this paper I propose that those who live in a state of poverty suffer primarily from a lack of social connection to people richer than themselves to whom they can bind, or be bound, for protection and work. I shall apply the yardstick of connectivity to evidence for fishing activities in Egypt and the Levant. Aquatic resources are less definable than terrestrial ones, with fishing villages historically occupying a liminal position in rural economies and intersecting with urban centres tangentially, in markets.

Thais Rocha da Silva | University of São Paulo; University of Oxford

### *Poverty at Home? Community Life and Social Status in New Kingdom Egypt.*

The investigation of domestic space in ancient Egypt privileged larger houses with scholars focusing on space use and artefact assemblages to determine social activities and status. Many analyses have been influenced by the assumption that the material culture equals social status of the inhabitants, especially regarding to house size. This is particularly problematic when we investigate special purpose settlements, like the Workmen's Village in Amarna, with smaller houses in a clustered space. The settlement housed the workforce engaged with royal building construction and was built and maintained by the Egyptian state. The existence of communal areas spread out of the enclosure wall may have given a different idea about what "house" was for these communities. In this presentation, I explore anthropologically-oriented methodologies, like the study of gated communities and sensorial archaeology to understand "village life". Furthermore, I will discuss what small houses within communities can offer to shed light on defining the social status and community life in ancient Egypt.

## SESSION V: POVERTY & SETTLEMENT ARCHAEOLOGY

Georg Cyrus | NINO Leiden

### *"The Wretched of the Earth" - Who were Poor in the Neo-Assyrian Empire?*

One of the biggest challenges to overcome when studying lower classes in ancient history is the conceptualization of them. How we define the poor is dependent on the sources we are using which often lead to a reductionistic position on the matter. Textual evidence about poor people is predominantly administrative texts that show dependencies, thus creating a definition as dependent labor. In graves poverty is defined as materially speaking poor people thus as have-nots, while domestic architecture gives us insights into the question of living conditions in the everyday life and defines poverty as people with low living conditions. Different sources thereby do not define different "lower classes", but they elucidate different forms of poverty. These forms often overlap, and it therefore makes sense to combine them in a structural view on poverty.

In order to illustrate this intersectional view on poverty I use the case study of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. I concentrate on the domestic architecture from selected archaeological sites and analyze the living condition they afford. Afterwards I shall compare this data to other historical sources in order to arrive at a more nuanced position on which groups can be considered poor, lower class or silenced.

Bettina Bader | Austrian Academy of Sciences

### *Assessing Social Stratification in Egyptian Settlements: An Attempt to Visualize non-Elite People in Archaeology*

Various means and methods have been used to reach a better understanding of the relative scale of affluence (being rich/er and being poor/er) in ancient Egyptian settlements. Among the factors used the expansion of house ground plans of habitations/dwellings was analysed as well as the relative thickness of the walls actually making up such dwellings.

While a relative comparison of these factors shows very clearly that often huge differences exist within a settlement, engagement with the "poorer end" of the spectrum has been extremely limited.

A case study of a late Middle Kingdom settlement at Tell el-Dab'a (Area A/II) in the north east Delta, excavated by the Austrian Archaeological Institute between 1966 and 1983 under M. Bietak, will highlight approaches and questions raised by asking after the social status of the inhabitants and how to measure it. The basic data set will be briefly presented, consisting entirely of material culture and archaeological evidence without any written sources.

Thus, the structure of the settlement and the accompanying finds will be discussed and presented in context with and comparison to the remarkably few Middle Kingdom settlement excavated and published so far. Such comparisons are not without problems due to the small number of available settlements, the different types of these settlements and their different modes of excavation and publication in general.

As a result of this comparative approach, which is inevitable in a society not using money in the modern sense, a start will be made to better understand the problems inherent in tackling ancient Egyptian social stratification viewed through archaeological data and begin to make visible the non-Elite in Egyptian settlements.

Agnieszka Ryś-Jarmużek | University of Warsaw  
Lukasz Jarmużek | University of Warsaw

*Investigating Economic Inequality in Provincial Settlement:  
A Case Study of the Third Intermediate Period (XI-VII cent.  
BC) Tell el-Retaba (Egypt)*

This paper discusses the methods of studying economic inequality in ancient societies through provincial settlement sites. Traditional approaches involve analyzing plot size, house size, architectural features, and decorations to determine the wealth of residents. However, these methods are only suitable for settlements that have high levels of economic diversity. In communities with more uniform economic circumstances, it is necessary to focus on factors such as the level of economic self-sufficiency of households, access to resources, or technological expertise. This involves examining movable objects and the spatial arrangement of significant installations, such as ovens or storage facilities.

We will discuss a case study of the Third Intermediate Period settlement at Tell el-Retaba to illustrate our approach. This settlement was relatively small and had frequent organic alterations to buildings. Most structures in Tell el-Retaba were attributed to individuals from the lower end of the economic spectrum compared to populations from other settlement sites in Pharaonic Egypt. We will discuss the reasoning behind this statement and the challenges of comparing different kinds of settlements from various historical periods. For instance, how can we compare a provincial settlement like Tell el-Retaba from a period of political instability with the capital of Egypt like Tell el-Amarna from the imperial period? Our approach involves examining movable objects and significant installations, such as silos, bins, or ovens, to gain insights into the economic self-sufficiency of households and access to resources. Our findings suggest that this approach can help investigate potential economic inequality in settlements with less economic diversity.

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## SESSION VI: POVERTY & FUNERARY ARCHAEOLOGY

E. Christiana Köhler | University of Vienna

*The Cemetery of Helwan – A case study for understanding  
lower and middle class funerary identities in the early 3rd  
Millennium BCE*

Helwan is the largest necropolis of the Early Dynastic Period (ca. 3100-2700 BCE) and served as the main cemetery for the lower and middle classes of the Memphite urban population. Following numerous missions and excavations, most notably by Z.Y. Zaad in the 1940s and 50s as well most recently (1997-2017) by the author, the archaeological site provides high quality information into early Egyptian funerary customs and material culture. Especially the analysis of smaller burials with no or few grave goods, i.e. the majority of burials excavated, allows insights into the ways how members of the lower classes of urban society displayed their funerary identities. It is notable that many of these small burials contained certain grave goods, be it wooden coffins, containers for sustenance or even adornments, suggesting that they and their families had access to a range of commodities. This evidence is complemented by interesting patterns in the age and sex distribution of the tombs' occupants. Conversely, the burials of members of the middle class are distinct by their larger size, more complex architectural design and furnishings indicating very deliberate means of displaying vertical and horizontal social differentiation.

While our analyses of the Helwan burials are still ongoing, this paper will provide a summary of the funerary archaeology of the lower and middle class burials at Helwan as well as first glimpses into various interpretive approaches arising from this evidence.

### *Social Topographies. Mapping Social Hierarchies in Ancient Egyptian Landscapes*

Social topographies analyse and map the spatial distribution of different social groups within urban spaces and landscapes, often focussing on indicators of wealth and poverty, crafts and professions, family structures, gender, age, ethnicity, or religious denomination. Developed in Geographical Sciences and adopted in historical and archaeological disciplines (especially for the study of the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age), this concept has rarely been applied to ancient case studies due to the (comparatively!) scarce written sources. Yet, many social-archaeological studies have pointed out ways to identify social structures based on material remains, be it field boundaries, architectural elements, the dimensions of houses, the size of tombs, osteological data, the distribution of finds, as well as prosopographical information and inscribed objects.

This paper will investigate how the spatial arrangement of tombs was used to mark social status by transferring the concept of social topographies to the site of Dahshur, while referring to a number of case studies, including the sites of Giza, Beni Hassan, Harageh, Amarna, and Deir el-Medina. It will be argued that social stratification could be communicated through the vertical and horizontal placement of tombs within the funerary landscape. Thus, the necropoleis can be considered visual metaphors of prevalent social hierarchies (although they do not directly mirror the society at the time). The creation of spatial topographies makes it possible to (re) populate Ancient Egyptian cultural landscapes with all the people shaping them, and to reintroduce social groups into the discussion which are often overlooked since they have left no, or only few, material traces.

### *Poor Tombs or Tombs of the poor? Questioning Social Stratification in the Funerary Equipment of Women's Burial at Medinet el-Gurob during the New Kingdom*

This paper aims to examine the socio-economic parameters for obtaining a tomb in ancient Egyptian society during the New Kingdom and what is known in archaeology as a 'poor tomb', with a special focus on the site of (Medinet el-)Gurob.

Surface pit graves without any funerary equipment are the poorest to be found at the site of Gurob. They represent 10% of the sixty-seven New Kingdom tombs of women uncovered by the British School of Archaeology in Egypt in 1920 (G. Brunton and R. Engelbach). However, do they really belong to poor women, or is this just a case of relative poverty compared with the other graves?

Archaeological data is an interesting way to go beyond the elite vision of poverty that monopolises other types of sources. However, the visibility of the poor is limited in the archaeology of the living. Does funerary archaeology provide access to the poor?

Despite the absence of material, these burials bear witness to a significant investment and, therefore, to the integration of the owners into society and its hierarchy.

Recontextualising and studying the funerary material from these New Kingdom tombs of women at Gurob, which is now dispersed in numerous museum collections around the world, allow us to observe a broad spectrum of the Egyptian population, and raise the question as to whom the ladies of Gurob were, and whether it is possible to define the place of the poor in society, and where poverty ends, or even starts in the documentation available to us.

To what extent can the study of this funerary material from an early 20<sup>th</sup> century excavations context, which did not preserve the bodies of the deceased and therefore does not allow osteological observation, enable this kind of analysis? The limits of documentation are a subject I would like to address.

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*Archaeological Evidence of the Cult of the Dead in Middle Kingdom "poor" Burials*

Evidence of acts performed by the living for the benefit of the deceased has mainly focused on pictorial sources and artefacts found on elite tomb-chapels. This paper will analyse ritual-trays and material associated as evidence of cultic practices in poorer burials based on the archaeological record. Ritual-trays are pottery artefacts dated to the First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom. They were used in libations acts as part of rituals related to the cult of the dead. They have been considered as cheaper substitutes for elements used for the well-to-do people: ritual-trays without buildings, offering-trays, as cheaper substitutes for stone offering-tables, and those trays with models of buildings, soul-houses, as a replacement for a rock-cut tomb. The aim of this paper is twofold: It will show the performance of rituals carried out for the living on the surface of the tombs in poorer or non-elite burials. It will also analyse if they share similarities to those performed in elite tomb to decipher if they are actually cheaper substitutes. The paper will also question the term 'poor' to encompass all the graves that contain these artefacts, since ritual-trays appear in a wide range of tombs with different architecture and material culture.