



Elsa Yvanez

Unravelling Nubian funerary practices: textiles and body wrappings in ancient Sudan

Introduction

Attitudes towards death have taken a great many forms through history and across the globe. Research has nonetheless shown the existence of a few universal behaviours, including the desire to first hide the dead body and then recreate it as the deceased. Textiles play a prominent role in these processes, as is illustrated in ethnological studies but often ignored in archaeology. Rarely recorded together *in situ*, textiles are removed from the human remains, stored in different locations, and studied by different specialists. In these ways, precious evidence is destroyed and the understanding of funerary events is limited leaving important questions unanswered: How was the body prepared before the funeral? How was it seen and perceived by its relatives and community? What was the religious and social modalities of its transformation into the deceased?

In ancient Sudan and Nubia, no written sources are available to answer these questions. The burial is the only witness: not the skeleton alone nor the sum of its surrounding artefacts but the whole “body bundle” formed by the corpse and its wrappings. Often what is left of the excavation of human remains may be summarised as a pile of neatly arranged bones on a labelled tray, a small cardboard container or a plastic bag filled with mixed textile fragments, and written and photographic archives, as complete as the date of discovery and time for recording permitted. This project aims to bring this evidence together, combining the study of textile wrappings and human remains to help reconstruct past funerary practices in Late Antique Nubia.

The dry climate of the region has permitted very good preservation of human remains, naturally mummified or skeletonised, with their wrappings. However, a comprehensive archaeology of death has not yet emerged in Sudan and current practices tend to focus on biology, often overlooking that the dead are also cultural artefacts. Wrapped, anointed, and laid to rest after complex ceremonies, a body carried multifaceted social meanings.

This is especially true of textiles. Their physical properties and symbolic significance were particularly significant during funerals. Plainly visible for all to see during the ceremony, textiles could dress or wrap the body, conceal selected areas while leaving exposed portions, cover it entirely or give it a distinct shape. Whether reused items of clothing, luxurious elite garments, shrouds, or assembled rags, all textiles can indicate the social status and cultural identity of the deceased. Pioneering textile studies have showcased the richness of the Nubian material, producing useful catalogues and technical typologies. These studies were usually compiled after the excavations had taken place providing few details of the textiles’ precise contexts of use and discovery. In both textile and archaeological research, funerary finds continue to be classified simply as shrouds, a term that is neither precisely defined nor indicative of the diversity of the practices involved.

The goal of this project is to develop a comprehensive textile archaeology in burial contexts, using the untapped potential of textile artefacts to renew the understanding of funerary practices. Through close collaboration between textile experts, archaeologists

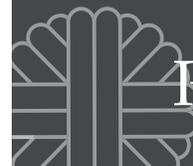


Fig. 1: Wrapped human remains of a child at Gebel Adda, approximately 350 CE to 570 CE (Image: Elsa Yvanez; archival photograph courtesy of R. Huber)

and bio-anthropologists, the project will help to reshape approaches to funerary remains: not as a disjointed group of scattered artefacts but as the result of a multi-step and complete practice in which textiles conceal, dress, shape, and protect the body of the deceased, while giving the individual a clear identity in the worlds of both the living and the dead.

Textile research will identify the number of fabrics used in the grave and their characteristics, and track their locations on and around the remains. Detailed analysis will show whether body wrappings were made of specifically woven pieces or reused garments, and how they were combined.

Anthropological data can indicate the original position of the body, identify the age and gender of the deceased, and pinpoint the impact of thanatological processes on the remains.

Funerary archaeology describes the environment of the grave (its content and structure) and relates it to the rest of the cemetery and to current knowledge of funerary beliefs.

Taken together, these methods lead to a dynamic study of burials, with the potential to recognise and interpret preparatory treatments of the body, sepulchral practices, and post-sepulchral events.

Sources are of two different kinds: published material from old excavations and recent finds collected by archaeologists. Case studies will be selected from previously collected data, focusing on analyses and interpretation. Well-preserved naturally mummified skeletonised remains with associated wrappings have been chosen from the material unearthed on the Nubian sites of Aksha, Gebel Adda, Karanog, Old Dongola, Ballana, Sai, Debeira, and Serra East (first century BCE to seventh century CE). Particular attention will be paid to the corpus from Sai Island, for which an ongoing excavation provides access to the best standards of documentation and data access. This work will lead to the creation of a new protocol for the *in situ* study of funerary textiles.

Unravelling Nubian funerary practices' objectives

- To track the different modes of body wrappings through the compilation of a database of published information and more recent material, cross-referencing anthropological textile, and archaeological data.
- To conduct case studies determining the nature and arrangement of wrappings on the bodies, merging anthropological observations with a detailed study of textile fragments. The project will test the potential and limitations of different recording practices (forms, drawings, and photogrammetry) for *in situ* data capture.
- To identify and understand previously unnoticed funerary practices involving the wrapping or dressing of the dead. A typology of the different modes of body wrapping will be created using Late Antique Sudan as an example in order to initiate a discussion of relevant definitions.
- To assess the role of body coverings in funerary rituals by merging archaeology, physical anthropology, social anthropology, and textile studies.
- To establish a protocol for best practices in the excavation, *in situ* analysis, and conservation of wrapped human remains. This protocol will be tested in the field during the winter of 2021 to 2022.



The project hopes to lay the groundwork for an increase – in number and in quality – of *in situ* and collaborative analyses. We aim to provide new and useful tools for future research to: a) enhance archaeological practice in the field; b) improve the chances of optimal conservation of excavated artefacts; and c) advance the understanding of death in past societies.

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Author:

elsa.yvanez@gmail.com