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CHANGING PATTERNS OF VIOLENCE AT QUSTUL AND BALLANA IN THE POST-MEROITIC PERIOD. PART ONE: THE HUMANS

INTRODUCTION

The burials at the royal tombs of Qustul and Ballana are a well-known feature in the archaeology of Lower Nubia of the fourth and fifth centuries AD. Some of the human remains from the sites were analysed and discussed in the years following their excavation (see el-Batrawi, 1935). More recently, both the human and animal remains have received more explicit attention (see in particular Lenoble 1994 and 1996), in terms of their role within the rituals at Qustul and Ballana, and in terms of the possible continuity in practices from the preceding Meroitic period.

This paper assesses the importance of human sacrifices at both Qustul and Ballana by quantifying the burial data in order to draw out how these practices changed through time. It must be stated that the sexing and ageing of the human burials from the cemeteries is somewhat problematic due to the opacity of the methods which the anatomist el-Batrawi used in his calculations. Despite this caveat, an analysis of the human remains using el-Batrawi's data is useful as it provides certain interesting insights into changing patterns of violence at Qustul and Ballana.

A discussion of the animal remains from Qustul and Ballana will follow in a second article (Dann, 2008b, forthcoming).

HUMAN SACRIFICE: THE EVIDENCE

A wide variety of written evidence exists concerning the socio-political situation in Lower Nubia in the fourth and fifth centuries AD (see FHN; Török, 1987). Only one source concerning either the

Blemmye or the Nobadae makes any mention of sacrificial practices. Procopius writes about the Blemmye and Nobadae in book seventeen of his *History of the Wars*, which he wrote in his position as the historian to Justinian. Besides the account which Procopius gives of Justinian's invitation to the Nobadae to occupy Lower Nubia, he also relates details of the religious beliefs of the Blemmye and Nobadae. He records the special position of Philae in the religious life of the Blemmye and Nobadae and states that both groups worshipped the same gods as the Greeks, but that they also worshipped Isis and Osiris, and had a particular reverence for Priapus. Further to these aspects of religious life, Procopius records that the Blemmye made human sacrifices to the sun (Procopius trans Dewing, 1914, 189). Unfortunately, Procopius merely reports this practice, and did not elaborate any further upon it.

There are other pieces of evidence to suggest a history of human sacrifice in Nubia. A parallel can be drawn with the human remains in the tumuli graves at Kerma (see for example Adams, 1977, 409). Many of the tumuli graves at Kerma contained large numbers of human bodies, sometimes in what the excavator termed 'sacrificial corridors' (Reisner, 1923, pl. XVI), however at Kerma, the suggestion that the people were buried alive was the preferred interpretation. As at Qustul and Ballana, the remains were interred in a single deposition but the attitudes and postures that the skeletons exhibited suggested the possibility that they died from suffocation. Bodies were often crouched, with the hands covering the face, or grasping at the throat (Reisner, 1923, 66). Diodorus Siculus recorded that during the Meroitic period, the priests at Meroe had the power to proclaim when the king should die, and that ritual regicide was practiced according to their divinely



inspired proclamations (Diodorus, trans Oldfather, III. 6. 1-4; Welsby, 1996, 32). There is also evidence of multiple burials in the northern cemetery at Meroe, which may be interpreted as sacrifices. Sixteen tombs in the northern and western cemeteries included supplementary, contemporaneous burials. Five such burials were in the tomb of a king, one in that of a queen, and one in that of a prince. Others were in tombs where the status of the owner was uncertain (Welsby, 1996, 89; but see also Lenoble 1996).

The evidence for human sacrifice at Qustul and Ballana is based on a number of points. Certain tombs contained multiple interments and these burials occurred as a single deposition. The graves were not re-opened for subsequent burials, the people, animals and artefacts were all interred at once. The possibility of a number of individuals all dying at the same time (or in relatively quick succession) and that this occurred on quite a regular basis seems unlikely (for a similar argument with regard to Kerma see Reisner, 1923, 64-66). Furthermore, two female bodies that were recovered during the earliest excavations at Qustul (Emery and Kirwan, 1938) show signs of a violent death. In tomb 14 at Qustul, a well-preserved and fleshed female was found with a gaping wound on the left side of the neck, which was formed by a cut that was so deep that it reached the fourth cervical vertebra. The vertebra and the edges of the wound had the remains of barley, seeds and sand adhering to them. The barley and seed husks were also present in the stomach, and it seems likely that the woman vomited after the cut was made. The sand on the tissues and vertebra came from the pit into which she was placed. The fact that the wound was wet at the time of burial confirms that the wound was not a post-mortem occurrence, but was likely to be the cause of death (el-Batrawi, 1935, 149). A further well-preserved female body, of around twelve years of age, was found in the plunderers' passage of tomb thirty-six at Qustul. The girl's neck was dislocated at the atlas bone, and the hyoid bone was displaced, by the head having been forcefully twisted to the left to such an extent that all of the ligaments in the area except one, were torn. As the body was discovered in the plunderers' passage, it is possible that this damage occurred some time after death, if the body was perhaps dragged into the passage by the head.

However, the girl's hands were preserved in a clawing action (extended carpo-phalangeal joints, but flexed interphalangeal joints), which could be a further indicator of a sudden and violent death (ibid, 159). The other human remains at both Qustul and Ballana do not show any signs of peri-mortem trauma (except a male buried in tomb six at Qustul exhibiting trauma to the ninth and tenth vertebrae which, as the wound to the bone had sharply defined edges, may have been caused by a stab from a spear) (ibid, 146). On the basis that trauma evidence was not found in the other multiple human remains in the tombs, it seems reasonable to suggest that if the people were killed, it was probably by a flesh wound or with poison. It can be suggested that the slitting of the throat (in a similar manner to the girl in tomb 14, but not as 'enthusiastically' performed) was likely to be the quickest, cleanest and most effective method of execution.

When investigating the human remains from Qustul and Ballana a further problem exists. It is presumed that the tomb owner was the only individual interred who died in natural circumstances. Therefore, for the purposes of conducting an analysis of changing patterns of violence, it is preferable to remove these individuals. At Ballana, it is relatively easy to recognise the probable tomb owner in a number of the tombs by the array of adornment that they wear, especially crowns, and sometimes by the placement of particular bodies on beds or in niches. However, at Qustul, this is impossible, as only five bodies were found in direct association with artefacts. None of these artefacts are types that would usually be interpreted as regalia (although Body HH, a 17 year old male in tomb QT03 was lying in close proximity to a sword blade), and therefore as elements that might define a ruler. The change in cultural practices from Qustul to Ballana affects our ability to interpret the evidence. Only two of the bodies that were examined by el-Batrawi (Body C from BT06 and Body E from BT10) are bodies that are usually identified as rulers. Body C from BT06 was examined, but was too poorly preserved to gain any evidence concerning age or sex (it is remarkable, then, that el-Batrawi refers to this individual as a male. Presumably this is due to el-Batrawi's biased presumption that a female would not have been



afforded a crown). Body E in BT10 was identified as a possible female of adult age. The evidence presented here concerns all of the human remains from Qustul and Ballana that were examined by el-Batrawi, except these two bodies who may have been tomb owners, and who therefore may have died from natural causes and so cannot be included in a discussion concerning changing patterns of violence.

PROBLEMS WITH THE DATA

The location of the human and animal remains that were excavated from Qustul and Ballana is now unknown, except for a couple of animal skeletons still on display at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. According to private correspondence between Lawrence Kirwan and Professor Peter Rowley-Conwy of Durham University, dating to 1987, Kirwan believed that the bones may remain in el-Aini hospital in Cairo (pers. comm. Rowley-Conwy), but the present author's enquiries have, so far, been to no avail. As the human and animal remains have remained unlocated since their original examination by Professor el-Batrawi, there has never been a reassessment of el-Batrawi's work using more modern techniques. El-Batrawi only examined a selection of the remains from the sites, but the rationale for this selection was not stated. El-Batrawi's publication records a mixture of details concerning non-metric traits, tooth eruption, trauma and pathologies, yet this recording does not seem to be very systematic.

A further problem exists in the fact that not every skeleton from the sites was examined, and a number remain unsexed. The grounds on which the remains that were examined were selected, is unknown. The methods which el-Batrawi used to sex the human remains are unclear as he gives no information about which system of designation he adheres to, or which selection of bones from the skeleton were the object of study. However, el-Batrawi does give a list of abbreviations relating to parts of the bones that he used in his study. The majority of these measurements related to the various parts of the cranium. Other bones including the femur, humerus, radius and tibia were also measured in order to record the stature of the bodies. The measurements that el-

Batrawi took correspond with those recommended in the 'International Agreement for the Unification of Craniometric Measurements' (ibid, 196) and Wilder's 1920 volume. None of the measurements recorded by el-Batrawi relate to the pelvis, which is the most reliable part of the human body to use in sexing skeletal remains. It can therefore be suggested that el-Batrawi used measurements of parts of the skull in order to determine sex, not least because so many of his measurements refer to this part of the body. The cranium can exhibit significant sexual dimorphism, but any attempt at assigning sex to human remains should ideally cross-reference measurements from a number of different sites on the skeleton. Due to the lack of information given by el-Batrawi, his designations should be treated with caution. Despite these shortcomings, the anatomical information provided by el-Batrawi's report on the human remains has been the basis for the designation of the sexes of the skeletons in this piece, in the absence of any other reasonable option. 183 human burials were found at the sites (88 at Qustul, 95 at Ballana) of which 104 were intact (32 at Qustul, 72 at Ballana). 113 bodies were sexed, aged and assigned to a tomb phase (see fig 1), although in this research one of those is removed from the analysis, for the reasons outlined above.

Caveats regarding the designations of age at death of the human remains must also be made. Again, el-Batrawi made no mention of the criteria which he used in order to assign ages to the human remains. Given the degree of attention that he paid to measuring the skulls, it is possible that he used cranial suture closure to assign age. Given his lack of concern with using the pelvis to assign sex, and the absence of pelvic measurements, it is unlikely that el-Batrawi used the pubic symphysis as an aid, even though the procedure was first published in 1920 (Todd), and el-Batrawi may well have been familiar with this research. El-Batrawi does mention tooth eruption in his report, and in particular the eruption or non-eruption of the third molars, and this must have informed his ageing of certain individuals as in their twenties, assuming their similarity to modern populations (which may be erroneous). In some cases, el-Batrawi also makes oblique reference to epiphyseal fusion: for example, 'the epicondyles of both humera are just joining the shaft' (1935, 152).



Yet these instances are the exception rather than the norm, and therefore although el-Batrawi may sometimes have used methods of ageing that were more reliable, such as tooth eruption and epiphyseal fusion (Mays, 1998, 44-47), the opacity of his methods, and consequently of his results, remains. Some of the bodies that are deemed to be children have been sexed, such as ‘a child, probably female, eight years old’ (el-Batrawi, 1935, 158). Such designations of sex should be ignored as it is impossible to sex human remains before the onset of puberty without DNA analysis.

Other comments may be made with regard to the difficulty of understanding concepts of age in the past. Recent sociological and archaeological research has suggested other modes for understanding age, beyond that of numerical (calendrical) age (Meskell, 1994 and 1999; Welinder, 1998; Lucy, 2005). In particular, the concept of sociological age – the culturally specific social behaviours and attitudes deemed appropriate for individuals at particular life stages – has been influential (see Ginn and Arber, 1995). The concept of social age is both interesting and problematic for the archaeologist, suggesting as it does that the chronological/calendrical age given by an osteoarchaeologist only provides one aspect for our understanding of age in the past. If

Phase	Approximate Date A.D.
1a	c.380
1b	380-390
2a	390-400
2b	400-410
3a	410-420
3b	420-430
4	430-440
4a	430-440
5a	440-450
5b	440-450
6a	450-460
6b	460-470
7a	470-480
7b	480-490
7c	490-500

Figure 1.

sociological age is subjectively and specifically ascribed in past cultures, the usage of our modern distinctions (which themselves are not especially clear) between infant, child, young adult, adult, and the old are thrown into question.

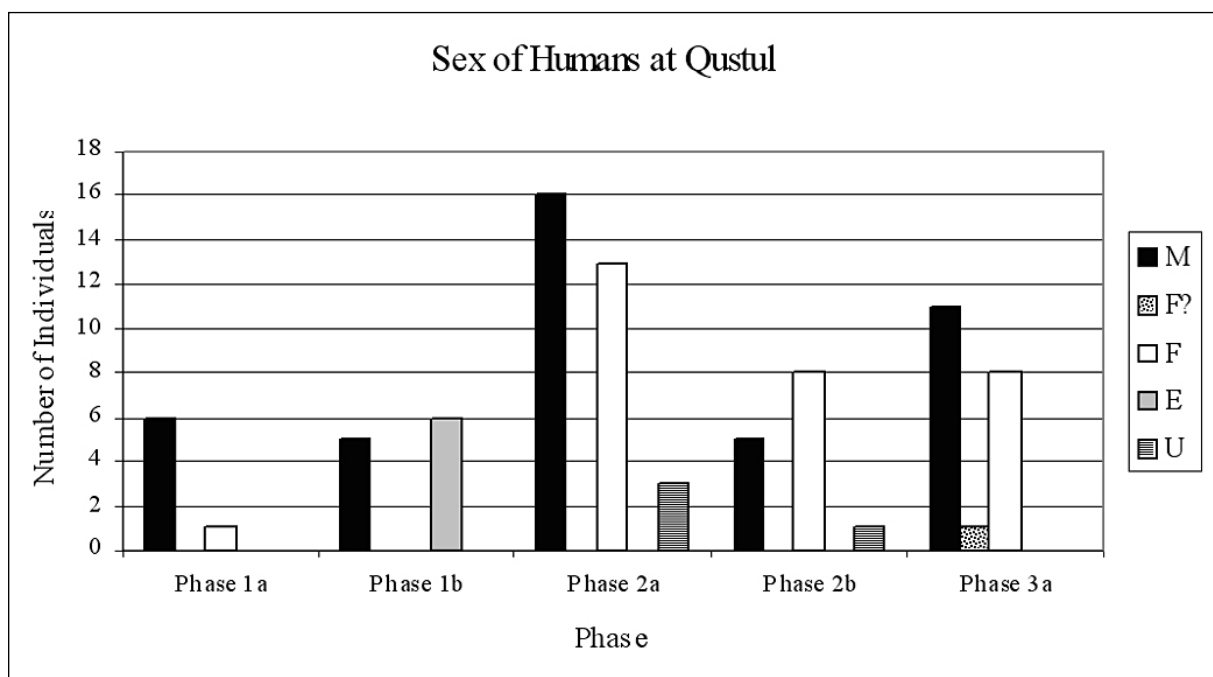


Figure 2.

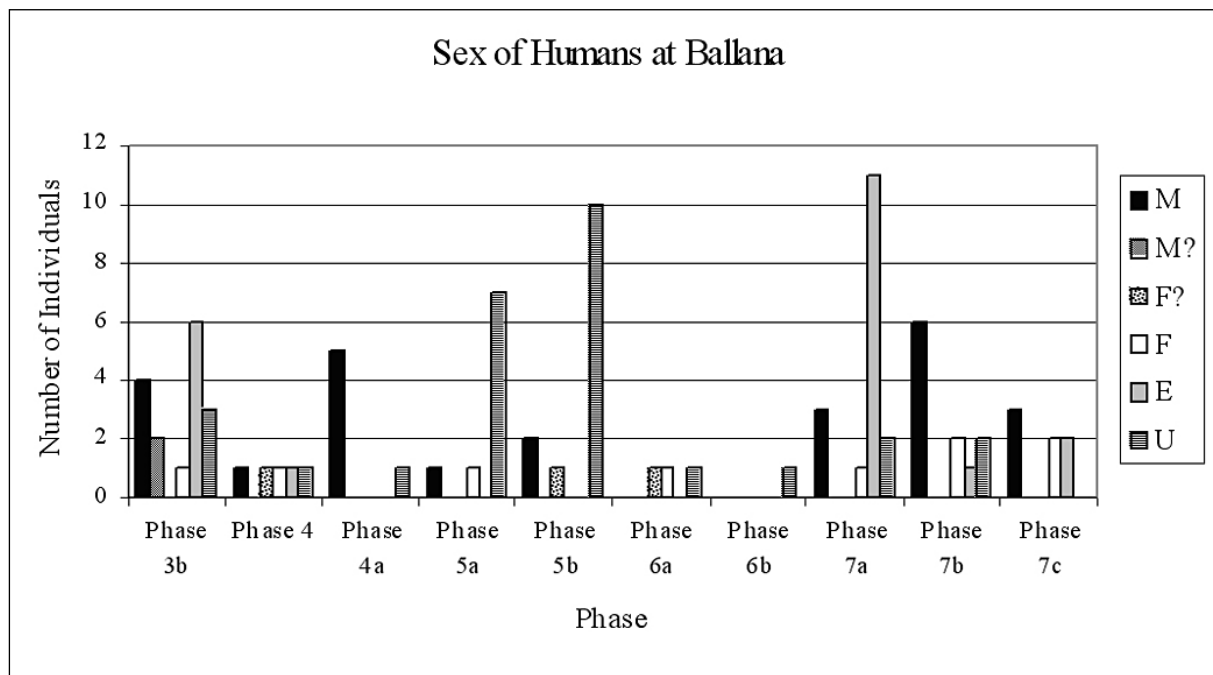


Figure 3.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The graphs that follow concern the sex, and the age at death of the humans at Qustul and Ballana. With regard to age, the precise designations of el-Batravi have been retained, but in certain figures they have also been grouped within broader age categories which are explained below. The sexing assigned by el-Batravi has also been retained. The remains have been analysed and where necessary the results have been plotted diachronically, using Török's chronological scheme for Qustul and Ballana (1987, 154; Figure 1 above).

It is noticeable (see fig. 2) that none of the skeletal remains from Qustul were assigned to the possible male category (M?), and only one entry appears in the possible female category (F?). Six skeletons were examined and then remained unassigned to any sex at Qustul (E), the sex of four more skeletons remain unknown (U). Most of the sexed remains from Qustul date to phase 2a (32). In every period except phase 2b, there were more male individuals recovered than females. There were four burials from an unknown phase at Qustul, that do not feature in this graph.

There were twenty individuals at Ballana that were examined, but that were not unassigned a sex

(fig. 3). In phase 5b there were ten individuals of unknown sex, and in phase 7a, 11 bodies that were examined and unassigned a sex. There were more individuals assigned to the male category than the female category at Ballana. Most of the males (six) were found in phase 7b. There were five bodies of an unknown phase, that do not feature in this graph.

As a first stage in the analysis of the sexed remains by age, the human remains were divided into 'low', 'mid', 'med' and 'up' age ranges. The 'low' range includes all those human remains designated by el-Batravi (1935) as 'children', 'young' or who were given a numerical age between 0 and 13 years. The 'med' range includes those individuals classified as 'young adult', 'pubescent', 'adolescent', or who were given a numerical age between 14 and 25 years (25 years being the highest specific numerical age that el-Batravi identified – note that the terminal date of the age span differs in the graphs below following el-Batravi's findings for males, females and burials that were examined but unassigned a sex (c.f. figures 7 and 8). The 'mid' range concerns all of those individuals who were designated 'adult' by el-Batravi. The 'up' range contains those individuals classified as 'middle-aged', 'mature' or 'old' (cf figures 4, 5, and 6 below).



Figures 4 and 5 relate to those individuals from the cemeteries who had been both aged and sexed. No female remains were reliably identified in phases 1a, 1b, 4a, 6b. thirty-one females were identified at Qustul, and eleven at Ballana. In total, eight females were recorded in the 'low' age group, nineteen in the

'med' age group, fifteen in the 'mid' group and none in the 'up' age group. Female burials in the 'low' age category were only found in very small numbers at both sites, but the sexing of these individuals must be regarded with caution. Female burials from the 'mid' (or adult) age category is found at both

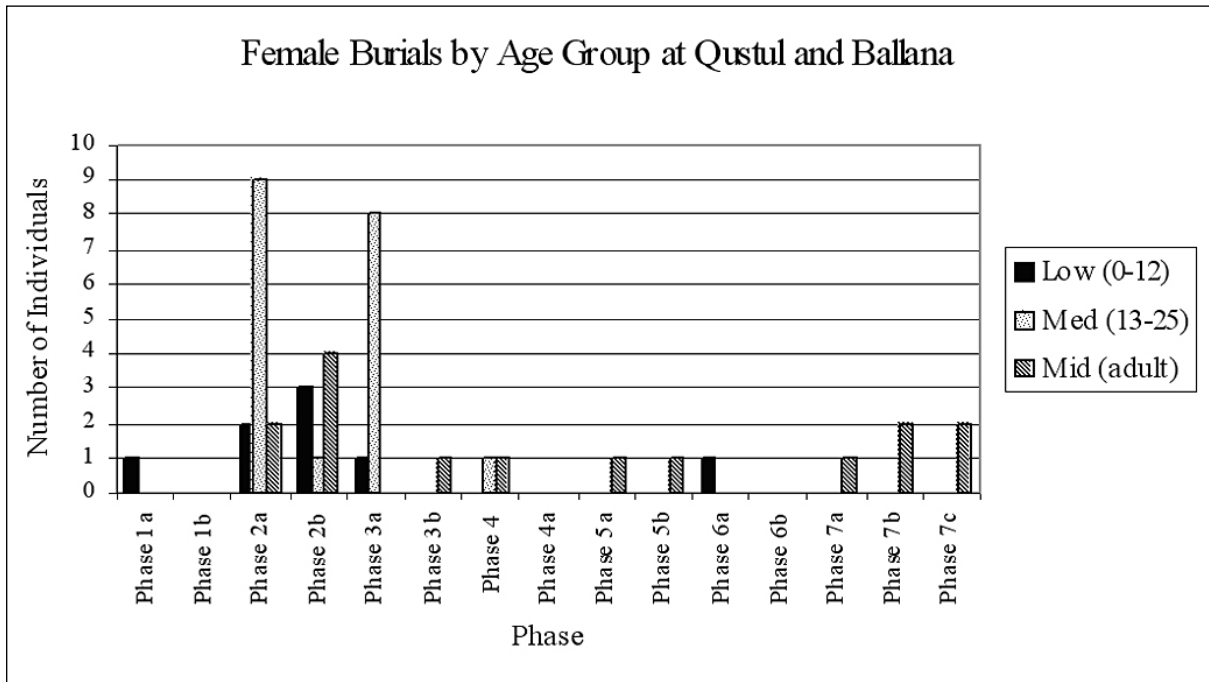


Figure 4.

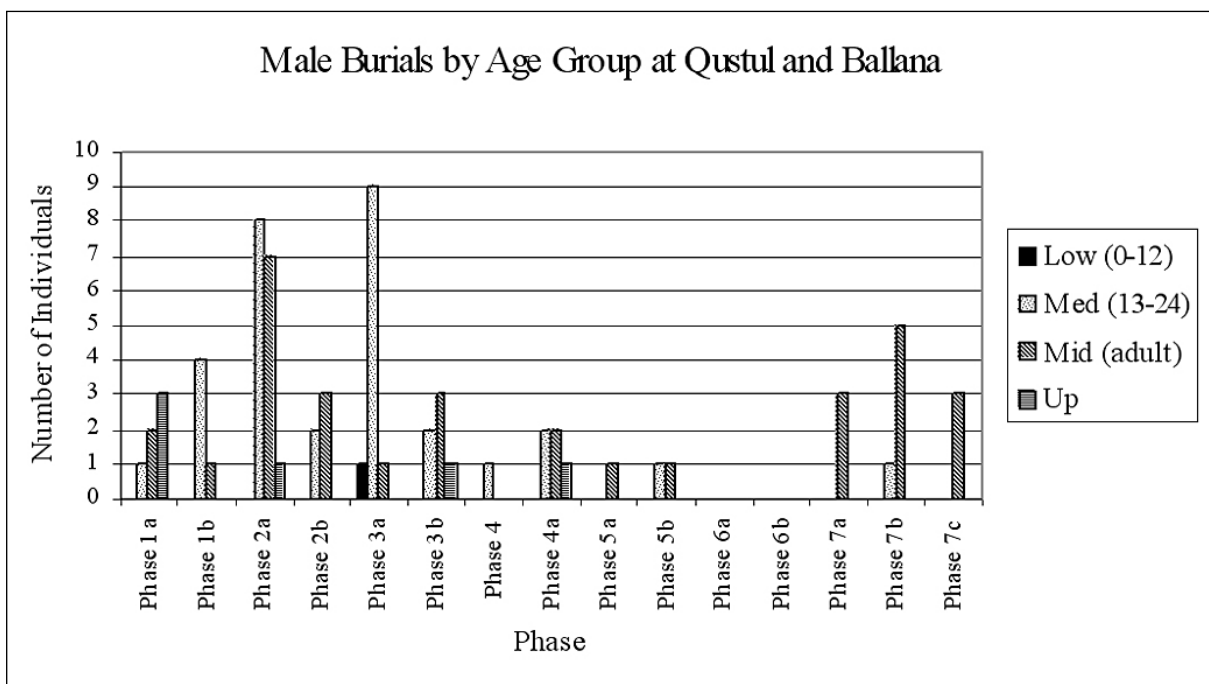


Figure 5.



cemeteries and is an enduring phenomenon. The majority of the female burials at Qustul belonged to the 'med' category (18) with seven females in the 'low' category, and six females in the 'mid' (adult) category. This trend is reversed at Ballana where only one female of the 'med' category was identified (phase 4). One female of the 'low' category was found in phase 6a, but all of the other female remains discovered at Ballana (nine) belonged to the 'mid' (adult) category. The trend in the age at death for females therefore altered significantly from Qustul to Ballana.

43 males were identified at Qustul, and 27 at Ballana. There were no male burials identified in phase 6a or phase 6b at Ballana (fig. 5). Overall, 31 males were identified in the 'med' category, and 32 were identified in the 'mid' (adult) category. Only a single male individual from the 'low' age category was identified, from phase 3a at Qustul (again, this sexing is suspect). At Qustul, there were four burials identified in the 'up' category, and two at Ballana. 24 males were identified in the 'med' category, and 14 from the 'mid' category at Qustul. However, at Ballana, this trend changed and burials of males from the 'mid' (adult) category (18) were dominant, in comparison with males from the 'med' category (seven). The peak number of sexed and aged burials occurred in phase 2a.

Figure 6 details the remains that were examined ('E') by el-Batrawi (1935), and that were aged, but that were not assigned a sex. They form a limited category. Six burials of the 'E' category were found at Qustul, all occurred during phase 1b. Two individuals were in the 'low' (0-12) category, and four were in the 'med' (13-18) category. 20 burials of the 'E' category were found at Ballana, four of which were in the 'low' category, six were in the 'med' category, and 10 were in the 'mid' (adult) category.

Figures 7 and 8 give a more detailed breakdown of the age and sex designations at Qustul and Ballana (note that the numbers vary slightly from those in the preceding graphs, as figures 7 and 8 also include a small number of sexed and aged burials of unknown burial phase). The ages of individuals have been recorded following those assigned in the reports. For this reason, the chart contains a mixture of actual biological age designations ('18'), and social age designations ('middle aged'). Whilst this means that the chart compares two different types of data – the specific and the general – the details have been included for the sake of completeness.

There is a large range of age classifications at Qustul (figure 7). The sex designations in the pre-pubescent age categories can be disregarded as

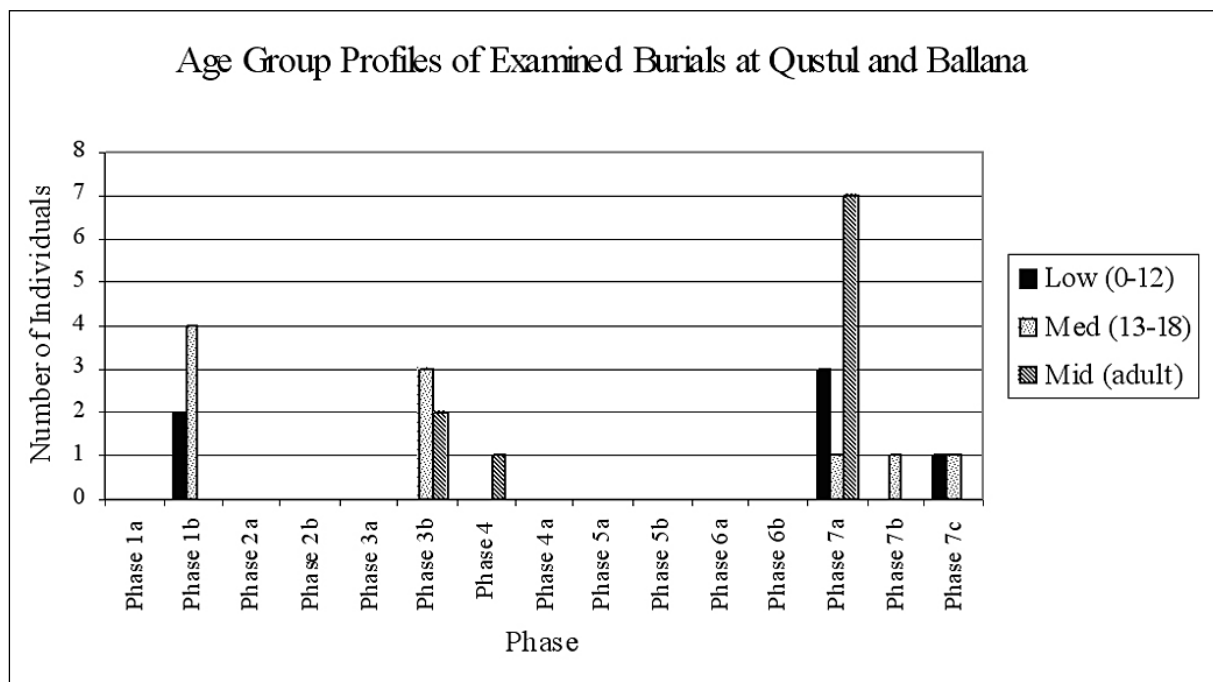


Figure 6.

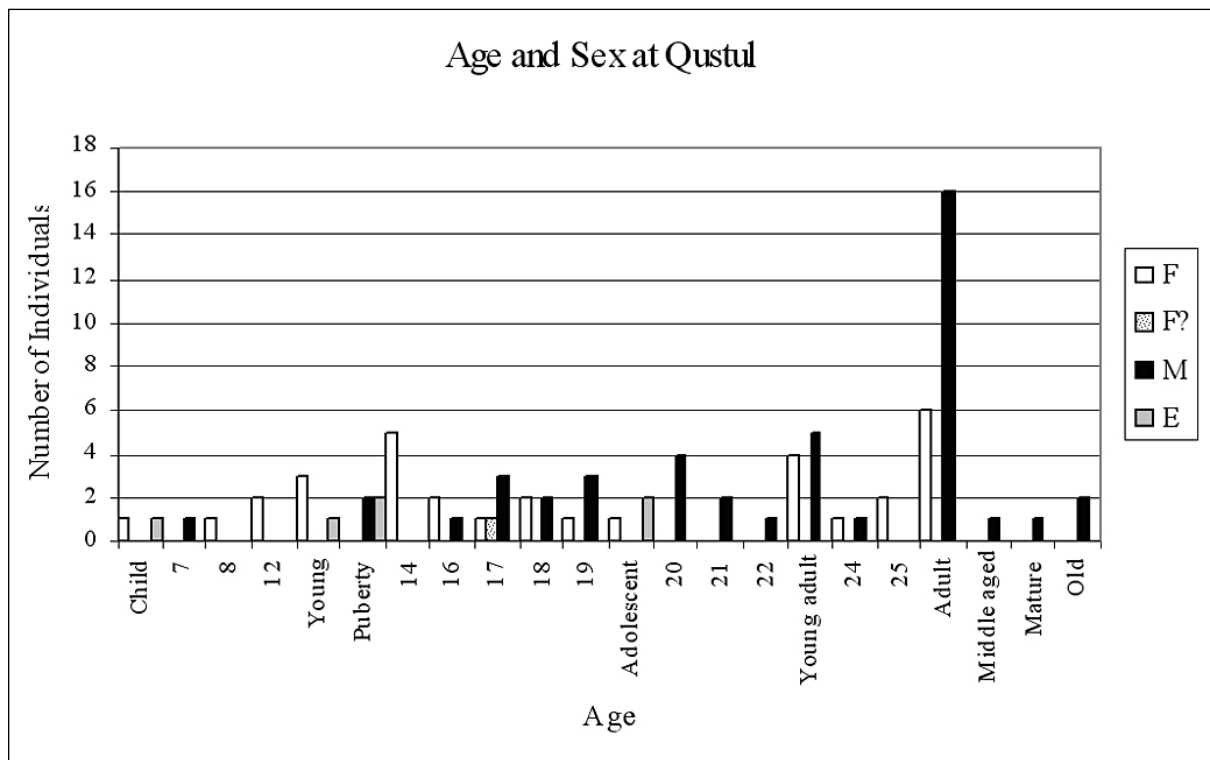


Figure 7.

unreliable. Males appear in the adult category in a significantly larger number (16) than in any other category, and in a significantly larger number than the women (6). However, when the numbers of males from the pubescent, teenage and young adult categories are added together, they form a larger numerical group (24) than the male adults (16). There are also more female individuals in the pubescent, teenage and young adult categories (22) once they are counted, than there are in the adult female category (6). At Qustul, the majority of male and female burials appeared in the teenage and young adult categories. Only a small number of individuals appeared in the very highest age categories.

Figure 8 shows the same kind of material as figure 7, but is concerned with Ballana. The bodies that were examined, but that were not assigned a sex, appear across three age groups and one specific age – ‘child’, ‘young adult’, ‘18’ and ‘adult’. At Ballana, the majority of individuals appeared in the adult category (37). It is interesting to note that definite female burials only appear as ‘adults’ at Ballana. Although a female burial appears in the ‘young’ category, it is not possible to be sure that a child of

this age was either male or female. It would be very interesting to know whether the five ‘examined’ bodies in the ‘young adult’ category, were in fact male or female. If they were male (or mostly male), a significant trend could be noted: females (whilst they may have appeared in the graves as children), may only have been included in the burials at Ballana as adults. Only a very small number of individuals (2) appear in the middle aged range, and none are in the mature range.

CONCLUSION: CHANGING PATTERNS OF VIOLENCE AT QUSTUL AND BALLANA

Having explained the findings of the previous graphs, Figure 9 compares all of the burials at Qustul and Ballana that were assigned an age by el-Batrawi, but without a consideration of sexing. This allows for the specific data considered in the preceding figures to be subsumed in more general groupings in order to facilitate an overall comparison of age profiles. As we have seen in the previous graphs, the burial of the very oldest (‘up’) members of the

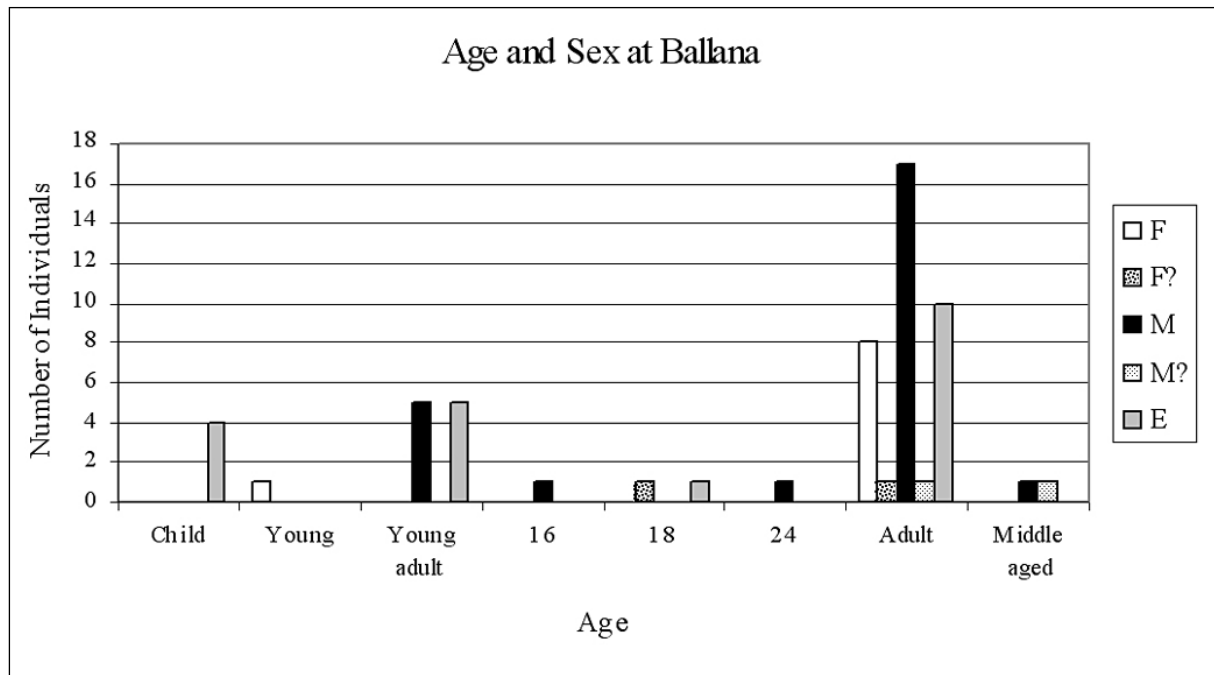


Figure 8.

population was very small at both sites. There may be two practical reasons for this. Firstly, it is possible that fewer members of the group achieved old age, and are correspondingly under-represented at both Qustul and Ballana. Secondly, it is notoriously

difficult to age older human remains (Mays, 1998, 50), and the figures presented here are likely to reflect a deficiency in el-Batrawi's methods and an under-estimation of the age of certain individuals in the 'upper' group.

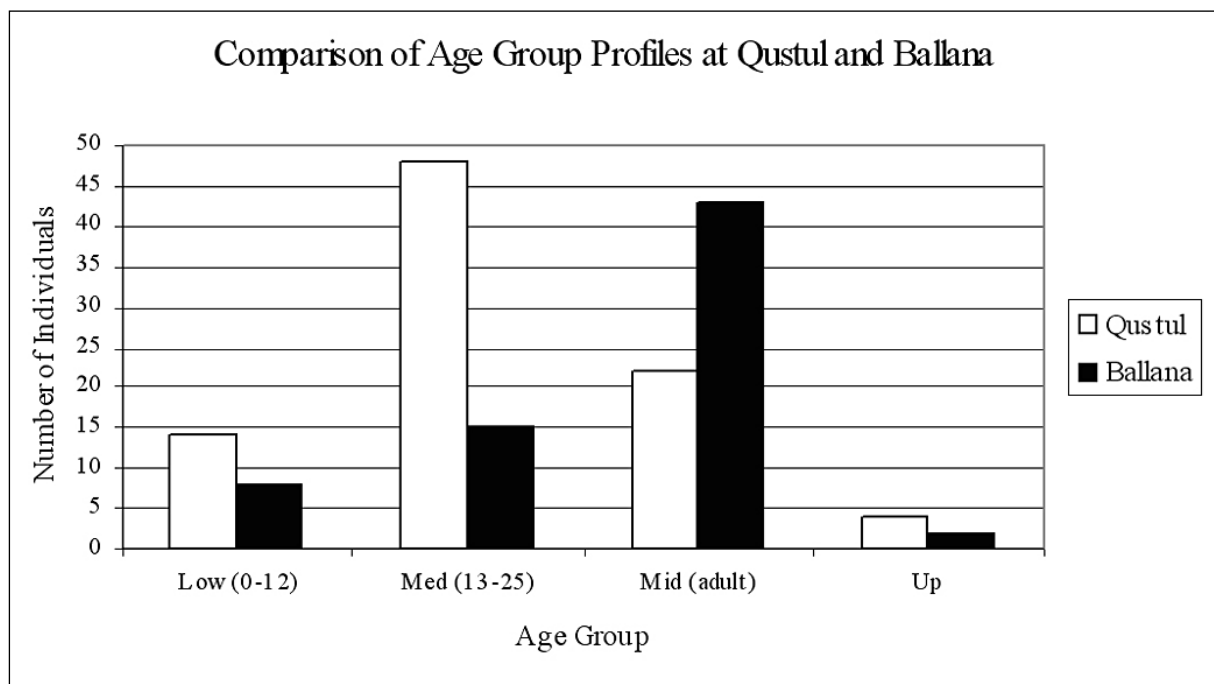


Figure 9.



At the cemeteries, more individuals were categorised as male, than were categorised as female, or than were left unsexed. At Qustul the majority of the male burials (24) were in the ‘med’ category (13-24 years) but at Ballana, the majority of the male burials were individuals in the ‘mid’ (adult) age category (18). A similar trend is found in female burials, with the majority of women buried at Qustul being in the ‘med’ category (18) in opposition to Ballana, where the majority of women buried (9) were in the ‘mid’ (adult) category. Only a single female from the ‘med’ age category was found at Ballana (figure 4). Therefore at Qustul, the majority of interments were those of young individuals (children, teenagers, young adults) whereas at Ballana, the majority of the interments were of adults. Figure nine demonstrates that at Qustul 62 burials were of individuals under the age of (c.) 25, whilst only 23 burials under that age were found at Ballana. At Qustul, those in the adult and upper age range amount to 26, but at Ballana the number in these categories is 46. The burial rite that called for the inclusion of individuals from the ‘mid’ (13-25) age category in the tombs was strongly created at Qustul, but then seriously curtailed at Ballana, particularly in the case of females. This alteration in practice occurred immediately on the move from Qustul (3a being the final phase of activity at the site) to Ballana, and therefore represents a significant change in the pattern concerning the age at death of those who were violently killed for inclusion in the burials at Qustul compared to Ballana.

Most of the humans included as sacrifices in the tombs were likely to have been specifically chosen, and there are a number of possible reasons for their selection. They may have been kin group or family members, and they may have been the ‘class’ or type of person usually deemed appropriate to accompany the dead. Procopius’s assertion that the Blemmye sacrificed people to the sun is one possible reason for their inclusion, although specifically identifying either of the groups from Qustul or Ballana as Blemmye is problematic (c.f. Dann, 2006 and 2008a, forthcoming). Emery and Kirwan believed that the remains were those of sacrificed slaves (1938). Alternatively, it is possible that the remains were those of prisoners who were triumphally sacrificed

– a practice with its roots in Meroitic culture (Lenoble, 1996).

If the ruler chose those for inclusion in the burial, it might have provided an opportune political moment to dispense with potential rivals or disruptive elements in society. This suggestion may be supported by the evidence suggested by the age profiles of those individuals who were examined by el-Batrawi. At Qustul 70% of the burials were of young individuals (‘low’ and ‘med’), but at Ballana most of the burials, 67.3%, were of mature people (‘mid’ – adult, and ‘up’). These figures are based on a broad designation of age. It is acknowledged that age designations are very difficult to translate into a past context (c.f. Ginn and Arber, 1995, Lucy, 2005), and el-Batrawi’s opaque methods and classifications do not help this process. Nevertheless, based on the research presented here, the age at death profiles certainly changed from Qustul to Ballana. If the people buried in the tombs were those with the highest status, and with the most power, it can be suggested that at Qustul power rested with the youngest age group, and at Ballana it rested with the higher age group. Alternatively, it can be suggested that the new leader selected for the burials those who were most likely to cause problems. In such a scenario, that was young people at Qustul, but at Ballana it was adults and older people.

The change in burial demographics that is demonstrated by the quantitative analysis of evidence from Qustul and Ballana, points to a considerable transformation in practice. These alterations were noticeable and undoubtedly significant to those involved in the burial rites. Violence, practiced on different members of the group, may have provided one very visible manner through which socio-political power was to be re-negotiated at Ballana. The change in the practice of violence may have been very shocking, not due to the violent act of sacrifice itself, which was already well-established, but due to the drastic alteration to the pattern of sacrificing young people that had become customary over 5 generations at Qustul. The re-location from Qustul to Ballana enacted a physical demonstration of change which provided the opportunity to exemplify difference in terms of geography, a physical alteration of funerary space (i.e. the building of the kidney-shaped enclosure at



Ballana) and new types of practice involving humans, animals and artefacts. This move was underscored by the shattering of a social norm through violence within a ritual context, which further ensured the recognition and acknowledgement of significant social and political upheaval by the participants involved in performing and witnessing the burial rites.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Beitrag analysiert die Bedeutung des Menschenopfers in der postmeroitischen Zeit (ca. 380-500 AD) anhand der unternubischen Friedhöfe von Qustul und Ballana mit einem Schwerpunkt auf der Veränderung dieser Praxis in den verschiedenen Belegungsphasen der Friedhöfe. In der älteren Phase von Qustul wurden überwiegend jüngere Individuen (Kinder und Jugendliche) getötet und bedeutenden Personen ins Grab mitgegeben. Im Gegensatz dazu erfuhren in Ballana eher Erwachsene, einschliesslich älterer Menschen, diese Behandlung. Generell wurden mehr Männer als Frauen geopfert, wobei dieses Ungleichgewicht auch auf eine unzureichende anthropologische Geschlechtsbestimmung zurückgeführt werden könnte.

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