

Research on Non Elite Groups in Ancient Egypt from the Perspective of Material Culture

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Abstract. The historical narrative of traditional Egyptology has long been centered around pharaohs, priests, and high-ranking officials, with the vast majority of the ancient Egyptian population consisting of farmers, craftsmen, and ordinary laborers who have almost lost their voice in historical writing due to a lack of written records. This article summarizes the main progress in the study of non elite groups in ancient Egypt from the perspective of material culture. The article first sorted out three core material materials: settlement sites, tomb remains, and daily objects, and discussed their unique value and limitations in reconstructing the living world of ordinary people. On this basis, the article discusses from four dimensions: economic life, social stratification, faith practice, and cultural interaction. This article argues that the study of material culture not only provides a feasible way to write a more inclusive history of Egyptian society, but also promotes the development of Egyptology from elite history to social history, and from the center of literature to the interaction between things and people. However, this research path also faces practical challenges such as material preservation bias and interpretation methodology selection, and requires continuous improvement through interdisciplinary collaboration.

Keywords: Ancient Egypt; Non elite group; Material culture; Archaeology.

1. Introduction

The ancient Egyptian civilization is renowned for its magnificent pyramids, magnificent tombs, and rich literary records, but almost all of these splendid cultural heritages come from the royal family and elite class, which account for less than 5% of the total population. It is estimated that the elite group of ancient Egypt only accounted for a small part of the total population, while people's understanding of Egyptian history was mainly based on the writings and commemorative buildings they left behind. The vast majority of the population, including farmers, craftsmen, low-level priests, and ordinary laborers, have long remained silent in the historical narrative of traditional Egyptology.

This "elite bias" is not only due to the asymmetric distribution of textual materials, mainly due to the fact that non elite groups leave very few interpretable literature records, but also due to the development background of Egyptology as a discipline. Under the context of Western colonial expansion in the 19th century, Egyptology naturally tended to focus on grand narratives of pharaohs and elites, while lacking interest in questioning the lives of ordinary people. In recent years, with the spread of the concept of "bottom-up history" and the rise of material and cultural research methods, scholars have begun to realize that material materials directly left by non elite groups such as pottery, tools, house foundations, and tomb remains are precisely the most reliable evidence for reconstructing the history of ordinary people. The 'democracy' of material culture lies in its independence from the ability to write. People from any social class are associated with things in their daily practice, and these material relics provide the possibility to write a more inclusive history of Egyptian society [1-3].

This article aims to review the main progress in the study of non elite groups in ancient Egypt from the perspective of material culture. On the one hand, this article systematically demonstrates the collaborative application of archaeology, anthropology, material culture research, and statistical methods in Egyptology, providing a reference theoretical toolbox for subsequent research. On the other hand, by shifting the focus of research from grand royal monuments to everyday remains of

civilians, this article echoes the critical reflection on the "colonial heritage" of Egyptology worldwide in recent years.

2. Material Materials

The material remains of non elite groups are scattered in various archaeological contexts, with settlement sites, tomb remains, and everyday objects constituting the three main sources of research data. These materials each have their own advantages and limitations, and only by complementing each other can a relatively complete picture be pieced together.

2.1. Settlement Site

Settlement sites are the most direct archaeological materials for studying the daily lives of ordinary people. The Tell el-Dab'a site located in the Nile Delta has unearthed three consecutive periods of late Middle Kingdom civilian residential areas from 1830 BC to 1700 BC. These residential areas consist of mud brick houses, circular granaries, open-air stoves, and industrial kilns, with irregular arrangement of tunnels and inconsistent sizes and layouts of houses, forming a sharp contrast with the "planned settlements" in places such as Lahun that are planned according to orthogonal streets. This "self-organizing" settlement form precisely reflects how non elite groups can independently arrange their living space without national unified planning. The pottery, stone mortars, flint tools, and a small amount of Feons artifacts unearthed from the site, as well as imported pottery from the Levant and Upper Egypt, provide concrete evidence for understanding the diet, labor, and regional interactions of ordinary people. The Amarna site during the New Kingdom period is also an important location for studying non elite residences. A systematic analysis of the non elite residences in the 12th district of the site shows significant differences in housing size and artifact combinations, with some non elite families owning a wider variety and higher value items, suggesting that there is not a monolithic structure within the non elite community, but rather a certain degree of social differentiation [4].

2.2. Burial Remains

Tomb remains are another important type of research material. Due to the fact that tombs are often better preserved than daily living places, non elite cemeteries provide a wealth of information about the afterlife beliefs, social identities, and economic conditions of ordinary people. However, for a long time, the Egyptian academic community has focused almost entirely on royal tombs and elite tombs, and non elite tombs have received little attention. In recent years, researchers have begun to re-examine cemetery data that was once overlooked. For example, the study of the third intermediate period non elite cemetery in Matmar used modern statistical methods to reanalyze reports from excavations in the early 20th century and found a significant correlation between the types of burial objects and the gender and age of the tomb owner. It is worth noting that the material culture in non elite tombs is not a simple imitation of elite funeral customs. Scholars have pointed out that non elite groups exhibit characteristics of "cultural reproduction" in burial practices. They selectively accepted and creatively transformed the elite cultural model under limited resource conditions. This viewpoint challenges the long-standing popular "democratization" narrative in Egyptology, which holds that religious texts and funeral privileges originally belonging to the royal family gradually spread to the lower classes over time. In fact, even after the emergence of coffin inscriptions during the Middle Kingdom period, only a very small portion of society was able to possess such inscriptions as burial objects, and most non elite groups had never received such "elite style" funeral resources [5].

2.3. Daily Objects

Daily objects constitute the third type of core material. Pottery is the most common material relic in ancient Egyptian society, and its production, circulation, and consumption patterns can reflect various aspects of regional interaction, class differences, and daily life. Some scholars argue that the massive size of pottery itself is a social phenomenon worthy of attention, and Egyptology must use statistical

thinking and anthropological theories to fully tap into the social analysis potential of pottery data. Textile tools, cooking utensils, and tableware are directly related to the division of labor and consumption patterns of ordinary people. Research on artifacts from the Roman and late Egyptian periods shows that clothing items such as beads, bracelets, and shoes not only have practical functions, but also participate in the construction process of age and gender identity. Textile tools, which seem "ordinary", precisely reveal rich information about production activities and social relationships at the household level. The material culture related to children has also begun to receive attention. Researchers no longer simply classify small or poorly made objects as "toys" but attempt to understand the real interaction between children and objects in labor, ritual, and socialization processes [6].

3. Material Culture and Non Elite World

3.1. Economic Life and Labor Practice

Material remains directly reveal the livelihood and economic organization of non elite groups. The animal bones unearthed from the civilian area of Tell el-Dab'a site provide first-hand evidence for the study of dietary structure, while processing tools such as stone mortars and grinding discs reflect daily labor scenes such as grain processing. The excavation of the worker settlement Heit el Ghurab next to the Giza Pyramid indicates that the pyramid builders were not the "slaves" imagined by later generations, but organized labor groups with relatively standardized living conditions and food supply. The economic activities of non elite families during the Roman Egyptian period were more complex. Scholars have examined the daily lives of ordinary people in Roman Egypt from the perspective of "life course", combining residential spaces, object remains, and letter materials to analyze the economic participation and social role changes of individuals from birth, childhood, adulthood, to old age. Textile production, as a common sideline activity of non elite families, has its tool remains widely found in various settlement sites, suggesting a much more complex interactive relationship between family handicrafts and market economy than recorded in writing [4].

3.2. Differences between social stratification and non elite individuals

Traditional Egyptology often simplifies society into a binary structure of "elite" and "non elite", but material materials do not support this overly simplified division. The analysis of non elite residential areas in Amarna shows that even within non elite groups, there are significant differences in housing size, building quality, and item combinations. Some households have a wider variety of goods and higher value consumer goods, implying the existence of a "middle class" and breaking the stereotype of wealth inequality. The differences in burial items among non elite cemeteries also reflect the gradient distribution of socioeconomic status. Some researchers advocate using descriptive terms such as "tombs with abundant burial objects" and "tombs with rudimentary burial objects" to replace the value labels of "elite" and "non elite" in order to objectively discuss social stratification. This differentiated material experience reminds us that non elites themselves are a diverse category full of internal differences, including different groups of people from relatively wealthy handicraft workshop owners to extremely poor agricultural laborers [7].

3.3. Faith Practice and Religious Life

In the research perspective of traditional Egyptology, our understanding of ancient Egyptian religion is almost entirely derived from the magnificent temple architecture, ritual documents written by priests, and religious texts in royal tombs. The narrowness of this source of material lies in the fact that it regards the religious practices of the elite class as the religious life landscape of the entire society. However, the vast majority of the population consisting of farmers, craftsmen, and ordinary laborers are neither capable of building temples nor able to afford the expensive costs of mummification and coffin procurement. Their world of faith is almost invisible under the light of

elite religion. Material cultural materials provide researchers with unique tools to illuminate this dark area [8].

The religious life of non elite groups has left the most concentrated material traces in the remains of their tombs. A large number of amulets unearthed from non elite tombs, their material selection and color matching are not arbitrary aesthetic preferences but contain specific symbolic logic and witchcraft concepts. For example, the blue and green colors of lapis lazuli and turquoise are often associated with regeneration and life force, while the red jadeite or red chalcedony may be related to sun worship or the magic of blood. These amulets are material carriers for ordinary people to seek supernatural protection in the face of childbirth, child illnesses, and daily accidents. They do not rely on the intervention of priests or knowledge of written rituals but directly serve the daily religious needs of individuals and families.

Some scholars have proposed that there were actually two religious levels operating simultaneously in the funeral context of ancient Egypt. One level is associated with the professional priestly class, formal theological system, and complex writing traditions, which is the domain of elite religion, represented by temple rituals and coffin inscriptions. On the other hand, it operates independently of the former, focusing not on grand propositions such as the order of the universe and the relationship between gods and kings, but on the daily concerns faced by ordinary families such as the success of childbirth, the safety of childbirth, and the growth of children. The material manifestations of this folk belief are mainly talismans and simple sacrificial containers, rather than lengthy religious papyrus or exquisite coffin inscriptions. It is worth emphasizing that the latter is not the result of dilution or deterioration of the former during the transmission process. On the contrary, it has its own internal logic and unique functional orientation and is an independent belief system that relies mainly on local oral traditions and intergenerational practical knowledge for its continuation, rather than written scriptures and priestly authority. The non elite groups who cannot afford the cost of mummification and canopies have developed alternative burial methods that are parallel to elite funeral practices, supported by this independent religious system [9].

3.4. Non elite roles in cultural interaction

Traditional historical writing often attributes cross regional cultural interactions to elite level diplomatic, trade, and military activities, as such events have left relatively rich written records in royal inscriptions and official archives. However, archaeological discoveries of material culture suggest that the role played by non elite groups in this process is far more important and complex than implied by written historical materials.

The Tell el-Dab'a site located in the eastern part of the Nile Delta provides highly convincing evidence. A certain amount of Levant-style pottery were unearthed from civilian residential areas during the Kingdom period at the site. These artifacts did not come from elite tombs or temple cellars but appeared in the daily living spaces of ordinary residents. This discovery means that ordinary households in the Delta region are not just passive terminals of remote trade networks but actually participate in the material circulation of the Eastern Mediterranean region as consumers. In other words, cross-regional connections not only exist in the exchange of gifts between pharaohs and rulers of the Levant city-states but also penetrate into the daily consumption of ordinary people, although the latter is much smaller in scale than the former.

Archaeological materials from Nubia and the Levant regions outside of Egypt have further enriched our understanding of this issue. The Egyptian-style items found in these regions are often not simply accepted as "symbols of Egyptian culture" in their original form. On the contrary, local communities have selectively adopted, functionally transformed, and symbolically reinterpreted these foreign items based on their own funeral traditions and religious needs. For example, Egyptian-style scarab beetles are often strung into necklaces in Nubian tombs, which is not common in Egypt, indicating that Nubian users have endowed this item with new social functions and symbolic value.

The process of selection and transformation in this cultural interaction is referred to by some researchers as "creolization" at the material cultural level. It is through this creative cultural practice that non elite groups express their identity and cultural agency in cross-cultural contact situations, rather than just passively accepting cultural influences from the core areas of Egypt. They have found a way of expressing their own group between local traditions and external influences through the selection, recombination, and re assignment of meaning to objects.

4. Conclusion

Traditional Egyptology overly focuses on the royal and elite classes, which make up less than 5% of the population, while the vast majority of ordinary people remain silent in historical narratives due to a lack of written records. The perspective of material culture provides an effective path to break through this limitation. Material materials directly left by non elite groups such as pottery, house foundations, tomb remains, and daily tools can reconstruct the historical landscape of ordinary people's economic life, social stratification, belief practices, and cultural interactions in multiple aspects.

The direction of future research needs to be simultaneously promoted in multiple dimensions. Firstly, researchers should go beyond the long-standing binary division of "elite" and "non elite" and establish more refined social classification models. Non elite individuals themselves are a highly heterogeneous category, and there may be significant differences in the acquisition of material resources, consumption patterns, and funeral choices among handicraft workshop owners, urban poor, and rural laborers. Only through more detailed classification can the social mechanisms behind these differences be captured. Related to this, future work should focus on promoting comprehensive research on micro regions, incorporating settlement layout, cemetery structure, and surrounding landscapes into a unified examination framework, observing the interaction between so-called "big traditions" and "small traditions" within a relatively limited geographical unit, in order to avoid rigidly applying macro social models to local materials.

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