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A Rare Funerary Practice from the Late Old Kingdom in Balat

Laure Pantalacci

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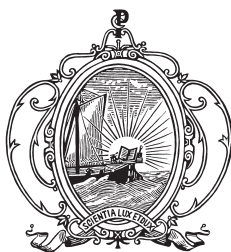
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DUST, DEMONS AND POTS

Studies in Honour of Colin A. Hope

edited by

ASHTEN R. WARFE, JAMES C.R. GILL, CALEB R. HAMILTON,
AMY J. PETTMAN and DAVID A. STEWART



PEETERS

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2020

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A RARE FUNERARY PRACTICE FROM THE LATE OLD KINGDOM IN BALAT

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Several decades of archaeological exploration in Balat, Dakhleh Oasis, have indicated the strong presence of pharaonic culture in every respect of local life. Material remains show that at least from the early Sixth Dynasty onwards, not only the elite, but also their servants and staff led a way of life – and death – identical to the inhabitants of the Nile Valley. Funerary customs appear quite similar to those of the valley cemeteries, both in terms of equipment and treatment of the body. The governors' mastabas and the major part of their peripheral cemeteries preserved bodies in extended, supine position, their hands laid on the pubis, either wrapped in a mat or deposited in a reed or wood coffin. Less frequently, the dead are lying on one side in a slightly contracted position (e.g. Minault-Gout 1992, pl. 28; Castel et al. 2005, 207, 211), perpetuating the Pre- or Early Dynastic tradition, as it also happens in other non-elite Egyptian tombs of the Old Kingdom or even later (Seidlmayer 1990, 426). A closer review of the Balat necropoleis revealed a more surprising anomaly, which forms the topic of this paper. It consists of bodies lying in supine, but otherwise non-canonical position, with their limbs strongly contracted. They are presented here according to the chronological sequence of the main governors' mastabas (on which see most recently Hadji-Minaglou 2013, 96). They all belong to the timespan between the mid-Sixth Dynasty and the end of the First Intermediate Period.

1. The two bodies of Tombs E8 and E10 are located in the southern cemetery of Imapepy I (Mastaba I) (Valloggia 1998, 65, pl. LXVIII). Both are women, aged 30–35, one of them buried near the southern wall of the mastaba, the second one immediately outside its enclosure wall. The bodies are oriented east-west, one of them with the head to the west, the other to the east. More generally, the orientation of the bodies in Balat shows a degree of variability (Minault-Gout 1992, 62–3), as is also the case in other necropoleis from the third or early second millennium BCE (Seidlmayer 1990, 414–25). No coffin, matting or wrapping could be observed in either burial. The bodies are in supine position, but their legs, instead of being extended, are flexed, with the heels to the pelvis. The arms are similarly contracted, with the hands to the

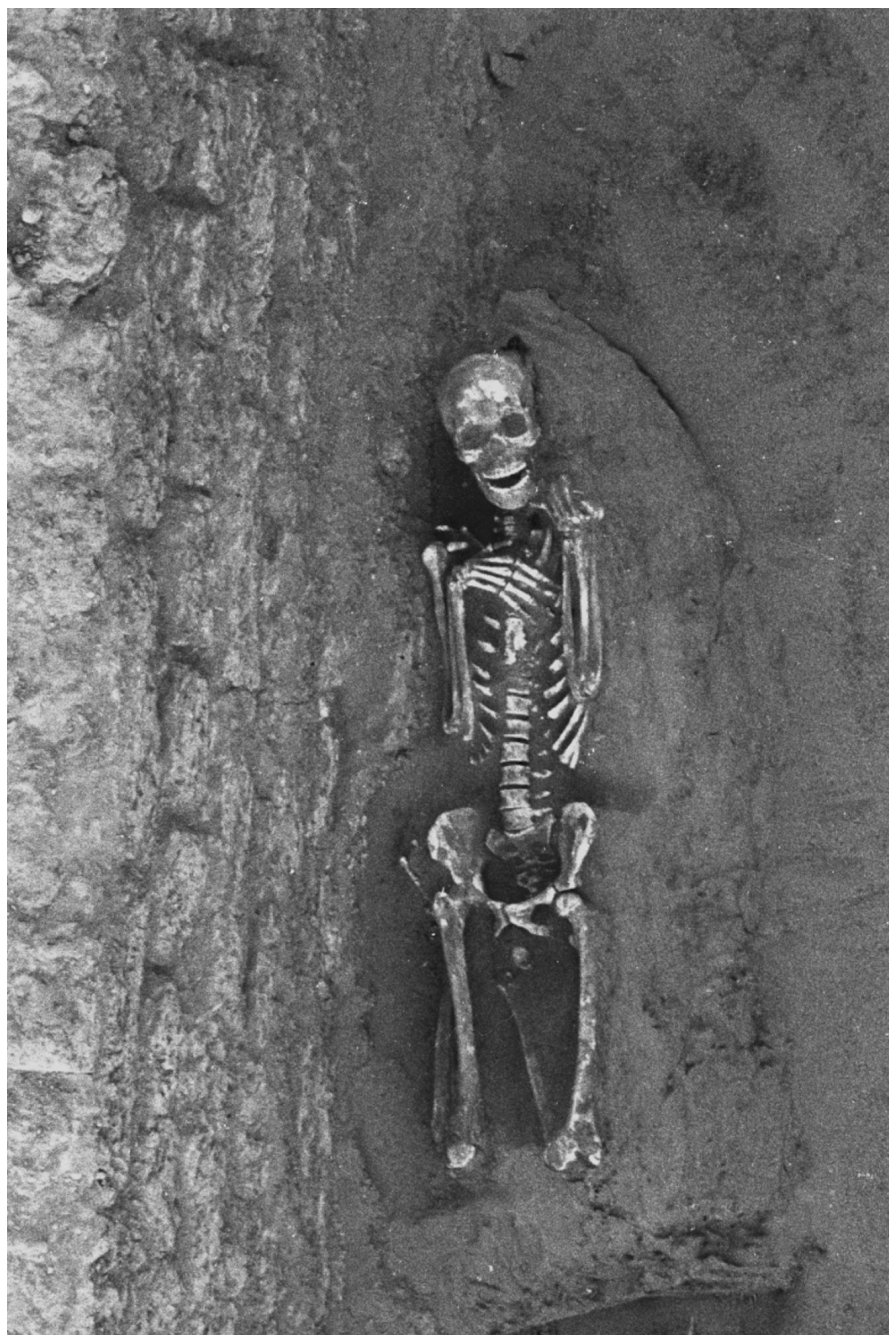


Figure 1. Tomb E10, skeleton SQ35, southern cemetery of Mastaba I
(©Ifao/J.-F. Gout).

chest or even, in Tomb E10, one hand under the chin (Valloggia 1998, pl. LXIX B) (Fig. 1).

The burials came presumably shortly after the construction of the governor's mastaba, and predate the destruction of its precinct (Valloggia 1998, 63). They belong to modest women: E8 contained no funerary goods at all, while in E10 there was a single jar and two faïence amulets.

2. Three complete bodies oriented north-south, looking east, were found in the access ramp used by the builders of Khentika's underground chambers (Mastaba III). One was lying extended on his left side, wrapped in a reed mat and a leather cover (Tomb 25: Castel et al. 2005, 119, photos 36–8). Nearby, a male adult and a young boy were deposited, apparently together, both with their knees bent so that their heels touch their pelvis (Tombs 26–27) (Fig. 2). The hands of the boy (about 12 years old) are laid over the pubic area. The man's arms are in a contracted position, both hands with the palm turned down. His left wrist comes under his chin, while his right elbow is bent at a right angle, so that his right hand comes under his left elbow (Castel et al. 2005, 115–19, photos 29 and 34–5). No funerary equipment was found with them, but the upper part of the man's body was still wrapped in a leather cover.

3. A last burial of an unusual type might be compared to those four already discussed. In the sloping passage to the secondary Tomb C, in the mastaba of Imapepy II (Mastaba II), a body oriented east-west was interred in a much too small coffin (skel.1 in Minault-Gout 1992, 59, pl. 29D) (Fig. 3). The knees are bent so that the heels touch the pelvis; one arm was twisted back under the body, the other one to the chest; the neck was broken. Obviously the body has been forcefully squeezed into the box. Modest objects were found on and around the body: a collar with a steatite stamp-seal, a small spouted jar and two clay stoppers (or dummy bread offerings?). The presence of a seal and of a well-built, though cramped, wooden chest, points to a somewhat better social status than the burials mentioned above.

If the position of the legs is identical on the five bodies discussed so far, that of their arms and hands varies. Only the boy buried in Khentika's access ramp extends his arms in the classical posture, with the hands laid on the pubis. As a rule, the arms of the other four are also contracted to the chest, in two cases with one hand coming up to the shoulder or chin area. These different positions of the arms and hands are not peculiar to our group, as they can occur elsewhere, on contracted or extended bodies (Brunton 1927, pl. XXV types 4J2, 5C3, 6A3 and 7E3).

These burials are more or less contemporary with the surrounding tombs and cannot be described as intrusive. On the contrary, their inclusion in the burial

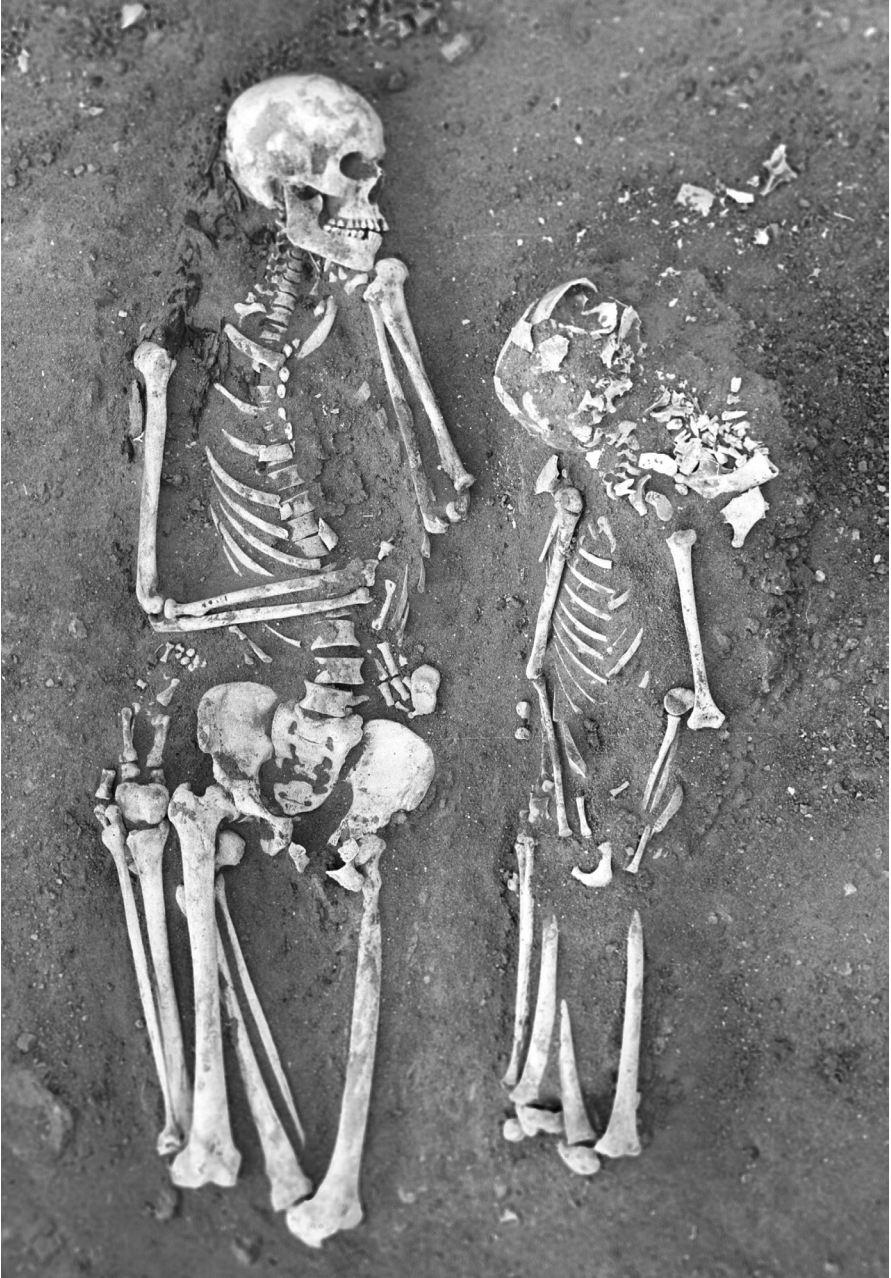


Figure 2. Tombs 26–27, eastern cemetery of Mastaba III (©Ifao/J.-F. Gout).



Figure 3. Skeleton 1, sloping access passage of Tomb C in Mastaba II
(©Ifao/J.-F. Gout).

grounds around the governors' funerary complexes seems a clear indication of their integration in the local community. Since they were allowed to be associated with the governors' memorial cult for some time, they probably belonged to the palace staff during their lifetime, though obviously to its lower social stratum; three of the burials lack any funerary equipment, the remaining two have only a few objects of very modest quality.

The bizarre positioning of these bodies is highly distinctive. For instance, around Mastaba III, only two tombs out of 131 – less than 2 per cent – feature such burials. A survey of contemporary necropoleis in the Nile Valley confirms that the practice is also uncommon outside Balat. The only parallel known to me for the moment is from Qau, where Brunton (1927, 26, 31, 40, pl. XXV type 6B) unearthed a number of burials with comparable arrangements (Fig. 4). He dates them, mostly from their context, either precisely to the Sixth Dynasty, or more loosely between the Fifth and Tenth Dynasties. Here also, the dead were of humble status. A spouted jar, amulets and a collar of pearls, were the only objects recovered from their tombs.

Brunton (1927, 48) was struck by what he calls the 'almost grotesque attitudes of some bodies'. He proposes a global diachronic view of the occurrences of his types 6A, 6B and 6C, all with the legs bent back. On the whole, between Dynasties V and IX, they amount on average to 7.6 per cent for male burials and 9.1 per cent for females, with a peak of 12.6 per cent for men in the Sixth Dynasty, and 11.5 per cent for women in the Ninth Dynasty (Brunton 1927, 50).

Nevertheless, this figure is not directly useful for comparison, since Brunton's types 6A and 6C – body lying on one side – differ strongly from 6B – body in supine position. Though the exact number of 6B burials is unknown, we can suspect that it was a low figure, since positions 6A and 6C, with the body lying on one side and the legs 'bent back from the knee so sharply that the feet rested against the pelvis', are regularly attested in other cemeteries of

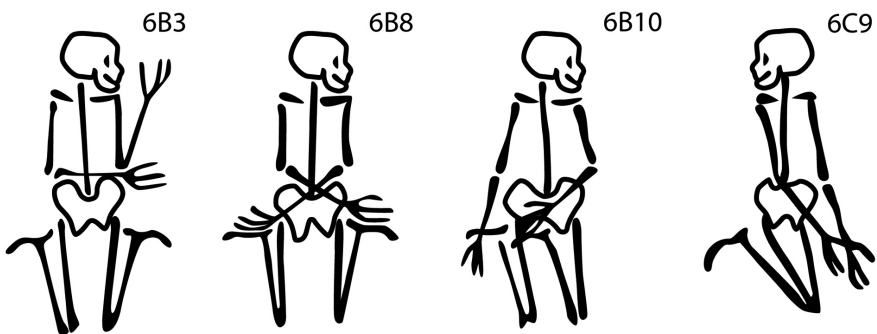





Figure 4. Body positions 6B3–6C9 of Brunton's (1927, pl. XXV) typology.

the late Old Kingdom or First Intermediate Period: e.g. Elephantine (Alexanian 2016, Abb. 5 and 7a–8); Diospolis Parva (Petrie 1901, 39). If we agree that the contracted attitude mimics a ‘realistic’, lifelike sleeping position (Seidlmayer 1990, 426; 2001, 224–6), we must strongly differentiate types 6A and 6C, which are natural for a sleeper, from 6B, which can by no means copy a (sleeping) position of the living.

Brunton wondered about the meaning of such attitudes. After suggesting first that they were purely accidental, he himself refutes this explanation by archaeological observations:

‘We can hardly believe that the corpse was deliberately laid out in such ways. It must rather be due to the position in which the person was lying when death occurred, *rigor mortis* having set in before any treatment could be effected. Bodies, however, were attended to very soon after death (PETRIE and WAINWRIGHT, *The Labyrinth and Gerzeh*, p. 7); the tightly contracted bodies of the early dynasties must have been tied up when still pliable.’ (Brunton 1927, 48)

The double burial 26–27 of Mastaba III, with a man and a boy buried together in the same attitude, strongly suggests they were related in some way, and the similarity of their mortuary position disqualifies the explanation of accidental *rigor mortis*. The conclusion that the bodies were deliberately arranged in this strange attitude is inescapable. For a living person, lying on the back with the feet to the buttocks is possible, but does require suppleness (Françoise Le Mort, pers. comm., June 2016). So the burials must actually have happened very soon after death.

Interestingly, fragments of a leather cover or bag were preserved on the head and shoulders of the adult male in Tomb 26 (Castel et al. 2005, 115). A skin was also covering the extended body buried nearby, in Tomb 25 (Castel et al. 2005, 115, 119, fig. 38). Thus two of the group of four pit-tombs located east of the mastaba, in the access ramp, used an animal hide or a skin bag to protect or contain the dead. This is worth noting, since leather is believed to have become uncommon in Egyptian tombs after the first dynasties (Van Driel-Murray 2000, 307–8). In this respect, funerary customs in Balat may have differed from those of the Nile Valley. Indeed, in the cemeteries surrounding the huge mastabas, which have been extensively excavated, leather was more often preserved (and also used?) than linen to cover the body (Fig. 5). Like linen, leather could be combined with reed mats or even wooden coffins (Castel et al. 2005, 96 [Tomb 7], 181 [Tomb 109], 184 [Tomb 110], 277 [Tomb 128]; see also Minault-Gout 1995, 316). The widespread use of leather by the locals is also evident in written documents, where textile words are mostly determined by the hide-sign F27 , replacing the fabric-signs S28  or S26 .

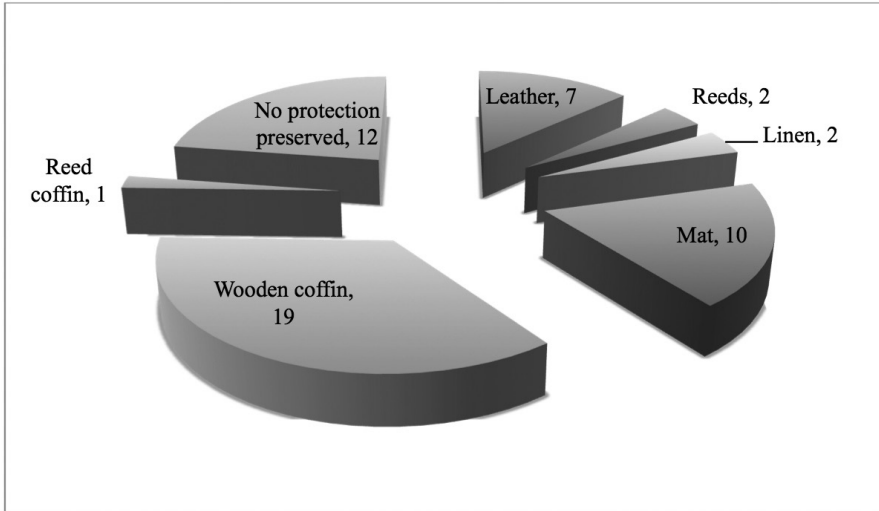


Figure 5. The materials protecting the body in 44 tombs around Mastaba III (the total exceeds the number of tombs as some burials combine several materials; based on Castel et al. 2005, 29–31).

In the Nile Valley, from the late Old Kingdom to the early New Kingdom, pelts are well attested among the foreign (mainly Nubian) groups settled in Egypt (C-group, Medjay/Pan-grave people: Seidlmayer 2002, 104–6). Leather was also used for loincloths or skirts of those groups (like Pan-grave people in the late Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period; see Veldmeijer 2008, 2–3). According to New Kingdom iconographic sources, oasis dwellers as well would have worn leather loincloths (Giddy 1980, 124). The iconography of foreigners or soldiers wearing leather loincloths developed during the Middle Kingdom (Vogelsang-Eastwood 1993, 29–31); however, archaeological evidence from the Old Kingdom tombs does not support this later iconographic tradition, since no pelt loincloth from Balat tombs has been reported with certainty.

In Dakhleh, like in the Nile Valley or Eastern Desert, were these hides an ethnic indicator typical of foreign groups? If so, which group? According to the current evidence, the Nubians, commonly attested in and around the valley, left very few traces in Balat (Grimal 1985; Koenig 1991). Nevertheless, ongoing research in and around Dakhleh and in the Eastern Sahara points to the coexistence of the Egyptian community with people from different cultures during the late Old Kingdom: mainly the Sheikh Muftah people, early dwellers of Dakhleh (Riemer et al. 2005, 344–5) – possibly of Libyan origin (Hope 2007, 409–10); maybe also nomads from the Eastern Sahara, attested west of the Nile in Wadi

Shaw and Wadi Howar during the late Old Kingdom/First Intermediate Period (Schuck 1989, 426–8; Jesse 2006, 78).

The burials in Balat cannot be related to a non-Egyptian culture in particular, but drawing on the parallel(s?) from Qau, certainly a region of extensive contacts with desert nomads (as seen with the Pan-graves at least from the Middle Kingdom), we consider that the issue of ethnicity is not irrelevant. Alternatively, the use of leather may simply reflect the better preservation of this material, or the relatively easy access of the people in Balat – even modest people – to livestock resources. This would be in line with the picture conveyed by previous archaeozoological and textual studies on breeding, butchery and meat consumption on the site (Pantalacci and Lesur-Gebremariam 2012, 307).

If not an ethnic marker, the strange position of the dead could as well be a social one, referring to a particular position or trade. The two ladies from Mastaba I are buried in the middle of a collective cemetery, but the group of burials including the man and boy of Mastaba III is located in a remarkable spot, on the axis of the access ramp of Khentika's mastaba, to the east of his funerary chamber. It comprises four shallow pits, Tombs 25–28, the last one disturbed and preserving only a skull. Whereas most of the secondary burials are gathered to the west and south of the mastaba, this axial location allows the highest visibility of these persons, to people looking both from and to the master's tomb. They share this privileged location with a few members of the oasis elite, whose well-built mud brick tombs (2 and 3) were installed near the eastern wall of the mastaba (Castel et al. 2005, 87–95), along the ritual path leading from the city to the main mastaba.

The quest for public visibility and social recognition in the funerary landscape is a well-known trend which has been analysed so far mostly for elite members (e.g. Richards 2002, 88–97; Vischak 2006, 49–51). Humbler people shared the same concern both in relation to the city of the living and to their master. In the Egyptian administration, such a conspicuous situation is expressed in Old Kingdom and Middle Kingdom titles with the increasingly frequent expression *n hft-hr*, 'in the presence' (Ward 1982, 387–9). While most of the tombs around the mastaba of the governor Khentika are west and south of its entrance, out of direct sight, I suggest this eastern group of tombs reflects the privileged position of servants particularly close and dear to their master during their lifetime. In Mastaba II as well, the contracted skeleton, located to the east, was the closest tomb to the funerary chamber of the elite Tomb C (Minault-Gout 1992, pls 27B and 30F). Was this preference connected with their professional activity, and was the strange position of their corpses reminiscent of this activity? If so, one has to think about a household occupation carried out equally by males, females (as in Mastaba I) and children, which could fit this body image – perhaps some kind of physical performance? A few Old Kingdom serving statues found in serdabs depict musicians and dancers (Roth 2002, 105). Or did their attitude merely

transpose the kneeling position expressing respect in front of the master (Dominicus 1994, 14–18)? In any case, we suggest that through this distinctive mortuary posture our dead were seeking immortality together with and close to their master, paralleling the function of the serving statues (Roth 2002, 120–1). Treating the dead body itself as an everlasting three-dimensional figure may be a way to compensate for the lack of non-elite statuary.

Be that as it may, when compared to the bulk of cemeteries' populations, our archaeological evidence and its analysis inevitably suggest a distinctive status of these few persons, be it on an ethnic or on a professional basis, or because of a combination of both. Despite their lower status, in their own view or at least in that of their community, their individual role in connection with the governor was worth being asserted and remembered for all eternity.

I hope Colin enjoyed reading this modest archaeological conundrum and, as a connoisseur of Dakhleh idiosyncrasies, maybe will find a more convincing explanation for it.

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