ALEXANDRA D. PLEȘA

RELIGIOUS BELIEF IN BURIAL

Funerary Dress and Practice at the Late Antique and Early Islamic Cemeteries at Matmar and Mostagedda, Egypt (Late Fourth–Early Ninth Centuries CE)

ABSTRACT

This essay explores local, individual expressions of religious belief in a burial context, using the evidence of funerary dress and burial practices from the late fourth- to early ninth-century CE cemeteries of Matmar and Mostagedda, in Middle Egypt. It proposes that the communities at Matmar and Mostagedda, although most probably nominally Christian, developed particular practices and beliefs that to a large extent continued older local traditions. The mixing of elements of traditional and Christian beliefs is best described in terms of religious syncretism, engendered by concerns related to salvation, protection in the afterlife, or a desire to express the piety of, and veneration practiced by, members of these agricultural communities.

QUICK CITATION

Pleşa, Alexandra D.
“Religious Belief in Burial:
Funerary Dress and Practice
at the Late Antique and
Early Islamic Cemeteries at
Matmar and Mostagedda,
Egypt (Late Fourth–Early
Ninth Centuries CE).”
Ars Orientalis 47 (2017):
18–42.

The study of late antique Christianity in Egypt has developed considerably over the past decades, shifting from a predominantly textual approach to the inclusion of archaeological and documentary evidence.¹ This change has created a significantly richer understanding of the locality, regionalism, and particularity of conversion to Christianity, as well as of the development and survival of traditional Egyptian and Hellenistic cults. Archaeology has often proven to be an effective tool for inquiry into local and regional communities, and its inclusion in the study of Christianity has been repeatedly advocated over the last decades.² These developments have resulted not only in an array of archaeological studies of religious belief and practice, drawing their evidence mainly from burial or cultic settings,³ but also in a shift in textual research, toward the analysis of local and individual expressions of belief.⁴ Similar developments are noticeable in historical, art historical, and archaeological scholarship, with an increasing number of studies in these fields focusing on the relationship between dress and the manifestation of group or individual identity, religious or otherwise.⁵ Late antique religious beliefs, Christian or non-Christian, are now understood as nuanced, deeply local phenomena, the peculiarities of which are highly dependent on social, cultural, and environmental realities.

In this context, the present essay explores local and individual expressions of religious belief in a burial context, using as evidence the late fourth- to early ninth-century CE cemeteries

at Matmar and Mostagedda, in Middle Egypt (fig. 1). By taking a nuanced approach to religious differentiation and identification, it proposes that the communities at Matmar and Mostagedda, although most probably nominally Christian, developed particular burial practices and beliefs that were strongly linked to old local traditions, mixing elements of traditional and Christian beliefs. The resulting *mélange* was engendered by local concerns related to salvation and protection in the afterlife, as well as a desire to express the piety of and veneration practiced by these agricultural communities. The study begins with an overview of the discovery of the necropolises and of excavation practices, as well as the ways in which the latter influenced the preservation of material, leading to considerable methodological limitations. It proposes a chronological framework for the use of the necropolises by reviewing the excavator's dating in light of surviving museum material and the results of recent radiocarbon dating. The burial practices are analyzed based on the evidence of ninety-six recorded tombs, focusing on the use of dress items—jewelry, accessories, and textiles—in conjunction with other grave goods. The problematic question of the social, economic, and religious identities of the communities at Matmar and Mostagedda is touched upon, and is further explored in a detailed inquiry into the material evidence for expressions of belief. The evidence of the archaeological record is contextualized with the use of existing archaeological and textual research on Christianity in Egypt. Conversely, ideas commonly circulating in archaeological research are challenged by setting them against the evidence on-site.

The Discovery and Excavations of the Common Era Cemeteries

The sites of Matmar and Mostagedda are located on the east bank of the Nile, south of Asyūṭ, on a narrow strip of low desert that separates the agricultural fields of the river valley from the higher desert plateau (figs. 2–4). At the beginning of the twentieth century, extensive excavations were organized in this area—also known as the Badari District—under the auspices of the Egypt Exploration Society and the direction of William M. Flinders Petrie. When the Society moved its fieldwork to Palestine in the late 1920s, Petrie's long-time collaborators, the well-known Egyptologists Guy Brunton (1878–1948) and his wife Winifred (1880–1959), decided to continue self-funded excavations in a previously unexplored, yet “very promising,”⁶ area close to the contemporary villages al-Matmar and al-Nazla al-Mustagidda.⁷

Between 1927 and 1931, the couple conducted three seasons of excavation at each site, uncovering vestiges dating to almost every period of Egyptian history. (Badarian settlements and necropolises were repeatedly reused as burial grounds in later times.) Despite extensive excavations, only a few isolated architectural structures dating to later times were found, and the corresponding settlements were not (yet) discovered. In the burial grounds, extensive cemeteries assumed to date from the “Ptolemaic or early Roman” to “early Arab” times were found. An unknown number of burials, probably in the order of hundreds, were excavated here, of which 115 were deemed most important and were recorded in two subsequent publications, *Mostagedda and the Tasian Culture* and *Matmar*; their grave goods were shipped to over twenty institutions and private individuals. Only about three hundred items of an original group of more than six hundred⁸ survive, primarily in museums in the United Kingdom and Germany. A smaller number belong to museum collections in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, to name the most important. Almost nothing can be said about the missing half. Some artifacts may have been returned to the grounds where they were discovered,⁹ while others may have been kept by Brunton himself, then sold or

FIGURE 1. General map of Egypt, including the sites mentioned in the text

donated.¹⁰ These objects, and the cemeteries in which they were found, are the focus of the following discussion.¹¹

Methodological Limitations

When dealing with material excavated in the early twentieth century, a series of methodological difficulties related to insufficient and selective recording becomes apparent; in that regard, this study is no exception. Compared to the archaeological practice of his day, Guy Brunton's excavation and recording methods were models of systematic scrutiny and precision. A fair amount of documentation about his excavation methodology, as well as the contexts and characteristics of both burials and their grave goods, is still available. Nonetheless, Brunton made a number of decisions that produced serious biases in the recorded data, foremost among which was his avoidance of poor and previously looted burials. When excavated by chance, such burials were not properly documented in the publications, leading to an overrepresentation of

rich burials at the expense of burials without goods. Assuming that the number and quality of burial goods testify to the economic situation of the dead, the poorer population from Matmar and Mostagedda is practically absent from the record.

A second aspect that poses problems is the limited and often selective documentation of burials and their grave goods. The orientations and positions of bodies were recorded for the majority of burials at Matmar but for only a few at Mostagedda. Likewise, the specific position of grave goods was rarely recorded, hindering an in-depth analysis of burial practices. The identification of sex was performed without the presence of a specialist, which raises questions

FIGURE 2. Brunton's excavations north of Mostagedda. Reconstruction of the published map overlapping the contemporary site

FIGURE 3. Brunton's excavations south of Mostagedda. Reconstruction of the published map overlapping the contemporary site

FIGURE 4. Brunton's excavations at Matmar. Partial reconstruction of the published map overlapping the contemporary site

about its reliability. On many occasions, insufficient descriptions of artifacts and the lack of illustrations make the identification of items in museums impossible.

In analyzing this rather incomplete and inconsistent data, Brunton's own publications were used as a point of departure, then set against information available in the much-diminished and scattered Brunton archive, as well as against the evidence garnered from surviving artifacts in museums. For quantification purposes, several tombs and artifacts with incomplete or biased records were set aside; the practicalities of selection are described in the endnotes. This study is based on the information presently known about the burials at Matmar and Mostagedda. Once more data becomes available, knowledge about the burial dress, practices, and religious beliefs of these communities may undergo considerable revision.

The Late Antique to Early Islamic Cemeteries (Fourth- to Early Ninth-century)

Location and Dating

Of the approximately 115 recorded graves, eighteen tombs from area 3900 at Mostagedda were dated by Brunton to “Ptolemaic or early Roman times.” The remaining ninety-six graves—sixty from Matmar and thirty-six from Mostagedda¹²—were dated to “Roman,” “Coptic,” and “early Arab” times. At Mostagedda, “Roman and Coptic” burials “were scattered about in most of the areas north of the headland, especially in [area] 1400.”¹³ The necropolises in areas 300, 400, 500, 800, 900, and 1100, although assumed to date generally to early Roman times, also contained two “Coptic” graves. The necropolises in areas 1400, 1800, 1900, 10100, and 11700 were assumed to date to “Coptic times” but included three “early Arab” graves as well (see figs. 2–3). At Matmar, graves of the “Roman and Coptic” times were mainly scattered in areas 600, 800, 900, 1000, and 1100, and to a lesser extent in areas 1300, 3200, and 5200 (see fig. 4). It is not entirely clear what Brunton meant by these period labels since he did not define them chronologically; most probably, he used the accepted periodization of the day, which labeled material assumed to date to the first three centuries of the Common Era “early Roman” and “Roman.” The material dating from the fourth to the seventh or eighth century was connected to the Christianized Egyptian society, being termed “Coptic.” As for the label “Early Arab,” Brunton most probably referred to tombs dating to the period after the Arab conquest of Egypt, rather than to those of Muslims or Arabs.

Compared to the typology, style, and decoration of the material surviving in museums, and set against the radiocarbon dates obtained for twenty textiles,¹⁴ Brunton’s periodization is generally slightly earlier. Judging from three textiles coming from area 3900 at Mostagedda that have been radiocarbon-dated to early Islamic and Mamluk times,¹⁵ Brunton’s dating of cemetery 3900 as “Ptolemaic” or “early Roman” is questionable, if not entirely flawed. The typology and iconography of the surviving material, in agreement with the range of radiocarbon dates obtained from the textile samples, indicates that the “Ptolemaic,” “(early) Roman,” and “Coptic” cemeteries at Matmar and Mostagedda were used roughly from the late fourth to the end of the eighth, or possibly the early ninth, century, with notable differences in the span and peak of use at each site. Interestingly, area 3900 at Mostagedda was used in early Islamic and Mamluk times as well.

At Mostagedda, areas 1400 to 11700 contained burials datable from the fourth to the end of the eighth or beginning of the ninth century, with numbers peaking during the seventh and eighth centuries.¹⁶ Most of the textiles found in these cemeteries have applied decorative bands on their edges, as well as applied *clavi*, *orbiculi*, and cuff bands, features generally datable from the fifth to the ninth century.¹⁷ Several tailored tunics with short sleeves and widened bottoms—types commonly produced during the same centuries and later—also have been found.¹⁸ Their tapestry decoration, whether applied or woven in, commonly includes vegetal designs or repetitive plant and animal motifs executed in a highly stylized manner. Unfortunately, no coins were found in burial contexts or other deposits, although the pottery recovered represents almost all types common during Late Antiquity and early Islamic times.¹⁹

The Matmar cemeteries were most likely in use slightly earlier, from the fourth to the seventh century, with a peak in activity during the fifth and the sixth century. Several coins found in unidentified poor burials of areas 800 and 1000, as well as in tombs 831 and 847, date from the second half of the fourth century. Likewise, coins found on the surface date from

the second half of the fourth century, with only one example dating to the early fifth. How long the coins were in circulation before being deposited is difficult to determine, but they do provide a *terminus post quem* for the burials. A fragment of an *ostrakon* in Coptic—dated to the seventh to eighth century on paleographical grounds by W. E. Crum—appears to be one of the latest vestiges on-site. As for the burial textiles, the majority have decorations that correspond to styles commonly dated from the fourth to the sixth century: tapestry bands with geometrical decoration realized in flying needle technique²⁰ and gamma motifs. In agreement with the typological assessment, the radiocarbon dates of seven textile samples from Matmar, corresponding to tombs in areas 800 and 1000, range from 410 to 665 CE, with only one textile (Bolton Museum, 1931.46.12) dating earlier, to 1738±29BP (230–390 CE, RICH-23471, 95.4%).²¹

The Burial Practices

As in many other parts of Egypt at the time, the body of the deceased was placed in a rectangular or oval pit. Apart from two exceptions—burials 826 at Matmar and 1400 at Mostagedda, where an adult female and an adult male, respectively, were each buried with a child—all pits represent individual burials. The body was wrapped in one or multiple shrouds; garments sometimes were used for wrapping the body instead. Little can be said about the wrapping process, or the succession of layers and their positions, as Brunton's descriptions are often laconic or leave room for interpretation. Judging from the evidence elsewhere, the number of shrouds used in each burial may have been considerable.²² Red and white crisscross or lattice “bandages” occasionally were used for wrapping the entire body or the head alone.²³ The practice of padding the head and feet to create protrusions, which were then fastened with colored tapes, is well attested at other sites, Fag el-Gamūs²⁴ and el-Kom el-Aḥmar/Sharūna²⁵ among them. How widespread the practice was at Matmar and Mostagedda is not entirely clear, although—judging from the description of the dead in area 600 at Matmar, who were “mostly wrapped in red and white criss-cross bandages” and had “masses of cloth round the head”—it may have been quite common. Additionally, remains of cloth rags on textiles surviving in museums suggest the same practice (fig. 5). Reed and rush stalks or palm leaves occasionally were placed next to the head, and along or between the legs of the deceased, to support the body during the wrapping process.²⁶ In several instances the exterior wrapping layer consisted of a mat, possibly added for extra protection.²⁷

The wrapped body was placed at the bottom of the pit without further protection. This must have been the most common practice at the two sites, as Brunton mentions “wood” as coffin material only for tombs 1011 and 1012 at Matmar. Judging from the circumstantial evidence, it is likely that he referred to wooden boards that supported the body rather than to wooden structures. The construction of bricked *loculi* seems to have been practiced in earlier Roman times and did not continue later on.²⁸ Only two adjoining tombs—1414 and 1415 from Mostagedda, dating to “early Arab” times—had bricked *loculi*, oriented to the north and south, respectively. Additionally, a female in tomb 623 at Matmar was buried in a “cylindrical pottery coffin.” Although the tomb was listed in the “Roman and Coptic graves” section, the burial goods suggest an earlier date, possibly Ptolemaic or early Roman. The vast majority of the deceased were laid in a supine position, with hands clasped or placed side by side on the pelvis, or, less commonly, placed beside the body (table 1).²⁹ The deceased in a single tomb—917 from Matmar, dated to the “Coptic” period—was found lying on her right side. Typically, the bodies were oriented with their heads facing west, although five were oriented differently.

It is unclear to what extent the deceased were provided with garments. Brunton was either brief in describing burial attire or skipped it completely. Whether textile descriptions are absent due to Brunton's lack of interest in them or to the deceased being wrapped only in shrouds remains a question. Burying the deceased naked and wrapped in shrouds was not at all uncommon, judging from the evidence at Dūsh, or el-Deir, further south in the Kharga Oasis.³⁰ Reading Brunton's descriptions of burial attire, it is often impossible to differentiate among the garments that wrapped, covered, or clothed the bodies, let alone to establish the succession of layers. Up to five garments accompanied the bodies,³¹ and textiles surviving in museum collections indicate that, most often, these were various types of woolen tunics with woven-in or applied tapestry decoration, occasionally accompanied by shawls, headbands, or hairnets. The burial textiles often bear signs of wear, reuse, and mending, indicating that they had been in use long before being placed in the grave. Others, such as a brown woolen tunic with woven-in tapestry *clavi* from tomb 10106 at Mostagedda, may have been readjusted for burial purposes (fig. 6).³²

The majority of the deceased were buried barefoot; only five of them wear shoes. Tomb 1006 at Matmar is unique in that the female mummy wore shoes on her feet, and five shoes of different sizes, as well as five pairs of sandals, were placed alongside her body (fig. 7). The head often received special attention, being individually wrapped in cloth, then bound by straps of wool. Although details of how the head was specifically treated were recorded only selectively, it seems that blue textile headbands with white geometrical decorations in brocading weft were preferred for wrapping the head³³; shawls of various colors³⁴ and, more rarely, sprang caps³⁵ also were used (fig. 8).

As to the burial goods, items of personal or household use are sometimes present (table 2). Tomb 11713 at Mostagedda was unique in that it contained fish vertebrae. Pottery was used as a grave good infrequently, only three tombs being provided with two pots and a clay net sinker, respectively. Jewelry, either placed on the body or worn, is the most common type of grave good. The deceased were most often adorned with bead necklaces, metal torques, or

FIGURE 5. Fragments of a woolen tunic from tomb 1800(ii) at Mostagedda, belonging to a child aged 12, 6th–8th century

FIGURE 6. Proposed reconstruction of the sleeveless tunic belonging to the child buried in tomb 10106 at Mostagedda. Bottom left: detail of the sewn neck slit. Radiocarbon-dated to 1586 ± 34 BP (390–550 CE, RICH-23470, 95.4%)

strings with pendants. Necklaces, appearing in at least sixty-three tombs, represent the item of jewelry most often encountered at both sites, followed by bangles of common metals (most often iron and copper alloys), which appear in thirty-seven tombs. Earrings were as frequently used as bangles, while finger rings and anklets appear to a lesser extent. Items of jewelry were not only worn but also were placed on the chest, body, and pelvic area. Interestingly, a series of mummies wore, or had placed on the chest area, torques and bangles with rings strung on them. The symbolic use of grave goods will be discussed later. It is useful to ask in that respect who the people buried at Matmar and Mostagedda were and what can be inferred about their social, economic, and religious identities from the evidence on-site as well as from other sources.

Whose Burials?

The absence of settlements connected to the necropolises diminishes considerably what can be said about the social, economic, and religious composition of these communities. The people burying their dead in the grounds near Matmar and Mostagedda may have lived in villages further down the Nile Valley, a reasonable explanation for the absence of settlements on-site. These unidentified villages were probably dependent on agriculture for subsistence, as was the entire Valley. The inhabitants, at least those buried at Matmar and Mostagedda, seem to have come from (what can be understood as) the lower and middle classes. However, there seems to have been a considerable population that could afford being buried with fine garments, personal adornments, and other valuable goods.

FIGURE 7. Fragments of a pair of leather shoes belonging to the female buried in tomb 1006 at Matmar, 5th–6th century

The cemeteries contain a disproportionately large number of women and children. This feature, which also has been remarked upon in relation to earlier burials from the Old and Middle Kingdoms, may have been the result of males being buried separately, in unexplored areas of the cemeteries.³⁶ Although this suggestion seems plausible in the absence of any other evidence, it is important to note that Brunton's sex identification methods may have led to a number of males being classified as female.

Turning to the religious background of these communities, an idea about their beliefs can be gained by considering research on religious conversion in Egypt. Studies that tackle the issue based on naming practices, although questionable to some extent, have shown that Christianity grew steadily over the fourth century, from roughly twenty to thirty percent of the population around 315 to approximately seventy percent toward the end of the century.³⁷ The Christianization process was paralleled by the gradual abandonment of pagan temples during the fourth century.³⁸ By the mid-fifth century, the number of Christians amounted to about eighty-five percent of the population; in the early sixth century, almost all Egyptians considered themselves Christian. At the two sites, evidence from burial contexts, architectural structures, and surface finds confirms that a Christian community was present. At Mostagedda, stone blocks, quarried from the neighboring cliffs in Roman times, bore the remains of incised crosses, which led Brunton to think that they were reused in "Coptic" times.³⁹ The base of a pottery vessel discovered in the rubbish fill

FIGURE 8. Reconstruction of the surviving burial dress belonging to the child in tomb 1881 at Mostagedda. Fragments of two tunics (1 and 2), wool strands wrapped around the head (3), and headband (4). Bolton Museum, inv. nos. 1930.56.19 and 1930.56.39 (1), 1930.56.43 (2), 1930.56.16 and 1930.56.31.1–2 (3), and 1930.56.38 (4). Inv. no. 1930.56.16 was radiocarbon-dated to 1342 ± 29 BP (640–770 CE), RICH-23476, 95.4%

of a structure in area 300 was decorated with a “circle of stamped crosses.”⁴⁰ Similarly, a pot found loose in area 3200 at Matmar bore a cross, judging from the catalogue illustration.⁴¹ The presence of a Christian community is most clearly discernible from the funerary stelae retrieved at Matmar, the largest of which attest to the Christianity of the deceased for whom they were used, as well as from a total of fifteen tombs containing items with symbols that can be understood as Christian (see table 2).

When and to what extent Christianity was adopted by these communities remain daunting questions. The Matmar stelae help little in establishing a chronology of the Christian presence on-site, due to the lack of any archaeological context for them. None of the tombs from areas 800 and 1000 at Matmar, datable on numismatic evidence to as early as the late fourth or fifth century, contain items with Christian symbolism. Neither do tombs 1008 and 1013, for which the radiocarbon-dated textiles offer a *terminus post quem* as early as the first decades of the fifth century. Given that all of the coins found in these two areas are dated to the late fourth century, and taking into account the similarity of artifacts from tombs with Christian symbols and those in securely datable tombs, it is possible to suggest that at least some of the Matmar tombs containing items with Christian symbolism may date as early as the late fourth or fifth century. The Christian community that buried their deceased in the necropolises probably made use of chapels adjoining the cemeteries. Although no remains of cultic structures, Christian or otherwise, were found at either site, vestiges of three chapels adjoining cemeteries at the neighboring sites of Qaw and Badari suggest that chapels may have existed at Matmar and

Mostagedda as well⁴²; the fact that no temple was found is hardly surprising, given that the settlements themselves are missing. Only a few kilometers away, Asyūṭ was an urban center with a considerable Christian community, a number of thriving monasteries in its surroundings, and a few well-attested bishops.⁴³ Although the presence of a Christian community starting at the end of the fourth century can be proposed, very little can be said about the veneration of traditional gods, Hellenistic or Egyptian. No tomb contains items that would lead to its identification as “pagan.”

Drawing on all of these points, it is likely that a Christian population was present at Matmar and Mostagedda by the end of the fourth century, and that its numbers may have grown steadily later on. Whether and how affiliation to Christianity was expressed in a burial context, and what other concerns may have played a role in the practice of interring the dead, is the focus of the following section.

Religious Belief in Burial

The graves contain surprisingly scant explicit evidence of religious affiliation. Only ten of the dead at Mostagedda and seven at Matmar were provided with items with overtly Christian symbols: cross pendants, decorations in the shape of crosses, or images of saints (see table 2). Additionally, tomb 848 at Matmar had the Christian stela mentioned above yet contained no other item of Christian symbolism. Most of the Christian symbols that were found decorated items of jewelry: necklaces with cross pendants of metal, bone, wood, and mother-of-pearl, cross pendants either on strings or alone, and wirework earrings with decorative crosses. Such jewelry was worn, especially in the case of earrings, or was placed on the chest and body. A metal plaque incised with a cross was strung together with other rings and crosses on an iron torque worn by the child in tomb 1441 at Mostagedda. A second metal plaque, embossed with a figure interpreted as a saint, was placed on the body of another child, in tomb 1440 at the same site. Small crosses are embedded in the vegetal decoration carved on a wooden casket found next to the body of the female in tomb 1006 at Matmar (fig. 9). Apart from jewelry and accessories, two textiles present cross-like decorations. The first—probably a fragment of a decorative band on a tunic, buried with one of the dead in area 3900 at Mostagedda—has a pattern of round medallions with cross-like motifs.⁴⁴ The second, a woolen weave of unknown function accompanying the child in tomb 1012 at Matmar, features a similar pattern of oval and rosette medallions containing cross-like shapes surrounded by vegetal motifs (fig. 10). It is difficult to assess whether the cross-like motifs on the two textiles were understood as such, as they are not visually prominent but seem to be part of the decorative composition.⁴⁵

What precise role crosses played in tombs, and whether they marked the religious identity of the dead, acknowledged their devotion, or were apotropaic devices, is yet another problematic issue. Generally, wearing the cross was considered an act of piety and devotion toward God⁴⁶—in addition to offering protection against evil and all kinds of misfortune.⁴⁷ Most likely, their devotional and protective meanings were equally envisaged when they were placed in graves. The fact that crosses were believed to hold protective powers is apparent from their burial association with other items traditionally used for their apotropaic value. A lead pendant in the shape of a cross was placed on the body of the deceased in tomb 1844 at Mostagedda, together with other items, including two bells, commonly believed to have protective value and used especially for children (fig. 11).⁴⁸ In a few cases, crosses were associated with torques and bangles that were strung with pendants and rings.

FIGURE 9. Panels from a wooden casket found beside the legs of the female in tomb 1006 at Matmar, with crosses embedded in the decorative borders, 5th–6th century

Such was the case for the child in tomb 874 and the female buried in tomb 917 at Matmar. In tomb 1822 at Mostagedda, the set of items put on the child's body was considerably larger: an iron and a smaller copper alloy cross, an iron torque with four rings strung on it, an iron bracelet and a seal, and "three little disks of thin glass backed with plaster and set in lead." The three disks are probably mirrors,⁴⁹ of which other examples from burial contexts can be documented. A body in tomb 3203 at Matmar was found with a wooden mirror covered with plaster and fitted with a central glass piece. Similarly, a round wooden mirror found on the surface in the "Ptolemaic or early Roman" area 3900 at Mostagedda may very well belong to a Byzantine or later burial, considering the evidence provided by radiocarbon-dated textiles. Finally, a piece of plaster-backed glass encrusted on a plaster "human bust" was found beside the body of the female in tomb 1006 at Matmar, next to the casket with crosses mentioned above. This central glass piece may have functioned in a manner similar to mirrors, which, apart from being objects of personal grooming, were also believed to offer protection.⁵⁰ The precise chronology and meaning of the practice of providing the dead with glass-fitted objects cannot be precisely established from the evidence on-site. Generally, items of toiletry and personal adornment, including mirrors, are encountered in tombs at many other Egyptian sites,⁵¹ and may be connected with providing the deceased with all personal items needed in the afterlife. The custom dates to dynastic times and seems to have regained its popularity from early Roman times onward.⁵² A discussion about the joined use of crosses and traditional talismans in the context of what appears to be a Christian community, and how this practice should be interpreted, will occur later. At present, it is important to note that the practice of joining Christian symbols with traditional talismans and toiletry items is commonly found at

FIGURE 10. Red woolen textile with a decorative pattern of alternating medallions enclosing cross-like motifs, from a child's burial, tomb 1012, Matmar, 5th–6th century

such neighboring necropolises as Badari⁵³ and at numerous other sites, Fag el-Gamūs and Antinoopolis being two examples.⁵⁴

The presence of traditional talismans is by no means restricted to the graves containing Christian symbols. Reused dynastic scarabs, one phallic pendant, and a glass cylinder are only a few examples of pendants worn or placed on the bodies of the deceased (fig. 12).⁵⁵ Like jewelry and items of personal grooming, headgear with a symbolic meaning also was used. A sprang cap was placed next to the shoulder of a female in tomb 1414 at Mostagedda. Sprang caps were part of the everyday attire of adult women, indicating their married status—and possibly their motherhood. Sprang caps seem to be associated only with female burials, and their presence in young girls' burials has been connected with unattained adulthood and fertility.⁵⁶

In addition to items of dress and personal grooming, the vessels, broken or whole, placed in several tombs at both sites may have had a symbolic meaning. A broken glass “vase”—rather, a bowl—was placed over the feet of the male mummy in tomb 1410 at Mostagedda. The dead also had the lid of a basket placed over the pelvis, and the basket's body over the feet. Similarly, male mummies in tombs 1415 and 1421 at the same site had whole ceramic vessels placed near the head and over the pelvic area, respectively. Although these are the only three examples from the two sites, baskets and broken pots often were encountered in burial contexts elsewhere—at Kellis and Antinoopolis, for example.⁵⁷ Ceramic or glass vessels placed on the pelvic or feet areas of the deceased, whether broken purposely or not, were probably assumed to protect against the evil eye.

In sum, the deceased at the two sites often were provided with crosses meant to express their piety and devotion, which—together with other traditional apotropaic items, such as pendants and amulets, baskets and vessels—were also meant to protect them from danger and evil. Indicating (attained or unattained) adulthood and fertility appears to have been another concern of those burying their dead on-site. This situation, far from unique, is paralleled by similar customs at sites both in the vicinity and farther away, as the parallels above indicate.

FIGURE 11. Cross medallion, bells, and bead necklace belonging to the deceased buried in tomb 1844 at Mostagedda

FIGURE 12. Bead necklace with phallic pendant belonging to the child found in tomb 1027 at Matmar

Christian Burial Practices: An Archaeological Critique

The section above concentrated on the material evidence that demonstrates religious affiliation as well as the particular beliefs that may have prompted the use of artifacts with Christian or traditional symbolism. One further step in assessing the religious beliefs of the communities at Matmar and Mostagedda is to address those burial features that traditionally have been considered as providing indirect evidence for the (Christian) religious beliefs of the deceased, and to set them against the evidence available on-site.

Two features often connected with Christian burial practices are the orientation of the body on the east-west axis, with the head facing toward the west, and the supine position of the deceased. A connection between the emergence of Christianity and changes to the

orientation of the head has been suggested in relation to a number of cemeteries, among them Fag el-Gamūs—where the dead in “earlier” tombs were positioned with their heads toward the east, while those in later tombs almost always were placed with their heads toward the west⁶⁰—and el-Kom el-Aḥmar/Sharūna.⁶¹ The suggestion that a religious change may have led to the shift in tomb orientation at Fag el-Gamūs loses strength considering that the cemeteries are dated only approximately, to the second to seventh centuries, and that earlier burials are not dated with certainty. As for the same practice at el-Kom el-Aḥmar/Sharūna, comparative evidence points toward a less clear association between religious change and tomb orientation. Generally, many Christian tombs in other necropolises have other orientations, to such extent that cemeteries are thought to have lacked rules on orientation.⁶² A good proportion of the deceased buried in earlier tombs at Matmar and Mostagedda, dated to Ptolemaic or early Roman times—of which, as seen above, some may in fact date to early Islamic and Mamluk times—have their heads oriented westward. The head orientation of the five bodies buried after the end of the fourth century is not westward (see table 1). From what can be assessed based on the evidence of the ninety-six recorded tombs, the communities at Matmar and Mostagedda did not follow definitive norms related to the orientation of the dead, nor can the existence of Christian beliefs be clearly connected to a westward orientation of the head. What seems to best explain the situation is the continuation of a possibly centuries-old tradition regarding the orientation of the body.

Additional characteristics traditionally linked with Christianity are the enlargement of the head and feet areas and the fastening of the wrapped body with criss-cross bandages.⁶³ The head area was deemed important and received special attention at all times in Egyptian history. Earlier anthropoid sarcophagi had enlarged head and feet sections,⁶⁴ which suggests that, far from being innovative, the augmentation of these areas in late antique burials may have continued this tradition. Similarly, plain, uncolored crisscross bandages were used in earlier Egyptian times. Although colored, purpose-woven bands replaced these earlier versions, the practice can be equally explained as a continuation of the earlier tradition.

TABLE 1. Deceased position and orientation at the late antique and early Islamic necropolises of Matmar and Mostagedda

<i>Deceased position and orientation</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>AD (F, M, NK sex)</i>	<i>NK age and sex</i>	<i>Total number tombs</i>
<i>Head W</i>	45	16	2	20	2	67
<i>Head N</i>	1	-	-	-	-	1
<i>Head E</i>	1	-	-	-	-	1
<i>Head S</i>	2	-	1	1	-	3
<i>NK orientation</i>	19	4	1	6	-	24
<i>Supine position, hands placed on pelvis</i>	19	4	-	4	-	23
<i>Supine position, hands beside body</i>	4	1	-	1	-	5
<i>On right side, hands placed on pelvis</i>	-	1	-	1	-	1
<i>NK position</i>	36	15	4	20	3	67

TABLE 2. Personal adornments and grave goods at the late antique and early Islamic necropolises of Matmar and Mostagedda

<i>Item⁵⁸</i>	<i>Total number items</i>	<i>Number of graves</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>MA</i>	<i>FA</i>	<i>Worn</i>	<i>Deposited</i>	<i>Unknown position</i>
<i>Necklaces⁵⁹ (incl. pendant necklaces)</i>	71	62	57	11	1	8	13	5	53
<i>Bracelets</i>	≥138	37	≥80	≥52	-	≥45	90	≥ 18	≥30
<i>Earrings</i>	68	37	45	16	-	16	19	-	49
<i>Rings</i>	≥69	18	≥28	≥41	2	≥37	8	≥43	≥18
<i>Vessels (pottery, glass, wood, bone, basketry)</i>	7	6	2	5	4	1	-	6	1
<i>Mirrors</i>	4	1	3	1		1		4	-
<i>Items with inserted glass</i>	1	1	-	1	-	1	-	1	-
<i>Shoes (numbered individually)</i>	27	6	8	19	-	19	10	17	-
<i>Hairpins</i>	3	3	-	3	-	3	1	1	1
<i>Items bearing crosses</i>	27	17	15	10	-	9	5	4	18
<i>Coins</i>	8	4	8	-	-	-	-	-	8

The differentiation between Christians and “pagans” is sometimes made on the basis of separated cemeteries. Much academic effort has been devoted to the identification of pagan versus Christian cemeteries, to the extent that switching to a new place for burying the deceased is assumed to have been the result of Christianization. While there are good reasons to believe that “pagan” cemeteries were at times abandoned in favor of burial in a newly confined Christian area, as was the case in fourth- to fifth-century Kel-lis,⁶⁵ the custom finds little support from written sources, or from the evidence at other sites. The Christian Church did not develop a specific burial liturgy or rules related to burial until roughly the seventh to eighth centuries, leaving the practice under the care of the deceased’s family. Moreover, it also kept silent with regards to mixed burials of pagans and Christians.⁶⁶ Numerous other cemeteries, such as those at Hawāra, el-Bagawāt, and Qarāra, exhibit side by side pagan and Christian burials.⁶⁷ The distribution of graves at Matmar and Mostagedda suggests that several necropolises were in use concomitantly, and that older necropolises were not automatically abandoned when communities shifted to the use of new burial grounds. At Mostagedda, areas 400, 500, 800, 1100, and 3900 were used for burial during Ptolemaic and early Roman times. The graves from the end of the fourth century and later were found especially in areas 1400, 1800, 1900, 3900, 10100, and 11700. However, graves from these dates were also found in areas with earlier cemeteries—800, 1100, and 3900—which demonstrates that the community used previous burial grounds while expanding into new areas. The situation is similar at Matmar. The “Late Dynastic and Ptolemaic” burials occupied areas 300, 400, 800, 2000, and 5200; post-fourth-century burials occupied new areas, such as 900, 1000, 1100, and 3200, while continuing in area 800. Although it is possible that new burial grounds were used by Christians at Matmar and

Mostagedda, several areas were clearly in use from as early as the Ptolemaic period until well after the Arab conquest of Egypt.

Finally, the absence of grave goods and adornments is sometimes connected with the desire to express piety and modesty—and, through these qualities, with Christianity.⁶⁸ However, tombs at various other sites assumed to be Christian exhibit a good number of grave goods and jewelry, generally in line with older customs of burial from Ptolemaic and Roman times.⁶⁹ The Matmar and Mostagedda burials of both earlier and later times contain a standardized selection of grave goods, to which the tombs with Christian symbolism are no exception. It seems more reasonable to link the absence of grave goods to the lower financial means of the deceased than to an expressed desire for piety and modesty.

Syncretic Practices

The previous discussion analyzed burial practices that archaeological scholarship commonly associates with Christianity, and suggested that such associations find limited support at Matmar and Mostagedda, where the main motivation for a number of practices seems to have been the continuation of older burial traditions. An overview of the characteristics of the Matmar and Mostagedda cemeteries, as well as the burial practices and expressions of belief on-site, is appropriate at this point. The burials are spread over approximately four centuries at Matmar, and over more than five centuries at Mostagedda, ranging from the end of the fourth to the beginning of the ninth century. Although the earliest burials date to a period of the rapid expansion of Christianity, while the latest may have been contemporary to the first conversions to Islam,⁷⁰ the burial practices are relatively uniform with regards to orientation, wrapping process, and the types and position of grave goods. Not only do they echo local burial features from Ptolemaic and early Roman times, they share similarities with burials from other contemporary sites mentioned above. The care in providing the deceased—at least those whose tombs were recorded—with items of jewelry, toiletry, and textiles is striking when compared to the rare expression of a clear-cut religious affiliation: no burial was readily “pagan,” while only seventeen contained clear Christian symbols, namely crosses. The use of items corresponding to traditional religious practices is a recurring feature, to which tombs with Christian symbols present no exception.

How can the religious background of the Matmar and Mostagedda communities be better characterized? What were the reasons for using traditional apotropaic items—pendants, amulets, vessels and baskets, glass-encrusted objects, and mirrors—sometimes in conjunction with the use of explicitly Christian items? Finally, is the distinction between these two classes of objects—“traditional” and “Christian”—valid for the analysis of local religious beliefs? In order to respond to such questions, the situation at Matmar and Mostagedda must be placed in the larger context of religious change in late antique Egypt. Second, the usefulness of the distinction “traditional” versus “Christian” must be addressed.

It often has been stressed that, while adhering to the new religion, Egyptian Christians retained aspects of their previous beliefs and practices—and felt no apparent inhibition in doing so. The use of amulets, talismans, and magic spells during this period reveals a continuation of earlier practices,⁷¹ as does the partial survival of pagan festivals, some of which continued well into the sixth century under the tacit acceptance of the Church and were attended by Christians and non-Christians alike. Interestingly, Éric Rebillard has suggested, based on the concept of ethnical groupness, that during the fourth to fifth

centuries Christians embraced their Christian identity intermittently, precisely in those situations in which doing so was advantageous. In other words, Christianness was not “the common framework of interpretation for everyday experience.”⁷² In light of recent archaeological work, paganism does not appear to have been completely eradicated over the course of the fourth and fifth centuries. Although official pagan veneration in temples stopped de facto in the fourth century, and was banned early in the fifth century,⁷³ forms of pagan adoration survived in local and domestic spheres,⁷⁴ then in a “Christianized” form, throughout the sixth century.⁷⁵ Despite the Church Fathers frequently being outspoken against such practices, the Church tolerated and used them to strengthen its position within local communities. Christian priests took over the charismatic role of their pagan counterparts, manufacturing amulets and other devices meant for the day to day comfort and protection of their flock.⁷⁶ Turning from the general to the local, the religious practices of communities in villages such as Matmar and Mostagedda were closely related to the realities of agricultural life, and were directed toward solving the challenges of the everyday: birth, marriage, death, maintaining good health, providing for families, the success of crops.

A differentiation between traditional apotropaic items and Christian items is a useful analytic tool, yet its application can foster distinctions that may have not existed. Most likely, the people of Matmar and Mostagedda—villagers concerned with quotidian activities, most of them situated toward the poorer end of the economic spectrum—were unaware that their practices were officially contradictory. According to the logic of efficacy and piety, items that appealed to tradition provided security and favor, benefitting their users much in the way that Christian symbols did. A more suitable term to describe the mingling of religious beliefs in this case is “syncretism,” understood as the ongoing mixture and bricolage of different religious traditions.⁷⁷ The examples of Matmar and Mostagedda demonstrate that assessing clear-cut religious identities, and tracing boundaries between “traditional” and “Christian,” reveals little about the religious universe of these communities. Put differently, case studies such as Matmar and Mostagedda can be fruitfully explored by focusing on the process of religious bricolage, its transformation through time, and its expressions at the level of the individual. It is in this direction that it can “serve the larger questions of Christianization and cultural transformation.”⁷⁸

ALEXANDRA D. PLEȘA, MPhil (Leiden), 2012, is a PhD student in the Department of Arts, History, and Ancient Studies of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. She is interested in the art and material culture of the late antique and medieval Middle East as a tool for inquiring into larger economic, social, and religious phenomena. Her particular focus is the study of textiles from Egypt. Since 2014 she has been a textile archaeologist for the Berenike Project. E-mail: plesa.alexandra@gmail.com

Notes

1 In this study, the terms “late antique” and “early Islamic” are used strictly in a chronological sense. “Late antique” refers to the period roughly between the fourth and the eighth century CE, and “early Islamic”

to the first three centuries after the Arab conquest of Egypt, from the mid-seventh to the ninth century CE.

2 See, for example, Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of Early Christians* (New York:

- T&T Clark, 2009); and Luke Lavan, "Introduction. The End of the Temples: Towards a New Narrative?," in *The Archaeology of Late Antique "Paganism,"* ed. Luke Lavan and Michael Mulryan (Leiden: Brill, 2011), xv–lxv.
- 3 As, for example, Jitse H. F. Dijkstra, *Philae and the End of Ancient Egyptian Religion: A Regional Study of Religious Transformation (298–642 CE)*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta (Leuven: Peeters, 2008).
 - 4 As in Éric Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).
 - 5 Substantial contributions were made in Eunice Maguire, Henry Maguire, and M. Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Lise Bender Jørgensen, "A Matter of Material: Changes in Textiles from Roman Sites in Egypt's Eastern Desert," *Antiquité Tardive* 12 (2004): 87–99; and Kristi Upson-Saia, *Early Christian Dress: Gender, Virtue, and Authority* (New York: Routledge, 2011).
 - 6 Guy Brunton, *Mostagedda and the Tasian Culture*, British Museum Expedition to Middle Egypt (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1937), i.
 - 7 27°06'26.2"N 31°19'43.1"E—27°03'21.8"N 31°25'05.0"E.
 - 8 This assessment is based on Brunton's grave descriptions.
 - 9 Brunton is known to have reburied pottery at Qaw and Badari; see Guy Brunton, *Qau and Badari I* (London: British School of Archaeology in Egypt, 1927), 5.
 - 10 Brunton appears to have donated artifacts from Mostagedda later on. Ten late antique textiles were given to the Victoria & Albert Museum, then were transferred to the Bolton Museum. See a letter from Guy Brunton to A. J. B. Wace, June 14, 1928, Victoria & Albert Museum Archive. After the death of her husband, Winifred Brunton donated a series of Mostagedda artifacts to the Bloemfontein Museum in South Africa. Soudré Havenga, head of the collections management department, e-mail message to the author, January 15, 2016.
 - 11 The following discussion is based to a large extent on Brunton's descriptions in *Mostagedda and the Tasian Culture*, 139–42 and plates 82–83; and Guy Brunton, *Matmar*, British Museum Expedition to Middle Egypt (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1948), 91–96 and plates 66–69.
 - 12 The assessment was made by reviewing Brunton, *Mostagedda and the Tasian Culture*, 139–42; and Brunton, *Matmar*, 91–96.
 - 13 Brunton, *Mostagedda and the Tasian Culture*, 139.
 - 14 Twenty samples from burial textiles preserved in the Bolton Museum, seven from Matmar and thirteen from Mostagedda, were sent for radiocarbon dating at the laboratory of the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage in Brussels. For the method used, see Mark Van Strydonck and K. Van der Borg, "The Construction of a Preparation Line for Ams-Targets at the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage," *Bulletin Koninklijk Instituut voor Kunstpatrimonium* 23 (1990–91): 228–34; and Mathieu Boudin et al., "Rich—A New Ams Facility at the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, Brussels, Belgium," *Nuclear Instruments and Methods in Physics Research Section B: Beam Interactions with Materials and Atoms* 361 (2015): 120–23. The results are not yet published.
 - 15 A polychrome tapestry band with a cross-like decoration (Bolton Museum, 1933.30.27) has been radiocarbon-dated to 1275±31BP (660–780 CE, RICH-23556, 95.4%). The other two textiles, a sky-blue, fringed shawl of wool (Bolton Museum, 1956.30.33) and a 2/2 twill textile of wool (Bolton Museum, 1930.56.12), have been radiocarbon-dated to 634±28BP (1280–1400 CE, RICH-23467, 95.4%) and to 614±28BP (1290–1410 CE, RICH-23469, 95.4%), respectively.
 - 16 The range of radiocarbon dates for the ten textile samples from Mostagedda corresponding to burials in areas 1400 to 11700 is 630 to 780 CE. Only one textile (Bolton Museum, 1930.56.24) dates to an earlier time, 1586±34BP (390–550 CE, RICH-23470, 95.4%). Textiles were often in use long before burial, so it is probable that the tombs in which they were placed date to later times.
 - 17 A considerable number of tunics with applied decorative bands have been radiocarbon-dated in recent years. For a comprehensive summary, see Christina T. Rooijakkers, "Dress Norms and Markers: A Comparative Study of Coptic Identity and Dress in the Past and Present" (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2016), 1:180 and 2:47, fig. 9.2.
 - 18 Examples of this type are the tunic of a child buried in tomb 1881 (Bolton Museum, 1930.56.43) and a tunic of unknown findspot from area 1800 (Bolton Museum, 1930.56.53, 1324±31BP/31BP/650–770 CE, RICH-23453, 95.4%). Tailored tunics with widened bottoms were produced between the seventh and the tenth century; see Frances Pritchard, *Clothing Culture: Dress in Egypt in the First Millenium AD. Clothing from Egypt in the Collection of the Whithworth Art Gallery, the University of Manchester* (Manchester: University of Manchester, 2006), 115, fig. 4.52. A child's tunic similar to 1930.56.43, located in the Whithworth Gallery, has

- been tentatively dated on stylistic grounds to the seventh to eighth century; see Pritchard, *Clothing Culture*, 102–4, fig. 4.46.
- 19 Brunton, *Mostagedda and the Tasian Culture*, plates 82–83.
 - 20 Examples are four textiles stored in the Bolton Museum, including a fragment tentatively identified as a cushion cover (1931.46.5), a fragment of a shawl (1931.46.7), and another furnishing textile (1931.46.12, 1738±29BP/230–390 CE, RICH-23471, 95.4%), all without a known findspot. The fourth example (1931.46.10) comes from an unidentified grave in area 800. The flying needle technique was used in the decoration of textiles from the third to the seventh century. The style is generally divided into two chronological groups: from the third to the beginning of the fifth century, and from the fifth to the end of the sixth century; see Mark Van Strydonck, Antoine De Moor, and Dominique Bénazeth, “¹⁴C Dating Compared to Art Historical Dating of Roman and Coptic Textiles from Egypt,” *Radiocarbon* 46, no. 1 (2004): 231–44. All Matmar pieces are similar in technique and quality to the earlier group.
 - 21 Based on Ramez Boutros and Christian Décobert’s survey, Bianca Tudor states that the “pottery analysis by P. Ballet showed that the Coptic settlement of Matmar existed until the end of the seventh century AD.” The pottery under discussion comes from the monastery of Deir al-Matmar, close to Armant and some two hundred kilometers south of Matmar, with which it was confused. See Bianca Tudor, *Christian Funerary Stelae of the Byzantine and Arab Periods from Egypt* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2011), 77; and Ramez Boutros and Christian Décobert, “Les installations chrétiennes entre Ballas et Armant: implantation et survivance,” in *Études Coptes VII: neuvième journée d’études, Montpellier 3–4 Juin 1999*, ed. Nathalie Bosson (Paris, Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 87.
 - 22 Fourteen textiles arranged in three different layers were used to wrap the body of a male buried sometime between the fifth and the sixth century at Deir el-Banat; see Olga V. Orfinskaya et al., “Textiles from Burial 213 in Deir El-Banat,” in *Textiles, Tools and Techniques of the 1st Millennium AD from Egypt and the Neighbouring Countries. Proceedings of the 8th Conference of the Research Group “Textiles from the Nile Valley” Antwerp, 4–6 October 2013*, ed. Antoine De Moor, Căcilia Fluck, and Petra Linscheid (Tiel: Lannoo, 2015), 39–40. An average of four shrouds per mummy was used in the cemetery of Qarara, according to Béatrice Huber, “Qarara: une affaire de linéals,” in De Moor, Fluck, and Linscheid, *Textiles, Tools and Techniques*, 15.
 - 23 Most burials in area 600 at Matmar were “wrapped in red and white criss-crossed bandages.” Mentions of crisscross bandages also appear for tombs 826, 1040, 1045, and 1301 at Matmar. See Brunton, *Matmar*, 91–96.
 - 24 Kristin H. South, “Minor Burial Textiles and Religious Affiliation: An Archaeological Case Study from Roman Egypt,” in *Dressing the Dead in Classical Antiquity*, ed. Maureen Carroll and John Peter Wild (Stroud: Amberley, 2012), 62–74; and Kristin H. South and Kerry M. Muhlestein, “Regarding Ribbons: The Spread and Use of Narrow Purpose-Woven Bands in Late Roman Egyptian Burials,” in *Drawing the Threads Together: Textiles and Footwear of the 1st Millennium AD from Egypt. Proceedings of the 7th Conference of the Research Group “Textiles from the Nile Valley,” Antwerp, 7–9 October 2011*, ed. Antoine De Moor, Căcilia Fluck, and Petra Linscheid (Tiel: Lannoo, 2013), 56–73.
 - 25 Béatrice Huber, “The Textiles of an Early Christian Burial from El-Kom El-Aḥmar/Šaruna (Middle Egypt),” in *Methods of Dating Ancient Textiles of the 1st Millennium AD from Egypt and Neighbouring Countries. Proceedings of the 4th Meeting of the Study Group “Textiles from the Nile Valley,” Antwerp, 16–17 April 2005*, ed. Antoine De Moor, Căcilia Fluck, and Susanne Martinssen-von Falck (Tiel: Lannoo, 2007), 36–66.
 - 26 Reed stalks and palm leaves are mentioned in the descriptions of tombs 882 at Matmar and 1410, 1411, and 1881 at Mostagedda.
 - 27 Tomb 1006 at Matmar. For a mummy wrapped in matting, see tomb 1033 at Matmar. The child in tomb 1132 at Mostagedda, however, was placed on a mat with one edge folded to serve as pillow.
 - 28 Brunton, *Mostagedda and the Tasian Culture*, 139–40.
 - 29 According to the register of Coptic graves in Brunton, *Matmar*, plate 67, and the corpus of body attitudes in Brunton, *Qau and Badari I*, plate 25.
 - 30 At Dūsh, in the Kharga Oasis, an early fourth-century grave contained the body of a seven-year-old girl, naked and wrapped in shrouds; see Fleur Letellier-Willemin, “The Embroidered Tunic of Dush—a New Approach,” in De Moor, Fluck, and Linscheid, *Drawing the Threads Together*, 23. During the first phase of the el-Deir cemetery, dating from the mid-third to the early fifth century, the deceased were buried naked, then covered with textiles (garments or furnishing items) and wrapped in shrouds; see Fleur Letellier-Willemin, “The Long- and Narrow-sleeved Tunic of the Mummy W14 of El-Deir,” in De Moor,

- Fluck, and Linscheid, *Textiles, Tools and Techniques*, 26–37.
- 31 See, for example, the attire of the male in tomb 1410 at Mostagedda.
- 32 The neck slit of the tunic was sewn. It is unclear whether this was done on the occasion of the burial or earlier.
- 33 Tombs 1410, 1800(ii), and 11713 at Mostagedda and 1006 at Matmar.
- 34 The mummy in tomb 811 at Mostagedda had her head wrapped with a blue and red “scarf.”
- 35 Tombs 1414 and 10109 at Mostagedda and tomb 3203 at Matmar.
- 36 Stephan Seidlmayer, “Wirtschaftliche und gesellschaftliche Entwicklung im Übergang vom Alten zum Mittleren Reich,” in *Problems and Priorities in Egyptian Archaeology*, ed. Vivian Davies, Jan Assmann, and Günter Burkard (London: KPI, 1987), 188.
- 37 The pace of conversion to Christianity in Egypt has been the subject of enduring discussion over the last decades. In his pioneering article, Roger Bagnall argued, on the basis of onomastic evidence, that Christianity grew vigorously during the fourth century, from about twenty percent to over ninety percent by 400; see Roger S. Bagnall, “Religious Conversion and Onomastic Change in Early Byzantine Egypt,” *The Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 19, no. 3–4 (1982): 105–24. In 1987 he proposed a less steep curve of conversion, from about sixty percent in the middle of the fourth century to about eighty-eight percent in the early fifth; see Roger S. Bagnall, “Conversion and Onomastics: A Reply,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 69 (1987): 243–50. His approach generated lively responses and engendered new studies. Recently, Mark Depauw and Willy Clarysse have further refined the method based on newly available data. Their results point toward a more gradual, though steady, conversion to Christianity, from twenty to thirty percent by the time of Constantine to around seventy percent by 380, and more than ninety percent in the mid-fifth century; see Mark Depauw and Willy Clarysse, “How Christian Was Fourth-Century Egypt? Onomastic Perspectives on Conversion,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 67, no. 4 (2013): 407–35. For criticism of the onomastic approach, see David Frankfurter, “Onomastic Statistics and the Christianization of Egypt: A Response to Depauw and Clarysse,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 68, no. 3 (2014): 284–89.
- 38 Lavan, “Introduction: The End of the Temples.”
- 39 Brunton, *Mostagedda and the Tasian Culture*, 2.
- 40 Brunton, *Mostagedda and the Tasian Culture*, 139.
- 41 Brunton, *Matmar*, 94 and plate 66, 12.
- 42 Brunton found three chapels: in cemetery 300, south of Qaw, and in cemeteries 400 and 5500 at Badari. See *Qau and Badari III*, British School of Archaeology in Egypt (London: British School of Archaeology in Egypt, 1930), 30–31 and plate I.
- 43 Jochem Kahl, *Ancient Asyut: The First Synthesis after 300 Years of Research* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2007).
- 44 Bolton Museum, 1930.33.27.
- 45 Rooijakkers discusses at length the difficulty of assessing the meaning of cross motifs on garments and concludes that while some may have had Christian or apotropaic symbolism, crosses were also included merely as ornaments. See Christina T. Rooijakkers, “A Cross or the Cross? Crosses on Egyptian Garments from the Late Roman and Byzantine Period,” in *Ornamentik in Spätantike Und Byzanz*, ed. Yvonne Petrina-Stolz and Antje Bosselmann-Ruickbie (forthcoming).
- 46 Brigitte Pitarakis, “Objects of Protection and Devotion,” in *A People’s History of Christianity*, vol. 3, *Byzantine Christianity*, ed. Derek Krueger (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 164–68.
- 47 Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers*, 18–22.
- 48 The habit of hanging bells on strings worn by children was so common that it drew the criticism of John Chrysostom; see John Chrysostom, “Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians. Homily XII 1 Cor. IV. 6,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series*, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1889), 71.
- 49 For Roman glass mirrors backed with plaster, see William M. Flinders Petrie, *Objects of Daily Use. With over 1800 Figures from University College, London*, British School of Archaeology in Egypt (London, 1927), 32 and plate 29.
- 50 Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers*, 7.
- 51 A mummy of a girl dating to about 100–120 CE, found at Hawāra, was provided with two copper mirrors with wood casings, placed on the stomach and above the right breast, respectively; see Susan Walker et al., *Ancient Faces: Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt* (London: British Museum Press, 1997), 83.
- 52 Wolfram Grajetzki, *Burial Customs in Ancient Egypt: Life in Death for Rich and Poor* (London: Duckworth, 2003), 128.

- 53 In area 600 at Badari, a child was found wearing a string with a cross and a much earlier, reused figurine of the god Bes. Similarly, a pendant in the shape of the Eye of Horus was found associated with wood and glass beads of the "Coptic" period; see Brunton, *Qau and Badari III*, 27 and plates 45–47.
- 54 Joyce Y. Smith et al., "Jewelry and Accessories from Two Christian Burials from Fag El Gamous Cemetery in Fayum Region, Egypt," in *Dress Accessories of the 1st Millenium AD from Egypt. Proceedings of the 6th Conference of the Research Group "Textiles from the Nile Valley," Antwerp, 2–3 October 2009*, ed. Antoine De Moor and Cécilia Fluck (Tiel: Lannoo, 2011), 167–220. The famous Thais was buried with a wooden cross and a basket placed upside down on her face; see Dominique Bénazeth, "From Thais to Thais: Reconsidering Her Burial in Antinopolis (Egypt)," in *Textiles in Situ: Their Find Spots in Egypt and Neighbouring Countries in the First Millenium CE*, ed. Sabine Schrenk and Nettie K. Addams (Riggsberg: Abegg Stiftung, 2006).
- 55 A steatite scarab was included in the necklace worn by the child buried in tomb 840 at Matmar; the glass cylinder was found in tomb 1013, whereas the phallic pendant was strung on the necklace of the child in tomb 1027 at the same site.
- 56 Petra Linscheid, *Frühbyzantinische textile Kopfbedeckungen: Typologie, Verarbeitung, Chronologie, und soziologischer Kontext nach Originalfunden* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2011), 54–55.
- 57 Michael Birrell, "Excavations in the Cemeteries of Ismant El-Kharab," in *Dakleh Oasis Project: Preliminary Reports on the 1992–1993 and 1993–1994 Field Seasons*, ed. Colin A. Hope and A. J. Mills, Dakleh Oasis Project (Oxford, Oakville: Oxbow Books, 1999), 41. See also Bénazeth, "From Thais to Thais."
- 58 Plundered graves (tomb 10100 at Mostagedda and 623 at Matmar) are not taken into account. When the burial location is known, the item is listed in the column "deposited"; when an item is acknowledged to have been worn, it appears in the column "worn"; items lacking a documented position are listed under "unknown position"; when items originally described in the plural could be identified within surviving museum material or in archival documents, the number of surviving museum objects is indicated as the minimum (when no additional information was found, items referred to in the plural in the publication are understood as minimum two); finally, children are marked "C" and adults "A." Further, male adults are listed as "MA," female adults as "FA," and the abbreviation "NK" refers to "not known" position, sex, etc.
- 59 The category "necklaces" encompasses adornments strung around the neck: bead necklaces, strings with pendants, and metal torques. "Bracelets" encompasses items designed to adorn the arms, such as strings of beads, with or without pendants, and bangles, all irrespective of their material.
- 60 South, "Minor Burial Textiles and Religious Affiliation," 62.
- 61 See Huber, "The Textiles of an Early Christian Burial from El-Kom El-Aḥmar/Šaruna (Middle Egypt)," 49: "the position of the body [of an adult mummy] as expressed in orientation and in dorsal extension correspond to the Christian burial rites of the time."
- 62 For a larger discussion on the orientation of the deceased and religious affiliation, see Françoise Dunand, "Between Tradition and Innovation: Egyptian Funerary Practices in Late Antiquity," in *Egypt in the Byzantine World, 300–700*, ed. Roger S. Bagnall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 174.
- 63 South and Muhlestein, "Regarding Ribbons."
- 64 See examples of such sarcophagi dating to Ptolemaic and early Roman times in Christina Riggs, *The Beautiful Burial in Roman Egypt: Art, Identity, and Funerary Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 84, and figs. 32, 82, and 171.
- 65 Gillian E. Bowen, "Some Observations on Christian Burial Practices at Kellis," in *The Oasis Papers 3. Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the Dakleh Oasis Project*, ed. Gillian E. Bowen and Colin A. Hope (Oxford: Oxbow, 2003).
- 66 On liturgical developments, see Jon Davies, *Death, Burial and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999), 191. On the silence of Church authorities related to the issue of mixed burial, see Éric Rebillard, *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).
- 67 For a synthesis, see Dunand, "Between Tradition and Innovation."
- 68 See Bowen, "Some Observations on Christian Burial Practices at Kellis," 179. Although generally reserved about labeling the dead from cemetery 2 at Kellis as Christian, Bowen appears to explain the lack of grave goods in view of conformation to Christian values.
- 69 Dunand, "Between Tradition and Innovation," 180.
- 70 Traditionally, it has been proposed that the first massive Coptic conversion to Islam occurred during the early ninth century; see Gabriel Hanotaux and Gaston Wiet, *Histoire de la nation égyptienne. IV: L'Égypte arabe de la conquête arabe à la conquête ottomane*

642–1517 de l'ère chrétienne (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1937); and Ira M. Lapidus, "The Conversion of Egypt to Islam," *Israel Oriental Studies* 2 (1972): 248–62. More recently, the thesis has been challenged by Tamer el-Leithy, "Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo, 1293–1524 A.D." (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2005).

- 71 Walter M. Shandruk, "Christian Use of Magic in Late Antique Egypt," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20, no. 1 (2012): 31–57.
- 72 Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 91.
- 73 See the discussion about the pagan cults at Philae, which, contrary to what was generally thought, ended soon after 457 CE, in Dijkstra, *Philae and the End of Ancient Egyptian Religion*. Also Lavan, "Introduction: The End of the Temples"; and Mark J. Johnson, "Pagan-Christian Burial Practices of the Fourth Century: Shared Tombs?," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1997): 44.
- 74 David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
- 75 Lavan, "Introduction: The End of the Temples," lii–lvi.
- 76 Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, 267–71.
- 77 The concept of syncretism has become increasingly popular in the social sciences over the last decades; see, for example, Charles Stewart, "Relocating Syncretism in the Social Science Discourse," in *Syncretism and the Commerce of Symbols*, ed. Göran Aijmer (Göteborg: The Institute for Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology, 1995), 13–37; and Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, "Introduction: Problematizing Syncretism," in *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, ed. Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), 1–24.
- 78 David Frankfurter, "Syncretism and the Holy Man in Late Antique Egypt," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11, no. 3 (2003): 342.

Figure Credits

Figure 1. General map of Egypt, including the sites mentioned in the text. © 2016 Google, Inst. Geogr. Nacional, Mapa GISrael, ORION-ME

Figure 2. Brunton's excavations north of Mostagedda. Reconstruction of the published map overlapping the contemporary site. Background image: © 2016 DigitalGlobe, Map data © 2016 Google, ORION-ME

Figure 3. Brunton's excavations south of Mostagedda. Reconstruction of the published map overlapping the contemporary site. Background image: © 2016 DigitalGlobe, Map data © 2016 Google, ORION-ME

Figure 4. Brunton's excavations at Matmar. Partial reconstruction of the published map overlapping the contemporary site. Background image: © 2016 DigitalGlobe, Map data © 2016 Google, ORION-ME

Figure 5. Fragments of a woolen tunic from tomb 1800(ii) at Mostagedda, belonging to a child aged 12, 6th–8th century. Bolton Museum, inv. nos. 1930.56.22 (1) and 1930.56.57.13 (2). © Bolton Council, the collections of Bolton Museum. Photograph by Alexandra D. Pleșa

Figure 6. Proposed reconstruction of the sleeveless tunic belonging to the child buried in tomb 10106 at Mostagedda. Bottom left: detail of the sewn neck slit. Radiocarbon-dated to 1586±34BP (390–550 CE, RICH-23470, 95.4%). Bolton Museum, inv. nos. 1930.56.23.1–2, 1930.56.24.1–4, and 1930.56.26. © Bolton Council, the collections of Bolton Museum. Photograph by Alexandra D. Pleșa

Figure 7. Fragments of a pair of leather shoes belonging to the female buried in tomb 1006 at Matmar, 5th–6th century. Staatliches Museum für Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich, inv. no. AS 3253. © Staatliches Museum für Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich. Photograph by Alexandra D. Pleșa

Figure 8. Reconstruction of the surviving burial dress belonging to the child in tomb 1881 at Mostagedda. Fragments of two tunics (1 and 2), wool strands wrapped around the head (3), and headband (4). Bolton Museum, inv. nos. 1930.56.19 and 1930.56.39 (1), 1930.56.43 (2), 1930.56.16 and 1930.56.31.1–2 (3), and 1930.56.38 (4). Inv. no. 1930.56.16 was radiocarbon-dated to 1342±29BP (640–770 CE), RICH-23476, 95.4%. © Bolton Council, the collections of Bolton Museum. Photograph by Alexandra D. Pleșa

Figure 9. Panels from a wooden casket found beside the legs of the female in tomb 1006 at Matmar, with crosses embedded in the decorative borders, 5th–6th century. © Brunton Photographic Archive, The Griffith Institute, University of Oxford, photo. no. 444

Figure 10. Red woolen textile with a decorative pattern of alternating medallions enclosing cross-like motifs, from a child's burial, tomb 1012, Matmar, 5th–6th century. Staatliches Museum für Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich, inv. no. AS 3268. © Staatliches Museum für Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich. Photograph by Alexandra D. Pleșa

Figure 11. Cross medallion, bells, and bead necklace belonging to the deceased buried in tomb 1844 at Mostagedda. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford University,

inv. nos. 1930.460 (1), 1930.461 (2), and 1930.465 (3). © The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford University. Photograph by Alexandra D. Pleșa

Figure 12. Bead necklace with phallic pendant belonging to the child found in tomb 1027 at Matmar. Petrie

Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London, inv. no. 59790. © The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London. Photograph by Alexandra D. Pleșa