ARTICLE 1

Gnosis from the Silk Roads: Exploring the Medieval Lifestyle of Littlemore Priory, Oxford, Through Monastic Archaeology

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Abstract

Christianity spread both eastward and westward along the Silk Roads, leading to an exchange of worship practices and liturgies over centuries. The fusion of lifestyle and monasticism might have been evident in the medieval English priories if most were not in a poor state of preservation. The present study investigates the medieval way of life at Littlemore Priory and its connections to the Silk Roads exchange of religious customs. It examines non-metrical traits linked with habitual kneeling to determine if the community practised religious rituals. It also evaluates funerary inclusions to shed light on the social status of the group. No significant difference was found in the incidence of kneeling facets between the Littlemore assemblage and non-church burials from Scalloway cemetery, although the results might have been skewed with a small sample size. Mortuary practices implied a high social status of the individuals buried within the church grounds. The historical accounts indicated that nunneries were used for social purposes that were disallowed by Benedictine rule, leading to the merging of religious and secular lifestyles. The study serves as a foundation for further research on this isolated and under-researched topic.

Keywords: Silk Roads Exchange, Christianity, Monastic Lifestyle, Genuflection

ARTICLE 2

Patterns of Mortuary Practice Associated with Ethnoreligious Genocides of the Silk Roads: The Use of Bacterial Necrobiome in Investigating Mass Burials

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Abstract

Whilst previous contributions have mainly focused on the forensic aspects of investigating mass graves, this study presents a microbial technique for interpreting the postmortem history of buried remains. The case study model is the first in a series of taphonomic reconstructions that focus on the role of bacteria in the decay of detached body parts. The domestic pig (*Sus scrofa*) heads, legs, and pork belly were used to model human decay. Measurement of body mass loss was supported by a series of experiments that included soil pH, the microbiological activity of soil bacteria, Total Viable Count, and Gram stain analysis. It was hypothesised that temperature and soil moisture would not make a significant impact on the decay rates of animal body parts. The findings demonstrated that: 1) mostly Gram-negative bacteria were involved in the decay; 2) microbial decomposers were higher in numbers in higher temperature and soil moisture settings; 3) animal heads and feet decomposed at different rates. The results add to the current body of published work by providing a decomposition pattern specifically for detached and/or commingled body parts that form an essential part of mass burials. This is significant as no previous microbial experiments have been conducted on a larger scale to aid methods in recovery, analysis and identification of the victims of genocide.

Keywords: *Sus scrofa*, Necrobiome, Yazidi genocide, Buried body parts, Conflict archaeology

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ARTICLE 3

Patterns of Mortuary Practice Associated with Ethnoreligious Genocides of the Silk Roads: The Impact of Wrapping on the Decomposition of Body Parts

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Abstract

Body part detachments caused by accelerated decay, as well as dismemberments, may alter the growth and activity of the microbial necrobiome in the absence of necessary gastrointestinal organs. The effect of depositional settings on the decomposition of individual body parts is, in addition, inadequately researched, leaving long-term implications for the recovery of mass grave remains. The present study is the second in a sequence of taphonomic reconstructions focusing on the role of microbial necrobiome in the decay of detached body parts. It assessed the early decomposition of wrapped remains using the domestic pig (*Sus scrofa*) as an animal analogue. The aim was to evaluate how the remains decompose under differing temperature levels, as tested by Total Viable Count, Gram stain, body part mass loss and gross morphological changes of soft tissue. It was hypothesised that an increase in temperature would not result in an increased decomposition rate. Statistical analyses yielded significant differences in biomass loss between the two microenvironments. The results further demonstrated differential decomposition between body parts and indicated that facultative aerobic and anaerobic bacteria were responsible for the decay. The controls suggested a specific decay pattern in reduced oxygen settings. This study advances taphonomic knowledge of the postmortem history of wrapped body parts, aiding the recovery and identification of victims of genocide.

Keywords: *Sus scrofa*, Necrobiome, Turkmen genocide, Wrapped body parts, Conflict archaeology

ARTICLE 4

Patterns of Mortuary Practice Associated with Ethnoreligious Genocides of the Silk Roads: The Impact of Sub-Zero Bacterial Necrobiome on the Decay of Buried Remains

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Abstract

If body parts are buried shortly after exposure to freezing temperatures, the altered microenvironment may delay or trigger their decomposition. Using Sus *scrofa* as a human analogue, this study investigated the role of ambient temperature in the decomposition of frozen buried remains. The case study model is the third in a series of taphonomic reconstructions that focus on the role of bacteria in the decay of detached body parts. Research methods used included body part mass loss and gross morphological changes of soft tissue, soil pH, the metabolic activity of compost microbes, Gram staining, and Total Viable Count of microbes. It was hypothesised that ambient temperature would not impact the decay rates of body parts. Compost pH levels exhibited a significant difference between samples decomposing at two temperature settings. The metabolic activity of compost bacteria indicated that prior freezing may not affect microbial growth and activity. The Total Viable Count confirmed that freezing temperatures do not necessarily kill microbial decomposers by demonstrating higher microbial counts on samples exposed to a higher temperature. Gram staining showed predominantly Gram-negative bacteria potentially involved in the decay. Biomass loss used as a measure of decay was statistically significant only in the case of animal feet, suggesting a differential decomposition between body elements. The effect of the burial microenvironment on the decay of frozen remains has never been comprehensively tested. The results serve as a base for further studies focusing on the taphonomic reconstruction of mass graves in regions with continental climates.

Keywords: *Sus scrofa*, Soil necrobiome, Armenian genocide, Frozen body parts, Conflict archaeology

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ARTICLE 5

Patterns of Mortuary Practice Associated with Ethnoreligious Genocides of the Silk Roads: The Role of Bacterial Necrobiome in the Decay of Frozen Wrapped Remains

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Abstract

Frozen body parts are likely to introduce a high moisture level to the wrapped microenvironment; however, the effect of these depositional circumstances on decomposition is not readily understood. The present study is the fourth in a sequence of taphonomic reconstructions focusing on the impact of microbial necrobiome in the decay of detached body parts. Using *Sus scrofa* (domestic pig) body parts, this study investigates the role of bacterial necrobiome in the decay of frozen wrapped remains in two temperature settings. The research methods included the Total Viable Count of bacteria, Gram staining, biomass loss and gross morphological changes. It was hypothesised that ambient temperature would not impact the biomass loss of the remains. The Total Viable Count showed a higher microbial load in a high-temperature setting, indicating that freezing does not necessarily kill the bacterial necrobiome. Gram stain analyses demonstrated that mostly Gram-negative bacteria were associated with higher temperature levels, suggesting a potential involvement in decay. Statistical analyses of body part mass loss yielded significant results, confirming that temperature is the influential variable in the decay of frozen remains. Morphological changes exhibited differential decomposition patterns specific to the tested microenvironments. The first systematic attempt to understand frozen-wrapped microenvironments forms a basis for further research focusing on the taphonomic reconstruction of mass graves in regions with continental climates.

Keywords: *Sus scrofa*, Bacterial necrobiome, Assyrian genocide, Frozen-wrapped body parts, Conflict archaeology

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ARTICLE 6

Heritage as a Tool for Negotiating the Tritiya-Prakriti Social Identity: A Case Study

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Abstract

The extensive history of the Tritiya-Prakriti community and the associated social stigma present a unique opportunity to explore the influence of this third-gender group on contemporary Indian society. Using the Koovagam festival as a case study, the present contribution explores the ways the Tritiya-Prakriti find a sense of legitimacy within their tangible and intangible heritage and negotiate social identity. The material culture and folklore of the Koovagam festival showcase how tightly the history is entwined and embedded in the group's social identity. It effectively suspends the perpetual discrimination and marginalisation experienced by the Tritiya-Prakriti members, affording them a temporary taste of mainstream living. Once exclusively the symbol of memory and resistance, the festival now serves as a platform for empowerment and social validation of their group identity. This way, as the Tritiya-Prakriti minority intersects with prejudice, folklore practices change and lead to a selective reconstruction of elements from the past, playing a significant role in redefining their new identity boundaries and influencing the preservation of group social values. As such, the contextualised discussion of the Tritiya-Prakriti social identity negotiations will be relevant to scholars studying minorities and heritage at risk from a wide range of epochs.

Keywords: Tritiya-Prakriti; Social identity; Heritage at risk; Third gender; Archaeology

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ARTICLE 7

Body as an Object: Deconstructing the Tritiya-Prakriti Social Stigma Through Material Culture of Precolonial India

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Abstract

Although the recognition of genders outside the male and female binary has only recently gained attention in Western societies, in India, the third gender communities have been shaping civilisations for over 2000 years. Focusing on the Tritiya-Prakriti ethnic group, this study explored the representation of gender fluidity in Indian material culture through a selection of ancient texts, architecture and iconography from the Iron Age to the Late Modern period (circa 400 BC- 1858 AD). It posited that the poor visibility of the gender fluid heritage in the modern era is indicative of the historical criminalisation under British colonial governance and the subsequent marginalisation of gender diversity in archaeological discourse. Material culture revealed a multitude of androgynous representations of Hindu deities, non-heteronormative sexuality, and cross-dressing. These findings underscore the acceptance of gender fluidity in precolonial India, highlighting the role of material culture in not only establishing but also preserving traditions and decolonising heritage. The uniqueness of the Tritiya-Prakriti community lies in its existence outside the traditional social structure and society's historical acceptance of this position. As such, India provides the richest source of knowledge about the historical third gender. Understanding the Tritiya-Prakriti systems and transformations can therefore provide a broader context for addressing contemporary inclusion challenges.

Keywords: Tritiya-Prakriti, Gender identity, Androgyny, Indian material culture, Decolonisation

ARTICLE 8

Commodity of the Silk Roads: The Production and Trade of Neutered Slaves in Early Modern India

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Abstract

Neutered slaves wielded significant influence as mediators within the socio-political framework of the Islamic courts and, as such, were regarded as valuable assets. Yet the institution of slavery continues to be a frequently neglected facet in Silk Road trade scholarship, which predominantly emphasises the contributions of merchants, leaders, and aristocrats in religious and cultural exchanges. Focusing on the historical practices of castration, the role of eunuchs at the Mughal courts, as well as their demand and availability in the Silk Road context, this research explores the connection between slaves, discipleship, and trade. It argues that slavery may have been instrumental in sustaining India's political and economic growth during the early modern period. By framing neutered slaves as both products and powerbrokers of trade that shaped Mughal society, it establishes a new platform for understanding the relationship between the institution of slavery and the historic third gender, which may help address contemporary challenges related to minority groups, identity and inclusion.

Keywords: Silk Road trade; Eunuchs; Tritiya-Prakriti community; Mughal Empire; Slavery

ARTICLE 9

Under the Blinding Light of Colonial Ideology: The (Re)formation of the *Tritiya Prakriti* in Late Modern India

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Abstract

During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, British linguists translated significant Sanskrit and Pali texts, laying the foundation for much of the legal system in colonial India. Notably, several nonbinary groups, which were collectively referred to as 'eunuchs', evolved to represent the *tritiya prakriti*, or India's third gender. Current scholarship addresses the *tritiya prakriti* through a cultural lens, distinguishing it from the institution of eunuchism. It analyses this group's historical context, professional roles, sexuality, and unique gender traits, while drawing a comparative analysis with harem-bound eunuchs. The study argues that eunuchs were historically created for specific occupational roles and are unlikely predecessors of the contemporary *tritiya prakriti*. However, the colonial disbandment of harems and the subsequent censuses of eunuchs changed gender classifications. While categorising the third gender groups into specific castes, these censuses inadvertently established the status of a distinct social group that predates the contemporary *tritiya prakriti* community. By situating the *tritiya prakriti* at the cusp of the eunuch framework, current research lays the groundwork for further exploration into the history of third-gender communities in India, which may contribute to addressing contemporary challenges related to inclusion and gender equality.

Keywords: Tritiya prakriti; Eunuch; Colonial India; Hijra; Third gender