

## *The Social Archaeology of Funerary Remains*

Edited by Rebecca Gowland and Christopher Knüsel. Oxford: Oxbow, 2006. (ISBN:1842172115). 326pp.

Erin-Lee Halstad McGuire (University of Glasgow)

Human remains are probably one of the most intriguing and disturbing types of evidence in archaeology. Skeletons provide a wealth of information about people in the past to those who know how to examine them, but until recently the data garnered from human remains has tended to be overlooked in the study of social organisation and identity. In spite of a rising interest in osteology and forensic archaeology<sup>1</sup>, the editors of this volume write that ‘there continues to be a distinct lack of a synthetic treatment of human remains and their burial context’ in archaeological research (p.ix). This volume, which emerged from a session at the 2004 meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists, demonstrates the power and potential of osteological analyses in the field of archaeology.

The nineteen papers included in the volume cover a diverse range of topics, from the preservation of bone and the impact of funerary practices, to cutting-edge scientific papers using organic chemistry in archaeological research. A number of the papers address social structures through osteological evidence, including issues of ageing, gender, health and domestic violence. Combined, they reveal just how broadly osteological evidence can be applied to common (and uncommon) research themes in archaeology. Moreover, the studies presented here draw on data from the Upper Palaeolithic

---

<sup>1</sup> Osteology is a branch of anatomy that focuses on the skeleton. Forensic archaeology applies archaeological techniques and methods to the analysis of criminal evidence (missing persons, murder, war crimes etc.)

through to the Early Modern Era, again demonstrating the flexibility of the field.

If there is a weakness in the volume, it must be the limited geographical scope of the papers. The perspective presented is very Eurocentric, with seven papers covering topics in the British Isles, six from Continental Europe, and the remainder divided across the United States, Turkey and Belize. One of the papers drew on Nubian examples for comparison (Stone and Walruth), but the wealth of material from Australia, the Far East, Eastern Europe, and South America, etc. was largely overlooked.

The book can be subdivided into several loose sections according to theme. The two papers by Bello and Andrews and that by Beckett and Robb take the preservation, creation and destruction of archaeological remains as their central themes. The authors assess the factors leading to the differential preservation of bone material, considering variables such as age, sex, funerary rites, and cultural activity. Although some of the papers have rather large literature reviews, the paper by Beckett and Robb, which examines Neolithic burial in Ireland and Britain, presents an intriguing simulation model to analyse the effects of natural versus cultural processes on bone assemblages. The second paper by Andrews and Bello, which studies the relationship between, and the impact on, the human remains and settlement structures from the Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük, in Turkey, provides a strong, empirical contribution to this section. Tucked into this first group of papers is the piece on the Archaeology of Death by Duday, translated from French by Knüsel. Although seemingly out of place in the section, this well-argued paper on the approach to the excavation of human remains makes an intriguing and useful contribution to the book. It may have been better placed immediately following the editors' introduction.

Unfortunately, in spite of the editors' aim to 'stress that *context* is of paramount importance to skeletal analysis' (p.x), context appears to play a limited role in this section and some of those that follow.

The next two papers take the practice of cremation as a core theme. These papers provide a balance between the skeletal data and the other archaeological evidence. McKinley's paper looks at cremation as a funerary ritual in early Britain, drawing on evidence from myriad sources, including ethnographic sources. Bond and Worley discuss the role of animals in early medieval cremation rituals in Britain. The authors demonstrate, through the use of a large quantity of data, that the inclusion of animals in cremation could have had a wide range of purposes, linked to the practices, beliefs and identities of the societies.

Two papers apply the scientific technique of stable isotope analysis to study human society. In the paper by Huray, Schutkowski and Richards, dietary variations in the La Tène culture are examined. Beyond merely identifying foods consumed, the authors are able to suggest social aspects of the prehistoric diet, such as a connection between meat/dairy products and elite male status. They are also able to consider the practices of breast-feeding and weaning, cultivation and migration. The second paper, by Montgomery and Evans, also draws on isotope analysis to examine social structures and migration, this time on the Isle of Lewis. Here, however, they conclude that while migration can be demonstrated, the technique is limited by a number of factors.

The papers by Gowland, Sofaer, and Stone and Walruth consider the relationship between the skeleton and the social constructs of age and gender, successfully combining theory, data and context. Gowland's study of age among the Anglo-Saxons is one of the first archaeological examinations of age as an aspect of social

identity that is not focussed on childhood. Sofaer examines the relationship between physical sex and social gender, suggesting ways in which the study of the skeleton might help us to understand the gender of an individual. The paper by Stone and Walruth brings a strong osteological emphasis to this section, analysing and critiquing the ways in which the pelvis is used to determine sex and study women's health.

Linking to the previous papers, the next two take up the theme of health. Mays uses the evidence from monastic sites in Medieval England to highlight the types of questions that might be examined through skeletal evidence, emphasising diet, illness and health within religious communities. Fay's paper uses a central case study from Late Medieval Norwich to discuss the contrast between the archaeological evidence and textual evidence for the treatment of lepers.

The remaining papers intertwine themes of power and violence. Knüsel's highly theoretical comparison between Merovingian funerary rituals and the Investiture Contest highlights the interplay between religious and secular power in socially critical rituals. Geller discusses body modification among the pre-Columbian Maya, emphasising the need to avoid ethnocentricity in such research. Sandwiched between these papers are Schulting's study of the evidence for physical violence in Mesolithic and Neolithic remains from across Europe, and Novak's daring attempt at reconstructing domestic violence among the Fremont, an early native American population. Finally, the book concludes with a paper by Pettitt which seeks to reconcile the primarily male-dominated inhumation practices of the European Mid Upper Palaeolithic with the production of predominantly female figurines (Venuses).

Overall, the papers in this volume present a wide-ranging and inter-disciplinary contribution to the fields of archaeology and osteology. Although there is some variation in terms of how much prior knowledge is required by the reader, the majority of the papers could likely be useful to postgraduate students, or even senior undergraduates. In spite of the narrow focus of some of the case studies, most of the themes and concepts can be made applicable in other contexts, making this a useful reference volume for anyone with an interest in the archaeology of death. As the editors point out, ‘human skeletal remains must rank as one of the (if not *the*) most information-rich sources of archaeological evidence’ (p.ix). As such, it will continue to be a key developing field in archaeology, and it is essential that osteologists and archaeologists work together. This volume makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the applications of osteology within archaeology, to aid the interpretation and study of the human past.

*The Kelvingrove Review*

<http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/esharp/thekelvingroverevuew/>