

Rebecca Gowland and Christopher Knüsel (eds),

Social Archaeology of Funerary Remains,

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In the introduction to this volume, the editors claim that 'human skeletal remains must rank as one (if not the) most information-rich sources of archaeological evidence' (p.ix) and duly set out to prove this point. After the varied quality of the papers is taken into account, all that can be concluded is that the usefulness of the scientific examination of skeletal remains ultimately depends upon the ability of the individual author to articulate clearly data drawn from the bones under examination. Once this has occurred, the author must also be able to situate the data coherently within the larger context of whatever society and time period he or she is investigating. If either the articulation or the contextualisation of the data is found wanting, the quality of the paper suffers as a result. The data by itself might be extremely interesting but the explanation given by the archaeologist is often not as relevant. That being said, there are many excellent papers within the *Social Archaeology of Funerary Remains*, some of which use highly advanced scientific techniques to achieve the aims of clear articulation and precise contextualisation, but there are also papers whose authors have decided to privilege the skeletal data above data derived from the larger mortuary context. While the use of rigorous scientific methodologies are appropriate in a multitude of circumstances, this does not make the archaeologist a scientist, nor does it necessarily give the archaeologist who uses these techniques a definite understanding of every social context that his or her discoveries touch upon.

The geographic reach of this edited collection was not as broad as might be expected. Of the nineteen papers, sixteen concentrated on either Europe or the United States. In only two papers were the majority of the analysed skeletal remains from outside a strictly European or North American context. These skeletal remains were derived from Turkey and Belize. When the data employed

by the sixteen papers concerned with either Europe or North America was examined further, seven of the papers focused upon the British Isles, six of the papers focused upon Continental Europe, and two of the papers focused upon the United States. The content of the remaining paper was divided evenly between England and the western United States. A disproportionate focus on Europe belies both the claims to scientific universality and theoretical attempts to undermine the same, supposedly objective, criteria. It is disappointing that a small number of papers which could have concentrated on skeletal remains from the Pacific, Africa, Asia, Australia or South America were not procured by the editors. Some comparative use was made of Nubian skeletal remains but this avenue needs to be more thoroughly explored. As the reviewer is writing from Australia, the geographic scope of this book was underwhelming. If the editors are arguing from a global perspective that the study of human skeletal remains is one of the most important tasks that a modern archaeologist can pursue, then the geographic range of the papers should support this contention. A more accurate title for this volume would be *The Social Archaeology of Funerary Remains from Europe and North America*.

When individual papers are taken into consideration, H. Duday's *L'archaéothanatologie ou l'archéologie de la mort* and J. D. Le Huray, H. Schutkowski and M. P. Richards' *La Tène Dietary Variations in Central Europe* were both highly erudite and informative. *La Tène Dietary Variations* is an excellent example of how the lucid explanation of a complex scientific technique and the resulting data can be set out clearly and comprehensively maintained throughout the length of the paper. The information provided by H. Duday is of value to every archaeologist, regardless of specialisation, who comes across skeletal remains during the course of his or her excavations. It is of interest to note that *L'archaéothanatologie* has been translated into English by C. J. Knüsel from the French original, but the basic argument is still more coherent and complete than the interpretations of data found in the English originals of S. Bello and P. Andrews' *The Intrinsic Pattern of Preservation of Human Skeletons*, P. Andrews and S. Bello's *Pattern in Human Burial Practise*, and J. Beckett and J. Robb's *Neolithic Burial Taphonomy*. The arguments found within *Pattern in Human Burial Practise* and *Neolithic Burial Taphonomy* rely too heavily on the statistical data

derived from the skeletal remains and do not seek to marshal ideological or iconographic data from other relevant archaeological sites to support their conclusions. It is all well and good for the statistical data to be listed in detail but the changes in the patterns of burial at Çatalhöyük and during the Neolithic of Britain and Ireland were undertaken by people who possessed belief systems and who acted upon them. This basic human need should be further emphasised at both a local and a regional level.

The papers which dwell on related topics, such as J. I. McKinley's *Cremation*, J. M. Bond and F. L. Worley's *Companions in Death*, and J. Montgomery and J. A. Evans' *Immigrants on the Isle of Lewis* fall somewhere between brilliant clarity and stumbling perplexity, in that interesting and original attempts have been made to gain a more accurate understanding of cremation rites in the British Isles, the cremation of humans and animals in Anglo-Saxon England, and possible human migration patterns on the Isle of Lewis between the Bronze Age and the late Iron Age. An uneasy balance seems to have been repeatedly struck between the data obtained exclusively from the skeletal remains and the data from the surrounding mortuary contexts. In contrast, the data from the skeletal remains deployed by S. Bello, P. Andrew, J. Beckett and J. Robb in their respective papers tended to overwhelm the data taken from the surviving remnants of the larger cultural settings. For example, it is useful to know that the skeletons of infants decayed more readily than the skeletons of adults in a single English cemetery which can be dated to the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries CE (p.10). What is more problematic is how this geographically-limited data set can then be applied to the rate of decay experienced by the skeletons of infants when compared to the rates of decay experienced by the skeletons of adults in Nubia during the fourth millennium BCE or for that matter in Queensland during the nineteenth century CE. The rate of decay experienced by the skeletons of infants and the rate of decay experienced by the skeletons of adults – when these skeletons have been subjected to differing post-mortuum burial practises in a wide variety of cultures and civilisations – is an issue which should also be addressed.

Not every paper in the *Social Archaeology of Funerary Remains* has such a strong assurance about the empirical possibilities of statistical analysis. Three papers that

employ a more explicitly theoretical and a less earnestly scientific methodology are also included in this volume. R. Gowland's *Aging the Past*, J. R. Sofaer's *Gender, Bioarchaeology and Human Ontogeny*, and P. K. Stone and D. Walrath's *The Gendered Skeleton* present strong arguments concerning the simplistic use of pseudo-scientific labels and the often sexist modern assumptions apparent in the assigning of gender and sex to skeletal remains from earlier cultures and civilisations. It would have been beneficial to this edited collection if a paper had been requested from an archaeologist who specialised in assigning gender and sex to skeletal remains from an explicitly non-European civilisations. The geographic range of the theoreticians in this edited volume extends precisely to the north-west of the United States and the south of England. This lack of cultural diversity is unfortunate. A couple of papers from theoreticians based at the very least in the mid-western United States or the north of England would have added greater depth to this edited collection.

Of the eight remaining papers (which include S. Mays' *The Osteology of Monasticism in Medieval England*; I. Fay's *Text, Space and the Evidence of Human Remains in English Late Medieval and Tudor Disease Culture*; R. Schulting's *Skeletal Evidence and Contexts of Violence in the European Mesolithic and Neolithic*; C. J. Knüsel and A. K. Outram's *Fragmentation of the Body*; P. L. Geller's *Altering Identities*; and P. B. Pettitt's *The Living Dead and the Dead Living*) all are of a high standard and seem more relaxed in the use of data from skeletal remains. These papers span a period of time that begins in the Upper Palaeolithic and ends in Tudor England, and which also encompasses a geographical area that includes North America, Mesoamerica and Europe. The scope and depth of these eight papers suggests that a balance can be repeatedly and successfully struck between the reliance on statistical data and the overwhelming need to coherently articulate other forms of information in order to buttress the major contentions of each particular argument. C. J. Knüsel's '*Of no more use to men than in ages before?*' and S. A. Novak's *Beneath the façade* are probably the most intriguing of this group. C. J. Knüsel presents an exemplary example of a strong argument woven together from seemingly disparate analytical threads and S. A. Novak has made a bold attempt to reconstruct the probability of surviving evidence for domestic violence in a Fremont population from the western United States. If the

editors had wished to begin to harness the plurality of possible responses to such a broad topic as the archaeology of funerary remains within various social contexts, the last eight papers of this volume should have been placed at the beginning of the edited collection, rather than at the end.

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