



## Book Reviews

### **NEOLITHIC CAVE BURIALS: AGENCY, STRUCTURE AND ENVIRONMENT BY RICK PETERSON**

*Manchester University Press. 2019. 256pp, 72 B&W figures, hb, ISBN 978-1-5261-1886-8, £80.00*

*Neolithic Cave Burials* brings together a disparate body of archaeological evidence from caves across Britain to explore the ways in which these underground spaces were used for burial and funerary practices throughout the Neolithic. It is the first book-length treatment of the subject, building on important research by archaeologists such as Andrew Chamberlain (2014), Rick Schulting (2007) and Stephany Leach (2015), amongst others. This publication is a welcome contribution to prehistoric mortuary studies in a British context, cave archaeology research on a European scale, and broader studies of life and death in the Neolithic.

Rick Peterson rightly challenges several of the misconceptions and assumptions about caves: that caves were used for the burial of individuals of lower social status; that caves are less significant than monuments; that cave burial was an unusual or aberrant rite. Instead, the book aims to emphasise that caves were 'an important strand in the overall diversity of funerary practice in the British Neolithic' (p.1), and explores the relationship between mortuary activities in caves and those occurring in monuments. Though Peterson does not claim to assess the evidence from every known British cave with Neolithic activity, 48 caves with direct dates on human bones (a wise selection criteria considering the complexity unravelling disturbed stratigraphy in caves), catalogued in Appendix 1, form the basis of the study. Regionalism is noted: in areas of southern Britain where caves occur they were used for burial, but this was not the case in north Yorkshire where suitable caves exist but seemingly were not appropriated to the same extent by Neolithic communities. Peterson notes a similar uneven distribution in the use of caves across cave-rich regions of Neolithic Europe. There are also changes through time. In Early Neolithic Britain a range of different funerary rites took place in caves that paralleled activities in monuments, but in the later Neolithic a 'genuinely distinctive cave burial tradition' (p.9) emerged, markedly different from what was taking place in monuments.

A valuable aspect of this book is that British cave use is situated within the broader European tradition. Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of the earliest evidence for Neolithic cave ritual, which comes from Greece, followed by overviews of the current data from the Eastern Adriatic, Italy, France and Iberia, central Europe, Belgium and Ireland. Particularly useful is a distribution

heatmap of 262 European caves that have produced human bone of Neolithic date, with the sites and sources listed in Appendix 2. The pinnacle of cave burial in Europe is identified as the beginning of the fourth millennium BC and Peterson argues that, in the Mediterranean at least, cave burial is closely linked to the adoption of a Neolithic way of life, though he acknowledges the use of caves for ritual and burial in the Mesolithic and Palaeolithic.

Chapter 3 is concerned with the interplay between the human agency of the living, the taphonomic agency of the corpse and the material agency of the cave. The archaeology and ethnography of multi-stage funerary processes and associated stages of decomposition are discussed at length here, which raises a not insignificant issue for this reviewer. The book title – *Neolithic cave burials* – omits the key word 'Britain', but of greater concern is the term 'cave burial' which is used throughout the book as a 'catch-all' phrase. The term is misleading when not referring specifically to primary burial, and tallies with generalised assumptions regarding human bones from caves while downplaying other highly complex and varied funerary rituals. That Peterson should use the term 'cave burial' so loosely is curious considering that he explores the multiplicity of different funerary practices and multi-stage rituals represented by the collections of Neolithic human bones from British caves (though the possibility that some bones represent votive deposits is not considered). A more accurate, inclusive and meaningful term would be 'funerary practices'.

The way in which caves 'act' on people, the concept of caves having agency, and the role of time and memory in the interpretation of funerary rituals and contexts are the subjects of Chapter 4. The second half of the book focuses specifically on the British data, beginning with an exploration in Chapter 5 of the potential relationship between Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic use of caves for funerary activities. Was funerary cave use a continuity of hunter-gatherer traditions or was this a specific feature following the adoption of agriculture? A number of Scottish caves containing shell middens associated with human remains suggest some level of continuity, but such evidence is largely absent from other parts of Britain. In Chapter 6 Peterson notes the increased diversity of funerary rites from 3800 BC, including the deliberate deposition of crania in caves, secondary burial of disarticulated or curated bones, and primary inhumation burial (individual, multiple and successive). Evidence of post-mortem processing, dismemberment and mummification of the dead is also explored. Peterson is particularly interested in the role of caves during the 'intermediary period', a theme that runs throughout the book, where corpses were laid out in caves and following decomposition of soft tissue, larger bones were removed from the cave leaving behind labile elements and small bone assemblages. Interestingly, he chooses not to use the term 'excarination'. Cave rites in the Middle Neolithic, Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age are the topic of Chapter 7, where successive inhumation burial was the dominant practice, though fewer sites have been

identified from these periods. Secrecy and the selection of caves located some distance from settlement sites became a growing concern, in addition to the use of deeper zones of caves.

At times, the summary descriptions of the 48 sites that formed the basis of this study detract from the discussion, but they also reveal the difficult nature of much of the surviving evidence. Some caves were excavated by antiquarians in the nineteenth century or by cavers in more recent decades, and in several cases the surviving documentation is woefully inadequate, often accompanied by a loss of some of the original material discovered. The nature of the evidence is also quite disparate: at some sites only a single human bone can be identified as Neolithic, while other caves have produced significant numbers of skeletons. Cave bone assemblages have also been subject to differing levels of osteoarchaeological analysis and radiocarbon dating. The author is to be congratulated for creating a coherent narrative from such a varied and complex body of data. Peterson also identifies those cave assemblages that lack modern scientific analyses, highlighting their untapped potential to reveal new information on certain sites and particular Neolithic populations.

The final chapter presents some thought-provoking ideas. The role of caves in the intermediary period where physical decomposition of the corpse was associated with the changing social status of the deceased is emphasised. Modelling of radiocarbon dates is used to determine duration and intensity: caves that were used intensively for short periods versus episodic usage of sites over long periods. A tantalising idea is that cave 'burial' was one of the earliest manifestations of a Neolithic way of life, and that the funerary use of caves is 'an excellent example of the 'unpacked' Neolithic revolution' (p.198). A particular strength of the book as a whole is the manner in which large datasets are interrogated and presented in highly effective maps and graphs, such as the aspects of cave entrances which demonstrate that the caves selected for funerary use in Neolithic Britain were not influenced by cosmological events but rather by local viewsheds and topographical features.

*Neolithic Cave Burials* is important reading for anyone interested in Neolithic Britain, funerary practice, prehistoric landscapes or cave archaeology. It is a valuable book, one that provides the first comprehensive review of the subject and leaves us in no doubt as to the significance of caves as ritual and funerary loci in the limestone landscapes of Neolithic Britain.

## References

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