



Book Reviews

CHILDREN, DEATH AND BURIAL: ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOURSES BY EILEEN MURPHY AND MÉLIE LE ROY

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Originating from a conference session entitled *Archaeological Approaches to the Burial of Children* (annual conference of the European Association of Archaeologists – EAA, Glasgow 2015); this volume draws together current research exploring the theme of children, death, and burial within archaeological contexts. The primary aims of this volume were to address what the study of child burials can tell us about funerary rites for children, how the roles of children changed within past societies as they progressed in age, and how we may access evidence for the nature of relationships between children and adults in the past.

With contributions from sixteen papers, a wide range of geographical and temporal contexts are considered, enabling insight into how these factors may have varied between time and space via combinations of various methodologies, including examination of burial position, inclusion (or conversely exclusion) of grave goods, spatial patterning of burials, archaeoethanatology, and osteological analysis. As such, this volume compiles an important resource for the burial practices of children within Europe from the Neolithic through to the 19th century. In this sense, the publication of this volume is timely, coinciding with the 10th anniversary of the founding of the Society for the Study of Childhood in the Past, and the publication of *'The Bioarchaeology of Children'* (Lewis 2007). Extensive research during the past decade has brought significant advances in our understanding of the interplay of social status and external environment, their influence on health, and how we can access this via the study of the remains of children (see Mays *et al.*, 2017). This publication brings some of the more social aspects surrounding death and burial to the forefront.

While such a broad range of burial contexts are considered throughout this book, it still remains cohesive, with all authors emphasising the cultural significance of child burials

in determining how a community came to terms with the loss of a child, and how this may have varied depending on their age (and by proxy their role/position within society). The editors neatly summarise the diversity of experiences that are highlighted within the chapters into defined categories. Thus throughout the volume we see evidence for the 'domestic child' (Le Roy, Tibbetts, Thomas, Kostanti, Sîrbu and Dăvîncă, Cave and Oxenham, and Jark Jensen), the 'vulnerable child' (Lazar *et al.*, Thomas, McSweeney and Bacvarov, Kostanti, Berseneva, Calliauw, Cave and Oxenham, Jark Jensen, and Murphy), the 'high status child' (Lazar *et al.*, Kostanti, and Dawson-Hobbis), the 'cherished child' (Maines *et al.*, Berseneva, and Geber), the 'potential child' (Le Roy, Berseneva, Sîrbu and Dăvîncă, and Cave and Oxenham), the 'ritual child' (McSweeney and Bacvarov, Kostanti, and Sîrbu and Dăvîncă), and the 'political child' (Tibbetts). How these burials fit within these groupings has implications for who these children represented within past societies, and how the adult population processed and commemorated their death. It is evident that they rarely encompass just one category, demonstrating the complexity of information that can be gleaned through the multidisciplinary study of child burials.

For example, the absence, and therefore underrepresentation, of foetal and infant remains within burial contexts has frequently been attributed to the apparent fragility of their bones, the influence of taphonomic processes, or lack of specialisation/expertise during the excavation process. However, multiple papers within this volume demonstrate that the absence of these individuals can be evidence for the purposeful exclusion of infants and young children within conventional burial grounds (Le Roy, Tibbetts, Maines *et al.*, Thomas, and Kostanti), suggestive of a differential burial treatment prior to social integration.

In addition, burial ritual is not purely concerned with where an individual is interred, but also the manner in which this is performed. Evidence for continuation of respectful burial in shrouds and coffins during times of extreme economic hardship as displayed at the Kilkenny Union Workhouse (Geber) emphasises the impulse to care for the dead in past populations, and the sense of loss for even the most marginalised members of a community. Murphy highlights the identification of variations in mortuary ritual in burials, indicative of personal touches, demonstrating the agency of families in the funerary process in later medieval Gaelic Ireland. Jark Jensen also identifies care in the burial of children in medieval Denmark, through their frequent placement near an adult chest or

neck, suggestive of an affectionate link between the deceased, or the desire of those interring the child to ensure they continue to be protected in death. Thus, through the collation of these varied experiences of death and burial throughout time and space not only can societal structure be considered, but also glimpses of the emotional impact of an untimely death can be caught.

This volume is particularly pertinent for those interested in the study of prehistoric societies. For communities where historical documentation is sparse, or non-existent, such lines of evidence become vital. In addition, while extensive studies have broadly deepened our knowledge regarding childhood in the past, Calliauw states that ‘...This increasing attention has, however, had a limited impact on the archaeology of Bronze Age Crete...’ (p147). This assertion is no doubt also true for many other time periods and geographic contexts. In this volume Calliauw reverses the misconception that juveniles were absent from the Bronze Age Cretan record, acknowledging them as an important demographic within the funerary record. A substantial proportion of this book relates to the study of prehistoric child burials, with ten of the sixteen chapters focusing on Neolithic (Le Roy, Tibbetts, and Maines *et al.*), Bronze Age (McSweeney and Bacvarov, Kostanti, Berseneva, and Calliauw), Chalcolithic (Lazar *et al.* and Thomas), and Second Iron Age (Sîrbu and Dăvîncă) burial rites. Le Roy provides a particularly thorough overview of Neolithic burial practices in general, and Lazar *et al.* demonstrate the wealth of information that can be derived from combining GIS and bioarchaeological data in a study of Romanian burials from the Chalcolithic period. While the majority of these chapters further understanding regarding burial ritual and the place of children within their respective communities, others offer additional insight into exchange processes between geographic regions in Bronze Age Bulgaria (McSweeney and Bacvarov), and inference of age of labour and gender socialization (Bersenevra).

Therefore, this volume would not only appeal to those with a general interest in the diversity of child burial practices over time, but becomes an essential resource for those interested in childhood, death and burial within prehistoric societies.

References

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