



Book Reviews

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF CREMATION: BURNED HUMAN REMAINS IN FUNERARY STUDIES. EDITED BY T THOMPSON

Oxbow Books, Oxford, 2015. 244 pp, 96 text illus, ISBN 978-1-78297-848-0, pk, £38

This is volume 8 in Oxbow's *Studies in Funerary Archaeology* series and brings together a collection of eleven papers examining evidence from England, Guernsey, Denmark, Portugal, Sardinia, Spain, Brazil and Chile. These range in time from the Neolithic through to the Roman Empire (Merida) to Anglo-Saxon England. In Brazil, the remains discussed date to the 15th century and 17th centuries AD and, in the case of the Chilean contribution, a recent potential murder. Despite the small number of papers which deal specifically with prehistoric data, the book should nevertheless be of interest to all archaeologists dealing with human remains as the information that can be gleaned from them and the stories told by cremated bone can be fascinating.

In 1905, John Mortimer wrote

...an ordinary archaeologist probably considers the collecting of other relics more important than securing the bones. For these are, except in the hands of a specialist, comparatively useless (p 41).

Mortimer then went on to describe the ages and genders that he encountered amongst the deposits of cremated bone at Duggleby Howe, North Yorkshire, thus demonstrating that already by the early 20th century it was realised that cremated remains could provide demographic information. It was a start.

In her excellent, 'chatty' and personal foreword, Jacqui McKinley makes this point suggesting that human cremated remains have usually been regarded as the poor relation in palaeosteological studies (a point repeated by other contributors), but she then goes on to describe the advances made in the study of human cremated remains (both at home and abroad) particularly over the last 30 years, despite a certain degree of scepticism as to what could be gleaned from such fragmentary material which prevailed throughout the 1970s. McKinley points out the importance of context when looking at human remains and reminds us that cremation was undoubtedly a multi-faceted ritual. Indeed, it is becoming obvious in Neolithic and Bronze Age studies that the choosing of cremation as a burial rite must be seen as much more than a convenient way of disposing of the dead.

Advances made in the study of burnt human are also discussed by Thompson particularly from an analytical and interpretative point of view. He describes the effects that fire will have on a body (not just the skeleton) and also the considerable number of variables involved in the burning and deposition of human bone, including post-depositional processes and different approaches to cremation by different societies. Though not exhaustive it nevertheless illustrates differences in human natures and beliefs.

In their contribution Cataroche and Gowland examine 15kg of Neolithic remains recovered by Lukis from his 19th century excavations at the passage grave of La Varde, Guernsey. The excavation is described as is the methodology for examining the remains. Almost 2500 burnt and

unburnt bone fragments were found and they seem to suggest a minimum of 9 individuals with adults and sub-adults of both sexes represented. This number is considerably lower than Lukis's original estimate of over 30, and although the archive may well have become depleted over the years, and unburnt remains may have been dissolved by acid soils, this low number is generally in keeping with observations at other contemporary monuments. Interestingly, many elements seem to have been skeletal before being subjected to fire which means that cremation is not a disposal method but a distinct, transformative ritual in its own right.

Harvig looks at conceptual changes in cremation processes in Bronze Age Denmark and in particular from the island of Funen. Once again the cremation process is described and variables discussed. Harvig used CT scanning to shed further light on the position of cremated remains within urns as well as on the excavated remains themselves. His analysis suggested that whole bodies were burnt and that previous estimations of fragmentation may have been over-exaggerated as a considerable amount of breakage results from the excavation process. Furthermore Bronze Age and Iron Age cremation practices were shown to be very different with careful collection of the burnt bone and burial in an urn with personal associations in the former period, whilst in the latter, random human remains and considerable amounts of pyre debris were gathered and buried in a pit. For these case studies it suggests the commemoration of the individual in the Bronze Age, and the commemoration of the process in the Iron Age.

Gonçalves *et al* turn their attention to Iron Age Portugal where the selection of cremated remains seems to have been far less rigorous than in Bronze Age Denmark. Cremation weight was analysed as a method of determining minimum numbers and skeletal representation though with mixed results.

The Phoenician-Punic cemetery at Monte Sirai, Sardinia, is described by Piga *et al*. Here the rite was very different with bodies burned *in situ* over the grave, at least one found in a prone position. Whilst most of the cremated remains proved to have been subjected to temperatures between 400-850°C, some burials exhibiting 'semi-combustion' were interpreted as marking the change from the rite of cremation to that of inhumation though this phenomenon may well be peculiar to the site.

Both primary and secondary cremations were encountered at Merida in Spain and date to the 1st-2nd centuries AD when Merida was a flourishing Roman colonia (Silva). The cremation rites seem to have been enacted soon after death and appeared largely economic in terms of combustion with few differences in rites noted between the sexes or age groups. A demographic comparison with other Roman cities suggests considerable similarities.

The Anglo-Saxon bodies examined by Squires point to the cremation of discrete individuals, in a supine position, wearing jewellery, on the top of pyres. Temperatures may be in excess of 900°C but do vary though this may result from variations in fuel and/or atmospheric conditions. As is familiar to students of the Bronze Age, the amount of bone interred rarely amounts to that expected from a discrete individual.

Ulguim turns to the mound and enclosure complexes of southern Brazil where cremated remains were found below the mounds in ash beds or excavated features. The cremations took place in a ritually defined space and were perhaps witnessed by a larger group. The similarities with British prehistory are also notable – well cremated in temperatures in excess of 800°C, single and multiple cremations, burnt grave goods and partial collection of cremated remains.

Ubelaker, who has made a substantial contribution to the study of cremated remains over the years, presents a more methodological paper which examines the thermal effects on the skeleton

and reminds us that although a body can be burnt it may display no signs of this on the skeleton whilst at the other extreme, bones can be severely affected. Trauma can be difficult to detect on cremated bone, especially blunt force trauma. He elucidates how the condition of bone can shed light on firing conditions and temperature but again acknowledges that many variables can be at play here and interpretation is by no means straightforward. This well written paper is a great start for anyone wishing to learn about the potential and limitations of detailed study of cremated remains.

Garido-Varas and Intriago-Leivea presented a modern case study of a forensic investigation into a partially burnt and fragmented body in Chile. Selective burning, incomplete skeleton, scattered skeletal elements all have a Neolithic ring to them but in this case they are used to try and establish the post-mortem treatment of a victim. In this case they were unsuccessful but the case would not yet appear to be closed.

This book is an excellent demonstration of how far the studies of cremated remains have developed and of the increased set of methodological and scientific analyses used in the study of calcined bone. It is optimistic in its outlook suggesting that techniques will continue to improve and be more widely applied (for example DNA). It is also a reminder that the interpretation of cremated remains is not an exact science and many variables can be at play during the period from death to deposition and even extending to post-excavation. One thing lacking is an in depth study of ethnographic studies. Many authors mention ethnography but few in much detail. From a Prehistorian's point of view, the treatment of human remains whether burnt or unburnt is a fascinating topic of study: complete/partial, burnt/unburnt, single/multiple. At a time when both inhumation and cremation were practised, who deserved what and why? These questions may be to a degree unanswerable at present but if we are to study past societies it is necessary to ask them.

References

Mortimer, JR, 1905. *Forty Years' Researches in British and Saxon Burial Mounds of East Yorkshire*. London, Hull & York: Brown & Sons

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