

# Review article

## Bioarchaeological perspectives on the social experience of prehistoric and historic communities

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HAAGEN D. KLAUS, AMANDA R. HARVEY & MARK N. COHEN (ed.). *Bones of complexity: bioarchaeological case studies of social organization and skeletal biology*. 2017. xix+486 pages, several b&w illustrations, tables. Gainesville: University Press of Florida; 978-0-8130-6223-5 hardback \$100.

MELISSA S. MURPHY & HAAGEN D. KLAUS. *Colonized bodies, worlds transformed: toward a global bioarchaeology of contact and colonialism*. 2017. xvii+459 pages, several b&w illustrations, tables. Gainesville: University Press of Florida; 978-0-8130-6075-0 hardback \$120.

### Complexity and hierarchy

Traditionally, reconstructions of social complexity in past societies have relied on a plethora of indicators including, but not limited to, ancient texts, monumental architectural and archaeological evidence for hierarchical leadership, surplus storage, craft specialisation and the density of populations. With the exception of mortuary patterns, particularly the quantity and quality of grave goods, bioarchaeological data have featured less prominently in archaeological interpretation. Over the past 40 years, however, the study of human skeletal remains has been more firmly integrated into theoretical explorations of the past, and the broader development of biocultural models has contributed more fully to archaeological research. The first of the two volumes reviewed here is exemplary of



current bioarchaeological approaches that draw on human biology, cultural development and physical environments to understand the human experience.

Editors Haagen Klaus, Amanda Harvey and Mark Cohen bring together a cohesive and impressive 15 chapters that demonstrate variations in social complexity through nuanced bioarchaeological data and methods. Social organisation is reconstructed in regions across the New and Old Worlds (although most focus on the Americas) and over a long timespan. The chapters are organised into three groups, each portraying social complexity in different ways. Parts I and II, 'Growth, stature, and social organization' and 'Complexities of sex and gender', each contain three chapters. Part III, the most substantial of the sections, with nine chapters, is on 'Skeletons in settings of emergent complexity and stratified societies'. All the authors adhere to the volume's broader theme of biocultural interpretations of social organisation, and it is clear that the editors have carefully guided their contributors in this regard. The placement of chapters in the volume's three sections is, however, less coherent, as some fit well in their respective sections, while others could have been easily included in any of them.

Part I is the most unified of the volume's themed sections. Chapters by Boix and Rosenbluth, Wright and Vásquez, and Becker all emphasise the relationship between physical stature and social status. The theme serves as an important introduction to the volume's focus on how skeletal biology is affected by socio-economic structure. Through cross-cultural comparisons, theoretical models and a re-evaluation of methods, the authors discuss long bone growth, and ultimately taller stature, and how this may reflect

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the connection between better nutritional access and higher social status.

In Part II, the chapters by Zakrzewski, Schepartz *et al.* and Pechenkina *et al.* highlight gender roles and differences in hierarchical status in three Old World settings. Given its emphasis on stature, Zakrzewski's chapter on Egyptian social structure could perhaps have featured in Part I, but her discussion of sexual dimorphism justifies its inclusion in Part II. The other two studies in this section use multiple skeletal indicators of diet (e.g. dental pathologies, isotope data) and demographic comparisons of mortuary treatments to interpret gendered inequalities.

The chapters in Part III focus on emergent complexity to address a wide spectrum of cultural contexts, but several shared elements can be identified. The most frequent common thread connecting these nine chapters is the use of similar skeletal pathologies to illustrate the differential morbidity risk factors that are associated with social standing in particular communities. Most authors rely on pathological indicators to interpret access to high- or low-quality foods (e.g. papers by Betsinger, Ross-Stallings, and Tritsaroli) and disease vectors associated with dense populations (e.g. Storey *et al.*). Some of these concentrate on differences in gender; others take a broad approach to reconstructing the social organisation of communities. The other chapters focus on traumatic injury; the studies by Robbins Schug and Harrod *et al.* highlight violence as a mechanism that reinforces power and hierarchical structures.

Regardless of the section in which the individual chapters are included, each does an excellent job of addressing the volume's primary objectives of working to expand bioarchaeological conceptualisations of heterarchy and hierarchy. All of the authors formulate their conclusions using multiple indicators of the human biological response to culture, and do so in creative ways. Many of the studies incorporate statistical testing, rather than the simple frequency data of much previous bioarchaeological research, providing their conclusions with greater scientific weight. Several authors explicitly address methodological limitations (i.e. the osteological paradox), which further expands bioarchaeological inquiry. Collectively, the chapters provide the reader with a variety of ways to identify and interpret past socio-economic standing and organisation. The best contributions to the volume are those chapters that push bioarchaeological analysis to

be more critical of the current literature and are scientifically rigorous and theoretically informed (e.g. Zakrzewski, Schepartz *et al.*, Robbins Schug, and Cook *et al.*). Klaus, Harvey and Cohen have compiled an excellent and useful volume that can be appreciated by professionals and students alike. Both archaeologists and bioarchaeologists should refer to it for informative examples of projects using human remains to interpret social complexity.

## Contact and colonialism

It is well known that historical accounts of contact and conquest are written almost exclusively by the victors. Archaeological approaches to colonialism have attempted to balance these biased accounts through studies of material culture that explore the perspectives of both coloniser and colonised. Yet these accounts have often only scratched the surface of the evidence for the impact of colonialism documented in the bioarchaeological record. Typically relegated to discussions of negative pathological consequences, these syntheses also offer incomplete reconstructions of the colonial past. *Colonized bodies, worlds transformed: toward a global bioarchaeology of contact and colonialism* demonstrates that modern bioarchaeological practice is not content with these reconstructions and pushes the boundaries of colonial studies.

In this volume, editors Melissa Murphy and Haagen Klaus seek to revitalise the study of colonialism through bioarchaeological approaches. Bringing together 14 chapters, the editors present a global bioarchaeology that expands the literature to include new ways of thinking about contact in both well-known and under-studied regions of the New and Old Worlds. Several authors report on common negative health consequences following contact, but they also challenge the stereotype that this was the only response. Instead, the case studies in these chapters delve into reconstructions of variable life experiences, biological responses and cultural behaviours of both the colonised local populations and the colonisers. Through osteological and mortuary data, many of the contributors interpret the interactions between colonisers and colonised, and are able to corroborate or refute historical accounts.

The volume is organised into three sections, each of four chapters. Section I is on 'Life, death, and

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mortuary practices after contact and colonialism'. This section serves as an excellent introduction to the volume's subject matter, providing baseline contextual information on situations of colonial contact that the subsequent chapters go on to elaborate. Using mortuary practices to interpret identity, and palaeopathologies to indicate stress experienced by subgroups, some studies (e.g. Murphy *et al.*, Klaus and Alvarez-Calderó) highlight the level of variability in colonial contexts. This is a theme that continues in many of the chapters in Sections II and III as well.

Section II, entitled 'Frontiers, colonial entanglements, and diversity', presents research that exemplifies the range of responses to contact, both in the heart of colonised territories and along their peripheries. For example, Harvey and colleagues discuss the Mayan community of Tipu and its ability to negotiate a Mayan-Spanish colonial hybrid identity that may have permitted the inhabitants to buffer themselves against biological and cultural stress. Chapters by Perry and Killgrove investigate Old World reactions to imperialism and find that health stress varies according to the degree of colonial intervention and local physical environments. Their studies present new ways of conceptualising contact in contexts with substantial textual records.

The chapters of Section III, 'Body and identity under colonialism', explore identity through embodiment. Using skeletal indicators such as cranial modification (Tiesler and Zabala), isotope data, craniometrics (Ribot *et al.*) and other biodistance markers, these studies reconstruct the identity of several

populations and subgroups in nuanced ways that incorporate social theory. It is in this section that the volume truly shines, advancing innovative biocultural investigations of the past.

In his commentary paper at the end of the volume, Stojanowski argues that a bioarchaeology of colonialism and contact is about "the consequences of power differentials" (p. 415). This is readily explored in the volume's chapters, at the site (or local) level and all the way up to global perspectives. As such, the contributors offer multiple scales of interpretation of bioarchaeological data that benefit colonial studies in ways that historical texts and archaeology alone cannot. Murphy and Klaus have overseen a fine and much-needed contribution to the literature. Scholars of all levels, from undergraduates to advanced professionals, should consult this volume in pursuit of excellent examples of biocultural and theory-driven explorations of bioarchaeology.

These two volumes bring a nuanced approach to the interpretation of the social experiences of past individuals and communities. The editors and contributors present a broad array of contextual information alongside human skeletal data to interpret biological and cultural reactions to changing social arrangements and environmental stresses. They also demonstrate how bioarchaeological and archaeological inquiry can and should be more theoretical and biocultural in their approaches. Both volumes are welcome additions to these respective disciplines, and will promote further thoughtful and multi-disciplinary research drawing on biological, cultural and artefactual evidence to explore prehistoric and historic human experiences.