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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

The Complexity of What is not a Bone

Review by Mattia Cartolano

Bones of complexity: Bioarchaeological case studies of social organization and skeletal biology
By Haagen Klaus, Amanda Harvey and Mark N. Cohen
University Press of Florida, 2017.

Bones of complexity is a considerable collection of bioarchaeological studies that aims to identify social structures and inequality in ancient communities from osteological analysis. The editors Haagen D. Klaus, Amanda R. Harvey and Mark N. Cohen (all writing from United States institutions) bring together a group of anthropologists, archaeologists and scholars from other disciplines with the aim to enrich the ongoing work on skeletal remains and to explore the linkage between social complexity and human biology in prehistoric and also historic communities. The collection is constituted by a total of 17 chapters including one cross-cultural investigation (chapter 2), a general introduction and concluding remarks. The other 14 bioarchaeological works in the volume analyze skeletal samples retrieved in some regions of the world: 6 studies come from North America, one from South America, one from Africa, two from Asia and four from Europe. The time periods examined in the text range from ancient Egypt and Bronze Age in Greece and Spain to Late Prehistoric Tennessee in the USA. Epipalaeolithic and Neolithic case studies in Southwest Asia (where the first large social centers appear), as well as any complex hunter-gatherer communities, are not covered in this book.

The main body of this publication is divided into three sections. Part I focuses on the connections between human stature and growth, and social ranking. By analyzing a diverse range of archaeological and historical frameworks, Boix and Rosenbluth, in chapter 2, observe that inequality and social differentiation, especially between men and women, are significantly conspicuous in agrarian societies where conflicts for land management and food surplus emerge and new demographic and social challenges appear. The following two chapters propose other significative bioarchaeological studies on

body health and height in the Maya center of Tikal and ancient Bohemia. Data results suggest that skeletal health and robusticity, which are influenced by access to food and water resources, constitute a well-founded source of evidence for corroborating socioeconomic structure. Part II concentrates on gender and sex. The three works of this section analyze very different contexts in which hierarchy and gender inequality appear by bringing forth not only multiple skeletal indicators but also comparing them with elements of mortuary practices and written records. Finally, Part III presents a series of case studies in which some bring more data analysis whereas others deliver more theoretical observations to the discussion. Anyhow, all contributions have the common intent to associate the skeletal pathologies and trauma (e.g. stress markers and dental enamel hypoplasia) with socially enforced practices that might suggest a peculiar community organization and set social status.

The contributions in this volume were aimed to further the discussion about inequality, hierarchy and heterarchy in ancient population through bioarchaeological analysis of human remains and the authors successfully achieved the primary objectives of this book. This up-to-date bioarchaeological research shows how skeletal indicators still constitute one of the most compelling lines of evidence in the study of human behavior. Seeing how small biological elements (e.g. dental pathologies) allow the gathering of an extraordinary amount of information is extremely fascinating and useful. The fruition and integration of different osteological and archaeological data provide a vast range of information about social life, and it would be interesting seeing how the appearance of inequality and social stratification develop diachronically and regionally whenever possible.

As mentioned various times by the editors, *Bones of complexity* should be considered as a starting point in the reflection over the significance and use of the bioarchaeological data in the interpretative attempt to outline social complexity. The seven broad observations mentioned in the concluding chapter synthesize the areas in which the bioarchaeological analysis of ancient social organization should improve, and I shall add a few more comments in this regard. The sentence Larsen states in the foreword of ‘how much more we need to know before drawing simple conclusion’ (p. xviii) illustrates a never-ending issue that affects the bioarchaeological *modus operandi*. The process of integrating different sources of evidence is a challenging task that is, and will be, constantly present. It seems that the combination and discussion of archaeological and biological results must be framed within a well-grounded theoretical framework and this is what Haagen D. Klauss and colleagues have well proposed in chapter 16. The lack of an appropriate analysis of the cultural elements involved in the dynamics of complex societies inevitably leads to assuming a series of questionable assumptions in the discussion of

data results, which is one of the common weakness of most of the case studies (e.g. type of burial indicating social status).

The values that determine social inequality are a clear example of the topics on which bioarchaeologists should work. Ryan P. Harrod and colleagues tackled this topic by bringing the aspect of the violence visible in the skeletal markers. Similarly, authors in Part II have used the diverse nutritional status among members of the same group as an indicator of social disparities. What appears to be pending in the proposed interpretations is an extensive analysis of the material culture that generates the unequal distribution of goods, spaces and workload. In this regard, I suggest that the study of the symbolic production and fruition might be a principal source of information to integrate into the analysis. A simple reference to mortuary practices and architectural settings might not be enough in supporting the interpretation of osteological disparities as an indicator of social inequality, especially in circumstances when skeletal sampling is restricted. It is unlikely that social inequality, exclusion and differentiation is not lead by a rigid ideological framework that is displayed and enforced through the material culture. Same discourse can be applied to gender inequality. In other words, I believe that the analysis of symbolic materials (e.g. special burial goods or monumental architecture) must be integrated into the process of interpreting osteological data.

Overall, the assemblage of studies proposed by the editors in this publication is a very useful textbook for all readers in and outside the field of bioarchaeology. If anyone would like to engage with the ongoing debate about combining the diverse sources of information for studying social complexity in ancient communities, then they should have a look at this publication with all examples and insightful theoretical discussions therein.

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