



Raising the Veil: New Clues into Unique Burial Practices

Review by Christopher Nicosia

2021, 21, June

TRACY K. BETSINGER, AMY B. SCOTT, and ANASTASIA TSALIKI, eds. 2020, *The Odd, the Unusual, and the Strange: Bioarchaeological Experiences of Atypical Burials*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 448 pp, ISBN 978-1-68340-103-2

KEYWORDS: Atypical Burial, Bioarchaeology, Death, Sociopolitical, Biocultural

What makes a burial atypical and how are they identifiable? That is the central question of *The Odd, the Unusual, and the Strange: Bioarchaeological Experiences of Atypical Burials*, edited by Tracy K. Betsinger, Amy B. Scott, and Anastasia Tsaliki. This edited volume expands on the works of Eileen Murphy's (2008), *Deviant Burial in the Archaeological Record*, and Andrew Reynold's (2009), *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs*, by examining a variety of atypical burial treatments as well as inherent parallels in how death is treated by past peoples through time and space. Initially studied in the early 1970s, atypical burial investigations have progressed from focusing exclusively on a system's model of culture to adding various lines of evidence, such as biological, pathological, and social influences. This contextual avenue of research examines mortuary variation, agency, and individuality using social bioarchaeological approaches (i.e., biosocial and interdisciplinary perspectives), with the goal of further understanding the complex relationships between humans and their broader social, cultural, and physical environments. Moving away from the stigmatized phrase "deviant," which connotes representations of the bizarre and negative meanings, and toward the more universal term "atypical," which represents the versatility required to describe a wide range of mortuary activities. By bringing together a diverse group of bioarchaeological scholars who use integrated biocultural approaches on contextual non-normative samples from several geographic regions and temporal periods, the edited volume asks questions about how we understand atypical burials and advances the study of the topic.

Atypical funerary treatments may reveal shifting ideologies that influence the creation of mortuary contexts for particular people, which can reveal cultural perspectives on life and death. The edited volume is divided into 19 case studies that report atypical burials in China, Mongolia, Greece, Japan, Peru, Bolivia, the Caribbean, and various regions in Europe and the United States. Documenting event types (e.g., “vampire” burials in medieval Poland, a mass grave of decapitated soldiers in ancient China) or single events (e.g., an individual from the Bolivian Formative period [1300 BC-AD 200] buried with their middle digit inserted in their vagina or anus) as part of a larger advocacy for methodological and analytical considerations of “typical” vs. “atypical” mortuary programs. For example, in Chapter 2, Cerezo-Román compares Preclassic and Classic Southwest Hohokam inhumations and cremations from the Tucson Basin, Arizona, demonstrating how atypical mortuary practices evolved over an 800-year period. She argues that critical and contextualized approaches to the study of non-normative burials are needed to reconstruct the complexity of funerary customs and associated cultural significances. While Moilanen suggests in Chapter 12 that using archaeoethanatology (i.e., paying close attention to post-dispositional events) and social microarchaeology (i.e., recognizing regular social practices behind diverse phenomena and identifying social discourse in detail rather than vague generalizations) can potentially aid in the development of atypical burial investigations.

Each of the 19 case studies take a different approach to understanding atypical burials, highlighting not only the extent of mortuary diversity but also the contextual details. In Chapter 15, Garvie-Lok and Tsaliki introduce a checklist of burial significances, such as focused disturbances of rib cages, to assist in the recognition of Greek “vampire”-related mortuary ritual. This is echoed in Chapters 13 by Gardela and Chapter 14 by Betsinger and Scott, which focus on “vampire” mortuary conditions in early and post-medieval Poland, seeking to shift the conversation from singular nonnormative cases and toward a more widespread understanding of this burial type. In Chapter 17, Haddow et al. illustrate the evolution of atypical mortuary treatment by taking an insightful temporal approach to four atypical burial examples from the Neolithic period to the twentieth century AD Catalhöyük in Turkey. Lee, in Chapter 19, explores a wide geographic and temporal range of mortuary practices from China and Mongolia from the Neolithic (3500-3000 BC) to the Period of Disunion (AD 744-840) and draws on archaeological, bioarchaeological, and historical evidence, emphasizing the importance of local contextual information since vast quantities of social complexity make a single interpretation and understanding unlikely. In Chapter 8, Wickowski et al. show how linking cosmology with the physical body allows for sociocultural comparisons of burials that occupy various biological sex and age backgrounds during the Early Horizon period (800-100 BC) in Peru with atypical burial and iconographic explorations.

Although the biocultural and biosocial approaches of the 19 case studies have demonstrated success in pushing atypical mortuary research forward, challenges remain. For example, in Chapter 6, Mickleburgh et al. found that when the Kelby's Ridge 2 data on Saba was compared to the wider Caribbean cremation context, it would indicate cremation was an atypical practice. As observed at the site level, where cremation was more common, the perspective changes, raising questions about the size at which an “atypical” classification for burials could be given. In Chapter 11, Hosek addresses the issue of categorizing atypical burials, arguing that binary

typologies like "unusual" and "normal" can oversimplify and limit understandings of the deceased. Furthermore, in Chapter 20, Resch discusses castrated individuals from both Chinese (200 BC-AD 1912) and European (AD 1500-1950) contexts, pointing out that while castrated individuals in both regions had distinct differences, their physical burials were often identical to non-castrated "typical" individuals. Emphasizing the creation of "atypical" burials could be due to a tragic accident rather than portraying someone who was markedly different in life. Overall, the edited volume stresses that the underrepresentation of non-normative burial treatments remains a major issue.

To this end, the editors of *The Odd, the Unusual, and the Strange: Bioarchaeological Experiences of Atypical Burials* deserve praise for its expansion and coverage of atypical burials and the sociopolitical contexts that produced them. Using social, sociocultural, archaeological, and biological data, the volume critically examines and expands understandings of the continuum of variation in mortuary practices. There are numerous high-quality graphs, maps, and figures available that aid in data presentation. When piecing together past funerary practices biological anthropologists and archaeologists should have this volume on their reading lists. It will undoubtedly be useful in higher education courses because it demonstrates not only different approaches for studying atypical mortuary practices, but also different societal views on life and death.

Works Cited:

Murphy, Eileen M. eds. 2008. *Deviant Burial in the Archaeological Record*. Oxbow Books, Oxford.

Reynolds, Andrew. 2009. *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Christopher Nicosia is a Ph.D. student in Anthropology at Louisiana State University. His dissertation topic currently involves looking at Peruvian subadult mortuary treatments (e.g., grave goods, body placement, body orientation, etc.) with biological components (e.g., biological sex, pathologies, etc.) to piece together aspects of their social identity (e.g., personhood, sex-roles, gender) and to better understand their roles in past communities. He has an interest in the topics of looking at societal aspects of social identity (e.g., personhood, adulthood, gender) and care (e.g., perceptions of cared individuals and paleopathological influences on mortuary treatments) through mortuary practices to piece together social landscapes of past societies. This is an outgrowth of his interests in aspects of mortuary practices, violence, paleopathology, diet, and social landscapes.

