Injury and Trauma in Bioarchaeology

Interpreting Violence in Past Lives

The remains of past people are a testament to their lived experiences, and living environment. Synthesising the latest research, this book critically examines the sources of evidence used to understand and interpret violence in bioarchaeology, exploring the significant light that such evidence can shed on past hierarchies, gender-roles and life courses.

The text draws on a diverse range of social and clinical science research to investigate violence and trauma in the archaeological record, focusing on human remains. It examines injury patterns in different groups, as well as the biological, psychological and cultural factors that make us behave violently; how our living environment influences injury and violence, the models used to identify and interpret violence in the past; and how violence is used as a social tool. Drawing on a range of case-studies, Redfern explores new research directions that will contribute to nuanced interpretations of past lives.

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This book is dedicated to my family and the memory of my father-in-law Roger Glue, a seafarer whose stories about his injuries and how they happened would fill another book.

Contents

Foreword

This volume on methods and theory regarding the study of violence is extraordinary in several respects. It draws together the many strands of factors that are necessary to not only analyze the presence of violence in the past, but to interpret the meaning of violence in particular cultures at specific moments in time. This book bridges the social science and clinical medicine literature. These are both challenging to integrate into bioarchaeological research but the approaches offered here will walk the reader through how to do so. The unique approach taken by Redfern is further enhanced by her raising various ethical issues regarding the study and interpretation of violence in not only ancient but also historic contexts. For example, she often points out that what might be considered violence by the western world, might not be considered violence in non-western and ancient groups.

If the reader only reads the introductory and concluding chapters by Redfern, they would have a truly good working knowledge about the state of thinking about violence and how these might be applied to bioarchaeological collections. But the real heart of the book does lie in the middle chapters where the reader is encouraged to think outside the box about a full suite of issues related to violence that are rarely considered together. And, the case studies are so richly detailed, so carefully laid out, and so engagingly presented, it is doubtful that any reader will stop with the Introduction. Each chapter of the book shines a different kind of light on a particular angle regarding violence, but the chapters are also accumulative, building with a sense of purpose the ways that they are all inter-related.

What makes this body of work so helpful is that the interpretations and understandings are gained through the lens of bioarchaeological data derived from the analysis of skeletonized remains. The explicit purpose of this approach is to offer readers a chance at making meaning out of violence in the past through a largely case-study approach. What pushes people to use violence? What conditions provoke violent responses or initiate violence actions? Answering these questions go quite far beyond simply identifying trauma on bony remains.

Hand in hand with this is the examination of the consequences of violence, that is, how does violence that does not kill people impair and disable them? How do fractures and other traumas end up making individuals less able to function in their daily lives? How are violence and its effects bound up in everyday experiences? How does this affect individuals depending on their age and sex, in other words,

across their life histories? Using multiple layers of meaning to reconstruct answers to these questions has implications for our own societies today, where little emphasis in terms of medical and social support is given to the survivors or warfare. There are lessons to be learned from people who suffered and survived, adapted and carried on in the aftermath of violence.

This is a very nuanced and distinctive approach and it is fleshed out with great detail in this volume. Injuries are examined and analyzed in light of social and biological life history stages. In particular, injuries and trauma that occur to the dentition and the jaw are especially problematic depending on the age that the injuries are sustained. There could be lifelong speech deficits and compromised ability to chew food. Another example of the careful and judicious approach to trauma and injury is on the ability to diagnose open (versus closed) fractures. Virtually no scholars are reporting on this and although much more study is needed, it again shows the innovative approaches being offered. Other examples and case studies explore the identification of pregnant women, vulnerable people and impaired persons in the bioarchaeological record. Redfern provides a wonderful cautionary tale about thinking through who might be excluded from the normative burial grounds. Taken together, these cautionary but helpful case studies shed light in places not normally looked.

Providing some newer methodologies drawn from a range of sources, the chapters encourage scholars to look to these for ways of getting at data that might be otherwise difficult to do. For example, Redfern provides a very concise introduction to the 'bioarchaeology of care' that provides a rigorous methodology based on clinical findings to work through the possibility that the survivor with injuries or extreme disability may have needed care and aid in order to survive the initial and subsequent sequelae of injuries and traumatic wounds. An introduction is provided to the World Health Organization's metric for establishing the daily-adjusted life year (DALY) as a means to quantify the morbidity and mortality burden within a given community. Finally, in several places with varying examples and "best practices" approach, Redfern invites scholars to think about using the web of violence approach that has been proffered as a way of showing the ripple effects within environments and the communities within those environments of factors that play into making life uncertain and creating spaces for violence to take hold. This approach examines broadly things such as pollution, droughts, state-sanctioned violence, and large-scale dramatic events that may collude to bring about increased violence or violence directed at sub-groups within communities.

A wonderful quotation stayed with me long after I completed reading the manuscript. Redfern states that "… bioarchaeology is an intimate and direct way of studying the past." The use of the term intimate here is compelling. Bioarchaeologists want their work to be relevant, to reveal something important that can help make the world a slightly better place. While there are many ways to reconstruct the past, it is true that when we lay hands on skeletonized remains, we are doing something quite intimate and personal. Examining this level of human existence that is so close to the person at the time they died is indeed intimate and awe inspiring.

I think many bioarchaeologists forget that fact. Reading this book will give the reader scores of way to reflect on that and to do a bioarchaeology of violence that is nuanced, relevant and engaged.

Bioarchaeology is hot right now, and this volume will ride the crest of new work coming out that continues to demonstrate its potential roles in explaining human behavior. It is an exciting, innovative and relevant discipline, and with an eye towards understanding violence in the world today, it would serve us well to understand our ancestors' use of it as well. The skeletal data combined with other lines of evidence are producing a far more accurate, nuanced and variable narrative of not only these violent practices. This approach provides detailed documentation about those who died and facilitates speaking for the dead.

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and Professor of Anthropology
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I can pinpoint the moment that I really, really wanted to research injury in past communities, the trauma lecture on my MSc course with Charlotte Roberts. This decision was cemented when my friend Amber lent me a copy of Margaret Judd's PhD thesis, and allowed me to tag along with her when she visited the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in 2001, where Dave Hunt shared his wealth of knowledge and experience about identifying injuries; Amber's enthusiasm for bioarchaeology remains a touchstone. Early versions of this work were shared with my dear friend Margaret Judd, and the book would have not continued without her humour, support and knowledge. Later versions were nurtured by a small group of people – you know who you are!

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