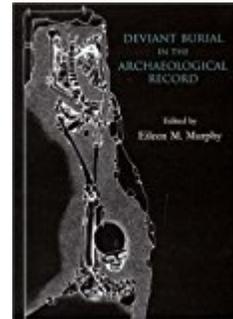




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Deviancy and Disability in the Human Past

The last two decades have seen scholars increasingly focus on aspects of premodern disability history, with an especial focus on medieval Europe and the classical world. This work has, however, remained largely within the bounds of historical rather than archaeological research. That archaeologists have made relatively little contribution to current debates is somewhat puzzling given the wide range of osteological examples of individuals with impairments that archaeologists and paleopathologists can draw on in the aid of disability history. Besides an edition of the *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* (1999) and Jane Hubert's edited volume *Madness, Disability and Social Exclusion: The Archaeology and Anthropology of "Difference"* (2000), there has been little explicit focus on the topic of disability as a social and historical identity within archaeological discourse. However, the interested reader can find substantial amounts of material in other edited volumes, such as this one, which frequently intersect with evidence for attitudes toward impairment and disability for periods that offer little other evidence.

The papers in this volume originate from a session

held at the eleventh annual meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists in Cork, Ireland, in 2005. The focus of that session was on atypical and deviant burial phenomena applied to individuals from a wide range of past human societies, which, as Eileen M. Murphy states in the introduction, "can include criminals, women who died during childbirth, unbaptized infants, people with disabilities, and supposed revenants, to name but a few" (p. xii). As such, several of the papers in the volume will be of less interest to disability historians than others. This review will focus primarily on those that discuss impairment and disability to some extent.

In the first chapter of the volume, "Unusual Burials and Necrophobia: An Insight into the Burial Archaeology of Fear," Anastasia Tsaliki provides a broad overview of the range of motivating factors behind deviant burials—linked by common motivating behaviors of "necrophobia," the fear of the dead. Tsaliki argues that "the type of burial together with the analysis of associated human skeletal remains ... may offer an insight into an individual's deviant treatment," i.e., the analysis of human skeletal remains can give us some insight

into the identity and attitudes ascribed toward the person in life (p. 2). This chapter briefly focuses on pathology as a factor in cultivating attitudes of fear toward the dead body before moving on to discuss attitudes toward supposed witches and revenants. There are several case studies of interest, including one that examines a series of graves of adolescents and young males from ninth- to eighth-century BC Italy. The subjects were buried in unusually prone and flexed positions. Several of them had physical impairments including facial and cranial traumas, which Tsaliki argues could be evidence for sacrificial behavior. Unusual burial treatment from eighth- to fifth-century BC Greece involved inhumation during a period when cremation was prevalent and included an individual with a misaligned and possible infected tibia. A more contemporary case relates to a sixty-plus-year-old man from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century AD from Lesbos who possessed a range of cranio-facial changes, possibly related to paralysis, and was buried with three bent spikes. This was a behavior associated with fear of vampirism; Tsaliki argues that in Greek folklore “physical disability is known to be a factor that can predispose an individual to become a vampire” (p. 14).

In the second chapter, Edeltraud Aspöck analyzes the utility of the notion of deviant burials by undertaking a thorough review of the two main streams of research on the topic in German and Anglophone studies. The chapter usefully notes the difference between the German expression “Sonderbestattung,” a term that translates as special or exceptional burial, with no positive or negative connotations, and the Anglophone focus on the deviant aspect of burial behavior, which typically ascribes negativity to the practice. Aspöck explores the history of how such terms have developed and been utilized in the archaeological literature. He notes that German research has focused primarily on the question of what makes a burial “different” from those of its surrounding culture, while Anglophone research has typically focused on a less rigid approach to categorization and has instead applied the concept of deviancy “in terms which are of current interest in Anglophone archaeology” (p. 29). The current interest in disability that is emerging within archaeology could be taken as an example of such a trend. Both streams of research have found those who are physically different to have been treated in an unusual or deviant fashion, though Aspöck notes that British research has more explicitly focused on the attitudes shown toward disabled people in their burial treatment than German research. The difficulties and ironies of the interpretation of different burial treatment

are highlighted in figure 2.2, a German diagram indicating the range of positive and negative attitudes that could motivate a “Sonderbestattung,” which includes both “special social-religious roles (e.g., hermaphroditic, mentally handicapped)” and “social outcasts (e.g., hermaphroditic, mentally handicapped)” (p. 22). This chapter is particularly useful in providing a context in which to place the largely Anglophone research on display in this volume, to make the reader question how we assign difference or deviancy in a given burial treatment, and to assess whether it translates to such difference during the life of an individual.

Stephany Leach’s chapter, “Odd One Out? Earlier Neolithic Deposition of Human Remains in Caves and Rock Shelters in the Yorkshire Dales,” focuses on the phenomena of cave burials in the early Neolithic upland regions of Yorkshire which have been encountered at more than twenty sites. While earlier authors have argued that the appearance of human skeletal material in such sites was due to natural factors, Leach makes the case that cave burial was a deliberate form of burial treatment and examines material from five sites to look at the possible motivating factors. She links this conspicuous burial treatment to a range of reasons, including impairment and disfigurement. Several individuals buried in these sites displayed evidence of physical difference, including cranial trauma and severe osteoarthritis. Of particular note was an individual who would have possessed visible disfiguring lesions of the jaw whose skeleton was deliberately “processed” after death by having the left tibia split open longitudinally. Another example, the cave burial of a seventeen- to eighteen-year-old woman with signs of early osteoarthritic development and facial deformities, is also intriguing. Leach argues that these individuals would have, for various reasons, stood out as notably different in their seminomadic communities due to their impairments. Therefore they would have been buried separately within cave contexts in a manner markedly different from the normative burial practices of this period—communal burials that mixed the skeletal remains of the deceased. As Leach notes, “the individuals whose remains were not commingled, in some way remained separate from the ancestral community of the dead” (p. 51). Leach usefully, and thoughtfully, notes that we must be careful not to project our present notions of disability too far into the past, and that these individuals may not necessarily have been ascribed negative social roles, but were still seen as markedly different as evidenced by how they were treated in death.

Philippe Charlier’s chapter, “The Value of Palaeoter-

atology and Forensic Pathology for the Understanding of Atypical Burials: Two Mediterranean Examples from the Field,” discusses the importance of utilizing pathological understandings of the human skeleton. Of particular interest is his example of a child with Down syndrome who was discovered from a Late Bronze Age (twelfth to ninth century BC) context in what would be the later Imperial Forum in Rome. This individual displayed evidence of unhealed, possibly violent, trauma to the head prior to death, which Charlier argues is an example of human sacrifice of the impaired, a recurring theme of the volume. Charlier asks the reader to consider the range of impairments that would have been considered different and marginalizing in the past: “What is a slight anomaly to the modern world ... could have been interpreted in the ancient world as a severe and ‘fatal’ malformation, particularly because of the potential associated symbolic causes” (p. 62). While this chapter provides an interesting case study, a criticism has to be made of the terminology employed. “Palaeoteratology,” the study of “monsters” in the past, is a term that is out of sync with current understandings within wider disability studies of how we should discuss impaired people, and stands out as something of an anachronism within an otherwise interesting chapter.

Alison Taylor’s chapter, “Aspects of Deviant Burial in Roman Britain,” provides another overview of the range of burial practices, and possible motivating factors behind them, from the first through the fifth centuries AD. Such practices include “decapitation, prone burial, unusually secure graves, with signs of unusual violence ... and dismembered remains,” practices that notably differ from the normal “care for the integrity of the body” recognized in other burials (p. 92). Numerous motivating behaviors are explored by Taylor, including sacrificial and punitive actions, pagan religious beliefs, and the fear of the supernatural. Impairment is a frequent theme in such burials, from the potential human sacrifice represented by the bog bodies of individuals with impairments, to an example of an instance where “the foot of a decapitated lame man was removed” postmortem, to an example of a physically impaired elderly woman who was decapitated postmortem (p. 104). The link between impairments and an individual’s age and gender is also present in the description of an elderly woman who had severe osteoarthritis and was buried prone, outside of cemetery bounds at Godmanchester, Cambridgeshire. Finally, another example from Cambridgeshire, of an un-

usually well-secured and lavish burial of an infant with hydrocephalus, is discussed. Taylor argues that such “unusually careful and respectful graves” were adopted to help the soul pass to the afterlife safely. She explicitly links this to Tsaliki’s earlier notions of necrophobia: “Loving care may have been demonstrated here, but care too was taken that the soul would pass safely to the afterlife and would not escape to trouble the living” (p. 110). This highlights the duality of attitudes that can be read into the burial treatment of impaired people.

Estella Weiss-Krejci focuses on the burials of individuals of the houses of Habsburg and Babenberg in medieval and post-medieval Europe in her chapter, “Unusual Life, Unusual Death and the Fate of the Corpse: A Case Study from Dynastic Europe.” This chapter has little on disability as a theme, but notes that those who died from communicable diseases, including smallpox, tuberculosis, plague, influenza, and typhus, were in several cases eviscerated, and in some cases were not laid in state after their deaths. Finally, Colm Donnelly and Murphy, in their chapter “The Origins of *Cillíní* in Ireland,” discuss the phenomenon of special children’s burial grounds (*cillíní*) that date largely to the post-medieval period. These *cillíní* were the designated resting places of those who could not be buried within consecrated ground, a group including unbaptized children, but also strangers, outcasts, suicide victims, and the mentally impaired. The chapter provides a historical overview and survey of the *cillíní*. It discusses recent research for their use.

This volume provides an interesting and varied range of evidence regarding responses to impairment and disability in the past, especially with regard to negative and superstitious attitudes toward individuals in contexts where we otherwise have little textual or artistic evidence to support analyses. Although the topic of disability is not the focus of this volume, the chapters discussed demonstrate the potential of this type of evidence and of archaeological dialogues that can be adopted to address topics of substantial interest to disability historians of prehistory, the classical world, and the medieval period. Arguably, the roots of archaeological study of impairment within paleopathology and forensics can cast the debate within a medical discourse that could alienate disability studies scholars from its use. However, due to its potential richness, the evidence encountered can and should be used by disability historians rather than exist solely within archaeological discourse.

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