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REVIEWS

Mays, S. *The Archaeology of Human Bones*. London: Routledge. 1998. RRP \$65.00. Softcover, pp242+xiii.

This book is essentially an introduction to human osteology for archaeologists and students. The aim, according to Mays, is "to show the sorts of information which can be obtained from the scientific study of ancient human skeletal remains and how these data can contribute to topics of general archaeological interest (p. xiii)." He achieves this aim.

The book covers the same range of issues and is organised like Brothwell's *Digging Up Bones*, last published in 1981. The similarity is not just in the range of contents but also in the British emphasis in the text. Most examples, but not all, come from British excavations. Its British origin is also visible in the discussion of physical anthropology which is much more descriptive and less statistically based than American books. The book is also aimed at a British rather than North American audience which explains why there is the consistent emphasis on pointing out the usefulness of human skeletal research to archaeologists. In Britain systematic osteological approaches to archaeological questions are less well-established than in the United States. This means that for a physical anthropologist the book is fairly basic but for an undergraduate student in the early stages of a degree or for an archaeologist it is eminently readable although less practical than technical manuals such as *Excavating Human Skeletal Remains* (Ubelaker 1986).

The book begins with an introduction to the nature of bones and teeth in Chapter 1. This is a general discussion but covers all the main facts. There is no attempt to provide an identification guide and this is the consistent emphasis throughout. Chapter 2, in keeping with the focus on archaeology, discusses the nature of an archaeological human bone assemblage. Taphonomic factors are explained through a simple diagram. Chapter 3 deals with age and sex estimation and here the British bias is evident in the consideration of the methods used (eg. the Miles method of dental aging is much more likely to turn up in a British book than elsewhere) and also in the lack of emphasis on population standards. It is unusual in books of this sort to see any discussion about the origins of sexual dimorphism in the skeleton

yet this addition means the discussion of sex identification is more thorough. There is also a very thorough discussion of sexing immature remains with some interesting examples. I particularly appreciate the note that 50% accuracy in sex estimation can be obtained by guesswork alone (p. 42). Metric variation of the skeleton is dealt with in chapter 4. What was really appreciated in this chapter, however, was the discussion of the statistical methods used to analyse morphological variation. While brief, this is a useful introduction which just could have been improved by directing the reader to further sources. As a companion chapter, non-metric variation is discussed in Chapter 5. This was a good summary of the field but the statistical problems of non-metrics do differ slightly from metric analyses and it might have been useful if this had been flagged.

Mays does a lot of work on palaeopathology and this is reflected in Chapters 6-8 where he discusses palaeopathology, dental disease and injury. Chemical analysis of the bone is described in Chapter 9. This easily understood description clearly demonstrates the accessibility of these methods. Often these methods are made to sound difficult or requiring of great degrees of technical skill. Mays provides a useful summary. The same occurs in Chapter 10 in the discussion of ancient DNA. Mays steers nicely between the enthusiasm for a new technique and the scepticism as to how widely this technique will be able to be applied. This was a well-balanced and easily understood introduction. Finally in chapter 11 cremated bone is discussed. Cremated bone is commonly found in both Europe and Britain and Mays manages to clearly explain how much can be done with these sorts of skeletal remains.

Overall the book is exactly what it sets out to be: a good, easily understood introduction to the value of human skeletal research to archaeologists. The audience it is aimed for is quite specific. The book makes no reference to forensics or to work on peat bodies, mummies etc. It is about bones and archaeology. One outstanding feature of the book is the clarity of the illustrations. The photographs are particularly clear. In a few sections, however, more illustrations would have been appreciated. For example, in Chapter 2 photographs showing the process of excavation rather than just the finished product would have been more informative. Similarly more illustrations of dental disease would have been useful. A major drawback is also that in Figure 3.1 the male and female pelves are reversed in the illustration. This mistake is corrected in a list of errata appended to the end of the table of figures, not the most easily found list of errata. Sections on

further reading would also have been helpful in the chapters following Chapter 1. For instance in Chapter 2, references to specific manuals would have compensated for the lack of any discussion about the use of preservatives or the methods of excavating soft tissue.

While most of the book is a good general summary of current techniques there are some odd omissions and areas where significant debates have been glossed over. In Chapter 3, a dental chart showing development of the deciduous dentition as well as the adult dentition is missing. Nor is the accuracy of age estimation among subadults on the basis of dental development mentioned. While he concentrates in the book on population studies of metric variation, Mays makes no mention of stature estimation or other facial reconstruction. Stature estimation is standard in all skeletal studies and facial reconstruction is being more frequently used in archaeological circumstances so it was odd that neither were even mentioned. In Chapter 5 one had the impression that Mays did not find non-metric analysis as useful as metric analysis but this seems odd given the number of non-metric studies which have found extremely useful results on population variation (eg. Pardoe 1991). In Chapter 8, the osteological paradox, i.e. that healthy skeletons could mean a sickly population, is only briefly alluded to. The ongoing debate about whether the size of hypoplastic defects on the teeth is a valid measure of stress is also glossed over and under referenced.

Nevertheless the book is a readable good general introduction. My only wish would be that in a few places Mays had been more willing to provide a conclusion or opinion on particular techniques. For example, some conclusion as to appropriate age intervals for estimation would have been useful.

In conclusion, for excavation and identification of human remains in the field this is not the book, but as an introduction to the value of skeletal analysis for archaeology I hope people read it and appreciate the dedication which I suspect is to his dog.

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References

- Brothwell, D. 1981. *Digging Up Bones* London: British Museum of Natural History.
- Pardoe, C. 1991. Isolation and Evolution in Tasmania. *Current Anthropology* 31:1-21
- Ubelaker, D. 1986. *Human Skeletal Remains* Chicago: Aldine.