

Deviant Burial in the Archaeological Record, Edited by Eileen Murphy

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Edited by Eileen Murphy, Senior Lecturer in Osteoarchaeology at Queen's University Belfast and specialist in deviant and minority burial practices, '*Deviant Burial in the Archaeological Record*' is the outcome of a session held under the same name at the 11th Annual Conference of the European Association of Archaeologists, 2005. A collection of twelve papers, this new volume is the first to deal exclusively with deviant and non-normative burial and is designed to begin to fill the gap in the theoretical and practical literature on the topic which has existed to date. While most archaeologists necessarily deal with that which is common and recurrent, '*Deviant Burial in the Archaeological Record*' demonstrates that uncommon practice may be equally revealing when it comes to the belief structures of a society. The suggestion is that unusual burial may provide invaluable insight into past understandings of disease and disability, criminality, difference, fear of death and the dead, and concepts of eschatological fate. The book also indicates that deviancy may be archaeologically identifiable, whether conferred in life, burial or death, and that those who receive non-normative burial represent a variable cross-section of society which depends upon the culture from which they come.

Illustrating the above, the book's twelve chapters cross a number of European countries and span a timeframe from the Early Neolithic to the early Twentieth Century. The first two chapters provide a theoretical background to recognising and interpreting

non-normative burials, highlighting common elements such as an unusually secure grave, decapitation and/or dismemberment of the corpse, prone (face-down) burial, binding, and unusual grave locations. The latter of the two opening chapters focuses primarily on the development of the Anglophone and Germanic archaeological traditions with regards to identifying and interpreting 'deviant' burials, usefully highlighting and discussing the negative connotations of the word deviant and comparing it to the neutral *sonderbestattung* (meaning special or exceptional burial). Within the context of the volume this discussion is particularly important as, despite the use of the word deviant in the title, the book deals not only with negatively viewed individuals, deaths and burials, but also with those which would be better described as special or exceptional. To her credit, the editor addresses this issue proactively within the introduction and throughout the volume, including the cover, useful examples of 'deviant burial' are given, such as those of women who died in childbirth, unbaptised infants, prisoners, battle combatants, the diseased, and the disabled.

The subsequent ten chapters consist of case studies which are structured chronologically and for the most part usefully named to make their geographical area and time period clear. Chapter three discusses cave deposition in the Neolithic Yorkshire Dales, highlighting the fact that even in the absence of historical data deviant burials may be identified and tentative interpretations made. Chapter four demonstrates the contribution of palaeoentomology and forensic pathology to understanding non-normative burial through Mediterranean examples dating to the Late Bronze Age. These examples show how disease and congenital abnormality may be identifiable, and possibly causative factors, in non-normative burial cases. Infant burial deposits in Geto-Dacian culture are discussed in

chapter five, suggesting the identification of infant sacrifice. Chapter six considers deviant burial in Roman Britain, particularly the need for controlling the deviant dead, such as decapitation and binding. Conversely, chapter seven questions whether the unusual is in fact deviant, illustrating that what appears different may in fact relate to coexisting acceptable practices, through case studies for Late Saxon Wessex. Through a deliberation of charcoal burials in Early Medieval Europe, chapter eight shows how unusual practice in one geographical area may be common practice elsewhere, stressing the need for consideration of broader contexts as burial rites which appear similar may be exploited in different times and places for variable reasons. Chapter nine returns to the classic definition of deviancy in a discussion of an Anglo-Saxon execution cemetery in East Yorkshire. Chapter ten stands out as very different, dividing members of the Post-Medieval European Habsburg and Babenberg Dynasties afforded non-normative burial into seventeen categories based on historically attested deviancy and exploring which of these perceived differences were reflected in deviant burial practices and which were not. The penultimate chapter posits that the Irish Cillin, or infant burial ground, relates to wider religious change in the aftermath of the Reformation, the ultimate chapter similarly relating to the interaction between Catholic and Protestant beliefs in the form of the Wogan-Browne Mausoleum, Co. Kildare (AD 1743).

These diverse case studies are where the real strength of the book lies, each of which has clearly been carefully selected. All well written, they consistently integrate the themes of the book and are carefully structured with useful abstracts and subheadings. While each chapter is self contained, their collection benefits the reader as the temporal depth and presented variation in non-normative burial throughout the volume clearly and irrevocably demonstrates that

deviant burial must be seen as a meaningful practice, the study of which has great potential to add to current understandings of past societies. Thus, the book represents a significant contribution to existing literature on deviant burial. It is not that it is saying something entirely new; however, by bringing together diverse case studies, the collection shows the wider significance of the study of deviant burial to understanding not only specific cultural practices, but the common human endeavour to deal with uncommon and unnatural death. Due to this, the book is likely to enjoy prominence in the subject area. With the exception of chapters four and nine ‘*Deviant Burial in the Archaeological Record*’, which employ extensive specialist vocabulary from the field of palaeopathology, the style is uncomplicated, making it suitable for both established archaeologists and also students. It is, therefore, not designed to function as a comprehensive field manual, but to introduce the reader to the interpretative possibilities opened up by the recognition of non-normative burials and to provide a useful background knowledge that will assist in the recognition of such burials in the future. To this end there are numerous useful photographs and illustrations of burials, let down only by the unfortunate omission of a figure list. This is compounded by the absence of an index, which under normal circumstances would affect the reader’s ability to navigate the text. However, in this case it is a very small flaw in an otherwise highly commendable volume as the theme explored is so tightly defined and adhered to that the book is easily navigable regardless.