

## BOOK REVIEW

*Cremation and the Archaeology of Death*. By JESSICA I. CEREZO-ROMÁN, ANNA WESSMAN, and HOWARD WILLIAMS, eds. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xviii + 364. Hardcover, \$120.00. ISBN 978-0-19-879811-8.

The cremation of the dead is an ancient and widespread practice. The earliest documented cases, dating to approximately 40,000 years ago, derive from Lake Mungo in Australia. Since then, cremation has occurred on virtually every continent and its popularity has persisted through the present day. Given this vast temporal and geographical span, it is unsurprising that the ritual, social, and ideological contexts of individual cremations differ widely. As a result, the interpretation of archaeological cremations has traditionally been a culture-specific endeavor.

This volume seeks to advance the field of cremation studies by widening the interpretive lens and considering the variability of cremation rituals from a broader theoretical perspective.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the book advocates an interdisciplinary approach to the study of ancient cremation which the editors call “the archaeology of cremation.” Ideally, the archaeology of cremation looks beyond the mere analysis of human remains to “a thorough exploration of the materialities, spatialities, and interactions with other disposal strategies” (page 10) that is governed by six principal foci: (1) greater integration of science and theory is necessary, (2) cremation should be studied interdisciplinarily from the perspectives of history (especially that of death and dying), sociology, and anthropology, (3) cremation is a transformative rite of passage, (4) cremation should be considered in the context of culture-specific daily activities and technologies, (5) the variability of past cremation practices must be analyzed, and (6) an understanding of modern cremation is essential to the study of ancient cremation. Accordingly, each of the case

<sup>1</sup> For other recent scholarship on the archaeology of cremation, see Ian Kuijt, Colin P. Quinn, and Gabriel Cooney (eds.) 2014. *Transformation by Fire: The Archaeology of Cremation in Cultural Context*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press; Christopher W. Schmidt and Steven A. Symes (eds.) 2015. *The Analysis of Burned Human Remains*, second edition. Oxford: Academic Press; Tim Thompson (ed.) 2015. *The Archaeology of Cremation: Burned Human Remains in Funerary Studies*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

studies presented in this volume engage with these principal foci to varying degrees.

The book begins with an introduction written by the editors (Chapter 1, Howard Williams, Jessica I. Cerezo-Román, and Anna Wessman) that describes the theoretical framework, organization, and aims of the volume. The 14 case studies that follow are separated thematically into three parts, covering material from Europe and North America and ranging in date from the Mesolithic period (ca. 9300–4000 BCE) to the present day. The first part, “Part I: Relational Fiery Technologies,” is concerned with the relationship between cremation and other methods of disposal. In particular, Chapter 2 (Amy Gray Jones) investigates the variability of Mesolithic mortuary practices in northwest Europe. Chapters 3 (Katharina Rebay-Salisbury) and 4 (Ruth Nugent) examine the interplay between inhumation and cremation in Early Iron Age Central Europe and Early Anglo-Saxon England respectively, while Chapter 5 (Lynne Goldstein) explores cremated deposits at Aztalan in southern Wisconsin, a Mississippian site, and the ways in which cremation was symbolically employed for transformative purposes. Chapter 6 (Douglas H. Ubelaker), the final chapter in this part, deviates from the others as it uses modern forensic case studies to illustrate the ways in which thermally altered bones can be misidentified and misinterpreted.

“Part II: Transforming and Commemorating with Cremation” focuses on the material culture associated with cremations—such as pyre goods (objects placed on the pyre and incinerated with the dead) and grave goods (objects buried with the cremated dead), the transformative processes the human remains undergo, and the significance of urns and architectural structures. Chapters 7 and 8 are concerned with Late Bronze Age assemblages: Chapter 7 (Gabriel Cooney) looks at the spatial ordering of burial mounds and graves in Ireland and its significance to the social histories of the groups associated with them, while Chapter 8 (Anna Röst) explores post-cremation depositional practices in Scandinavia. The remaining chapters discuss aspects of personhood in Gallo-Roman cremation burials (Chapter 9, Jessica Cerezo-Román, Koen Deforce, Denis Henrotay, and Wim Van Neer) and the role of architecture in the performative and commemorative aspects of cremation burial (Chapter 10, Anna Wessman and Howard Williams).

The final part, “Part III: Space and Time in Cremating Societies,” concentrates on when the practice of cremation emerged in various societies and the length of its duration as a dominant burial rite. Focusing on roughly the same geographical region, Chapters 11 (Jarkko Saipio) and 12 (Lise Harvig) respectively explore the evolution of cremation practices from the Stone Age through the

Bronze Age in eastern Fennoscandia and the nature of the substantial shift in cremation burial rituals that occurred between the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age in Scandinavia. In Chapter 13 (Kirsty E. Squires), the author describes the ways in which seasonality impacted Anglo-Saxon cremation rituals. The last chapter, Chapter 14 (Howard Williams and Anna Wessman), examines modern commemorative strategies in the urban cemetery of Hietaniemi (Helsinki, Finland).

Overall, this volume provides an overview of current approaches to the archaeology of cremation in Europe and North America. Although most of the essays are concerned with prehistoric topics, scholars of the Greco-Roman world should take particular note of the subject matter discussed in Chapter 9 (Gallo-Roman funerary practices), and the theoretic approaches described in Chapters 1 (the introduction), 6 (modern comparative practices), and 10 (structures for the cremated dead). In conclusion, this volume considerably advances our understanding of ancient cremation and the past peoples who practiced it.

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