

## BOOK REVIEW

*Isthmia Volume IX. The Roman and Byzantine Graves and Human Remains.* By JOSEPH L. RIFE. Princeton: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 2012. Pp. xlviii + 511. Hardcover, \$150.00. ISBN 978-0-87661-939-1.

As one of the four panhellenic sanctuaries, Isthmia has been the site of extensive archaeological excavation since the 1950s. Although exploration initially centered on the Temple of Poseidon and its associated Sanctuary, the site expanded to include a Roman Bath complex and its underlying Greek Pool, the enigmatic East Field (a conglomeration of walls from small buildings located 50m east of the Temple of Poseidon), as well as the Hexamilion Wall and its adjoining Fortress.<sup>1</sup> Rife's award-winning volume, the most recent addition to the Isthmia excavation series, focuses on the graves recovered near the fortifications and the ruins of the Sanctuary.<sup>2</sup> Excavated between 1954 and 1976, the study sample consists of 30 graves which contained a minimum of 69 individuals. These graves date to the Late Roman to Early Byzantine periods (ca. 4<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) and yield a remarkable amount of evidence concerning the lifestyles and burial customs of the inhabitants of the Isthmus.

Through the comprehensive analysis of the graves and their contents, Rife aims to explore the transformation of rural Greek society from Late Antiquity to the Byzantine Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> To achieve his goal, he considers the material and biological evidence in tandem; he further places the evidence within its proper archaeological and historical contexts, compares it to regional material from Corinth and other sites in the northeastern Peloponnese, and ultimately interprets it through the lens of anthropological theory. Rife's holistic approach transcends the traditional "catalogue and commentary" (viii) model, and as a result, his watershed monograph is the first publication of its size and scope to apply current theoretical

<sup>1</sup> The previous excavation volumes (*Isthmia I-VIII*), which present the findings from the Sanctuary, the Hexamilion Wall and the Fortress, are published by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens (Princeton).

<sup>2</sup> This book is the recipient of two awards from the Classical Association of the Middle West and South: the 2013 Outstanding Publication Award and the 2013 First Book Award.

<sup>3</sup> Note that this subject is explored from an anthropological perspective in P. Nick Kardulias' *From Classical to Byzantine: Social Evolution in Late Antiquity and the Fortress at Isthmia, Greece* (2005, BAR International Series 1412).

concepts and interdisciplinary methods to the study of archaeological burials in ancient Greece.

The book is divided into four sections. The first (Chapter 1) introduces the methods and materials used in the study and highlights prominent themes, while the second (Part I: Chapters 2–4) provides background information through descriptions of the archaeological, historical and social contexts of the graves. In particular, Chapter 2 details the physical remains of the graves (i.e. their forms, contents and associations); Chapter 3 presents the history of the settlement as well as the topography and burial chronology; and Chapter 4 reconstructs the local funerary rituals and their possible connections to social structure and ideology. The third section (Part II: Chapters 5–7) examines the osteological and bioarchaeological contexts of the human remains: the demographic attributes (e.g. sex, age at death, living stature) and morphological composition (e.g. metric and nonmetric traits, physical appearances) of the skeletal remains are discussed in Chapter 5; issues of diet, oral hygiene and dental health are explored in Chapter 6; and Chapter 7 expounds on the pathological conditions that are present in the sample and considers their epidemiological implications. Finally, the fourth section (Chapter 8) reviews the results of the mortuary and skeletal analyses and discusses how these findings inform our understanding of the transformation of rural Greek society. Notably, Rife concludes that the family unit was the foundation of Isthmian social structure during this transitional period marked by socio-political and environmental instability. The population itself was stable and growing, and its members were relatively healthy. Its dead were buried uniformly and without material that would indicate age, gender, status, or group identity, suggesting that these classifications also warranted little differentiation in life. Moreover, the adoption of Christianity was gradual and possibly facilitated by the permitted perseverance of traditional pagan practices (e.g. the ritual destruction of ceramic vessels and the deposition of coins).

Rife is to be commended for the clear and well-organized presentation of a mammoth corpus of fieldwork and research. His careful and precise prose is augmented by copious illustrations of the highest quality. Indeed, the photographs are reminiscent of White et al.'s gold standard textbook, *Human Osteology*.<sup>4</sup> The biological data are sufficiently detailed for human osteologists, but are also accompa-

<sup>4</sup> White, T.D., M.T. Black and P.A. Folkens. 2011. *Human Osteology*, third edition. Waltham, MA: Academic Press.

nied by a plethora of informative notes and meticulous descriptions of terminology and methods, which ultimately succeed in making his work easily accessible to non-specialists. Opportunities for further research, however, still exist. The sample is small and capable of yielding only preliminary conclusions; thus, a larger sample (if one were to become available) would produce more concrete results. Furthermore, biomolecular studies could positively confirm some of Rife's observations. For example, mitochondrial DNA analyses of individuals in groups of multiple burials could bolster his claims of kinship (220–221), while stable isotope analyses of carbon and nitrogen could definitively determine dietary patterns (summarized, 465–466). Nevertheless, Rife's volume is an interdisciplinary triumph and provides a rigorous model for future bioarchaeological research in the Mediterranean.

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