

BOOK REVIEW

The Agora Bone Well. Edited by MARIA A. LISTON, SUSAN I. ROTROFF, LYNN M. SNYDER with a Contribution by ANDREW STEWART. *Hesperia Supplement 50*. American School of Classical Studies at Athens. 2018. Pp. xiii + 185. Paperback, \$75.00. ISBN: 978-0-87661-550-8.

By its title, this work could appear to be a rather dry recitation of objects found in an abandoned well in the Athenian Agora – a litany, let's be honest, of the refuse of a rather unremarkable period of Athenian history. But quite to the contrary, this volume represents a well written, engaging story full of sociological insights, unanswered puzzles and human pathos that could just as easily have been entitled *The Mystery of the Agora Bone Well*.

The well was first excavated by Dorothy Burr Thompson about 80 years ago. Despite its remarkable contents, it remained understudied until this trio of scholars produced it in what, to my mind, is an exemplar of scholarly cooperation and superb writing. Maria Liston is an anthropologist at the University of Waterloo; Susan Rotroff is an expert on Greek pottery; Lynn Snyder is an anthropologist who specializes in zooarchaeology.

The well lies on the northern slope of Kolonos Agoraios, in the shadow of the Hephaisteion and was filled in during the second quarter of the 2nd century BCE. Its contents contained the usual bits of rubbish found in wells, such as pottery, industrial waste and other refuse. What makes it remarkable are the bones of over 450 infants and of a handful of older individuals, and the remains of over 150 dogs.

Chapter 1 describes the well and its neighborhood, demonstrating clearly that in the 2nd century BCE it was an industrial area. Clear illustrations and diagrams (the book contains 95 in all, and 5 tables), supported by careful writing, give a clear picture of how the well and its system of cisterns worked. Chapter 2 carefully examines the human remains. One skeleton was of an adult male who suffered from hemochromatosis, resulting in painful joint disease. A child of about 8-10 years old may have died from brucellosis. An infant of 16-18 months of age shows undeniable and severe signs of Battered Child Syndrome while another, though suffering from hydrocephalus, was kept alive and given care

for a significant period of time until it died. The remainder of the human bones are those of infants who died just before or just after birth and exhibit no gender bias. A lengthy discussion of ancient birth related complications and of an infant who was born with a cleft palate, coupled with the gruesome injuries of the abused child, give a vivid picture of some of the less discussed realities of ancient life. As the authors later say, "Ancient literature and art introduce us to only the very richest of Athenians, and it is easy to forget that life for many more was always precarious" (139).

Chapter 3 treats the faunal skeletal material, of which the dogs represent the most startling find. They mostly seem to be free roaming mongrels, often referred to as pariah dogs.

Chapter 4 treats the artifacts found in the well. Meticulous charts and illustrations attest to the wide variety of objects found. Andrew Stewart contributed to this chapter with his study of the small, female marble herm found in the well. As is true throughout the book, the authors include numerous ancient literary texts to bring the objects to life, a notable example being a discussion of what is probably a "baby bottle," a touching object to be found with so many infant skeletons.

Chapter 5 is entitled "The Wider Archaeological and Cultural Context of the Well" and typifies the authors' insistence on going beyond mere objects and including the people behind them. A clear study of mass infant burials and the practice of infanticide opens up many questions. Why are all but five of the children neonatal? Did they die from widespread disease, infanticide, or an external attack? Why is there only one adult? What explains behavior to dead children that we would consider callous? Could the limited area around the well have provided this many dead infants in the short period between the well's going out of use and being filled in? What is the association, if any, of dogs with deaths, especially those of infants?

The authors, rather like the authors of murder mysteries, are careful not to reveal the answers to these questions until the very end. Far be it from this reviewer to be a spoiler. Instead, the reader is encouraged to read this engaging work for her/himself. The book is expensive, but the quality of the work and its many illustrations justify it. It should be in the library of any college or university with a Classics program. Students interested in archaeology should be assigned it and parts would make excellent reading for a Women in Antiquity or a Greek Civilization course. Not only is the tale engaging and informative, the authors use their lucid prose and numerous high-quality illustrations to ensure that a non-specialist can follow even the finest details of the excavation and interpretation. The prose is

uniform throughout with no discernible typographical errors. All in all, *The Agora Bone Well* is an example of the best sort of cooperative scholarship our field has to offer.

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