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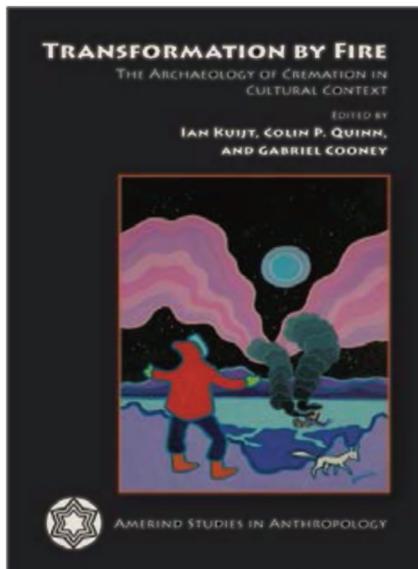


Book reviews

Transformation by fire. The Archaeology of Cremation in Cultural Context.

Ian Kuijt, Colin P. Quinn, Gabriel Cooney (Eds.)

The University of Arizona Press, Tucson.
2014. Amerind studies in Anthropology.
ISBN 978-0-8165-3114-1. \$54.41
(hardcover).



Transformation by fire: The Archaeology of Cremation in Cultural Context is a welcome publication that offers some new perspectives on cremation practice in Europe and North America. The publication was based on a session that took place at the SAA's (Society for American Archaeology) annual conference in 2011. The book was published in 2014 by the University of Arizona Press edited by Ian Kuijt from the University of Notre Dame, Illinois (USA), Colin P. Quinn from the University of Michigan (USA) and Gabriel Cooney from University College Dublin (Ireland).

The book is composed of four main parts that comprise 13 chapters focusing on temporal and cultural contexts of cremation and emphasizes the new perspective on cremation as a social context reflecting the social impacts of individuals or the gender of individuals. Furthermore, some

particular chapters focus on concepts of the self and identity, individual pathways from death to the final deposition, and movement and re-collection of burnt fragments.

The publication differs from other publications aimed at cremation through its emphasis on the sequences of the burning process, symbolism of the fire, total destruction of the body, and its transformation into the ash reflecting the materialism of the human being. In this publication, readers will not find issues dealing with methodology: such as technology reconstruction, isotope and DNA extraction, bone identification, methods of laboratory treatments and case studies. By contrast, most of the contributions are holistically conceived studies of a broader spectrum – from different time periods and geographic areas – focusing on the meanings of cremation. This focus, in my opinion, makes the book innovative and rewarding.

In the book's introduction the editors express their concern regarding the contextualization of cremation in global and temporal perspectives (pp. 4–22). They discuss the ambiguous definition of “cremation” and conclude that it is impossible to define it: since cremation is not just an archaeological record, but is a particular social phenomenon associated with emotions (pp. 4–5). Furthermore, cremation is not just a discrete event in time, but is a continual process beginning with the death of an individual and subsequently the pathways of the remains into to their final deposition. Thus ritual activities taking place before and after cremation are often poorly understood and may be of more significance than the burning act itself. The editors ask the question: who were the ones planning, organizing and practising the cremation and collecting the bone after burning from the pyre. Cremation is not only a complicated technological process; it is also an organizationally- and socially-challenging event.

Other parts of the book consider particular regions and periods from North America and Europe. Asa M. Larsson

and Liv Nilson Stutz (p. 47, chap. 3) investigate the relation between secondary inhumation and cremation in Mesolithic and Neolithic Sweden. The authors criticize the dichotomous concept of a funeral rite separated into cremation and inhumation, and they decline the term “bi-ritual”, and suppose that these ways of burial are not in contradiction – being purely arbitrary constructs of our minds. Rather, they assume that both ways of burial are part of the same coherent mortuary program and therefore they have the same aim, *i.e.* to deflesh human body as fast as possible. This opinion is discussed and criticized by H. Williams in another chapter (chap. 5). Williams denies that the categorization of burials is arbitrary. His argument follows from the technological difficulty of cremation. In his opinion, cremation is a community event: it cannot be practised in isolation and therefore requires complex organization, planning and the involvement of a wide spectrum of the community. All ways of burial have a particular reason. His claims are supported by the excavation and research conducted at Spong Hill in Early Anglo-Saxon England.

Personally, I was the most impressed by two other contributions. The first of them is written by J. Brück (p. 119, chap. 6) and the second by J. Cerezo Román (p. 148, chap. 8). J. Brück deals with gender differences, the treatment of the human body, and concepts of the self in British Early Bronze Age. She deplores the “androcentric tone of much research on the European Bronze Age” (p. 120). This “tone” is characterised by the assumption that – “poor” cremation burials only represent females, *a priori* people with low status. The “poorness” of cremations means the absence of grave goods and a low amount of bone fragments. J. Brück interprets the “poorness” of these female burials in the archaeological record completely the other way round. In her opinion, they could reflect a loss over generations of bone curations and circulation away from the mortuary site. If so, the deposits of limited numbers of bones may represent people of

particular significance (p. 129). The other author, J. Cerezo Román, presents her research from Hohokam in Arizona (USA). She uses the term “personhood” to explore the complex relationships between the dead and the living. The term personhood has been suggested for use in the study of mortuary practice. “Personhood” derives from the social relationships and connections between individuals within society (p. 149). Based on analyses of burnt burials, bone fragmentation and bone circulation, she constructs the concept of personhood through the strategies of remembering and oblivion (p. 250). Human identity is a derivation of the community and is detectable even after the death of an individual. In her research, she focuses on processes that follow after the cremation and deposition. She supposes the re-excavation of fragments and their curation by survivors.

Cremation is a complex process; it is the transformation of the body into ash, its destruction, fragmentation and finally integration into a form of custody or final deposition onto the place of discovery. Body fragmentation allows survivors to divide the dead among the members of the community in the form of amulets. The parting and sharing of bones are reflections of personal identity, social roles and relationships between the living and the dead.

Other chapters are focused on the variability of cremation practice in particular regions (Cooney, chap. 10, p. 189 and Sørensen, chap. 9, p. 168) and on an alternative view and explanation of cremation (Goldstein and Meyers, chap. 11., p. 207).

At the publication’s conclusion, Cerezo-Román and Howard Williams propose six avenues for future research – integrating

science and theory in: cremation research; cremation in theory and history; cremation as rites *de passage*; cremation as technology; cremation variability; and the archaeology of modern cremation. In my opinion, the main core of this publication is in its emphasis on the symbolism and social meanings of fire as a tool for the transformation of a human being. In addition, this book brings innovative views on the post-cremation pathways of bones, a new view on the dichotomy of cremation and inhumation, and the interpretation of social status from empty burials. This approach is unique among the many methodological-orientated articles and books available. I highly recommended this book for everyone who is interested in funeral archaeology.

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