

Book Review of *Activity, Diet and Social Practice: Addressing Everyday Life in Human Skeletal Remains*

Sarah Schrader

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Addressing the everyday lives of those who lived in the past is central question to archaeology. The goal of Sarah Schrader is to provide a way for bioarcheologists to elucidate the quotidian experiences of the people we study from their skeletal remains. Her methods rely on using interpretations from social theory, namely Pierre Bourdieu's habitus and embodiment theory, and examples of her research from ancient Nubia around the colonial administrative center of Tombos. Using the theory and methods provided, bioarcheologists can describe how skeletal remains embody everyday experience through diet and physical activity. On a large scale, this means looking at populations' human skeletal remains being products of both biology and culture, giving insights into social structures, individual identity, as well as inequalities.

Schrader, situating the everyday in practice theory, is interested in how individuals are in dialogue with social structures and display their agency in both reinforcing broader social structures but also in choosing how they may resist. An example provided in Chapter 5 potentially shows this—during the New Kingdom period when Egyptian style coffin burials were the most common burial style, there are examples of women, thought to be Nubian, using bed burial styles that were typical of Nubian burials prior to Egyptian colonization. When examining foodways this is useful as gendered food consumption, which in certain cultures can be used for identity construction. The same concept applies to cultural food choices, reaffirming one's identity under colonial rule by explicitly consuming traditional foods, but it can also reflect social inequalities as poorer social groups may have their diets restricted. This is also seen within Tombos. During Egyptian colonization of Tombos, Egyptian dietary staples—wheat beer, wheat bread, etc.—become more common potentially as a way for residents to highlight their "Egyptianness" to gain access to higher social strata. Bioarcheologists can obtain this information through isotopic studies. Using carbon isotopes and examining typical Egyptian and Nubian diets from the time it becomes noticeable that while the grains of choice are C₃ grains (wheat and barley), Nubians relied more heavily on millet, which are a C₄ grain. Schrader is able to wonderfully use these examples to give us a picture of an Egyptianizing population, which was incentivized to change and may not have been entirely willing to. This mix of willingness and successful incentivization is especially

noticeable in the Third Intermediate Period and Napatan periods, which take place after the withdrawal of the New Kingdom, where hybrid burial practices have become more commonplace, with coffin on bed burials appearing.

Some of the most compelling signals of the everyday embodied within the skeleton that Schrader presents are those revolving around enthesal changes and osteoarthritis. Given that osteoarthritis is unidirectional and does not heal, as well as that enthesal changes permanently alter bone where muscle attaches in adults, these provide solid evidence about regular or extreme physical activity. In Chapter 5 this information from skeletal remains is used to differentiate the lifestyles and labor done by the inhabitants of Tombos during the colonial and postcolonial periods. During the New Kingdom colonial period, when Tombos functions as an administrative center at the border of highly controlled and loosely controlled Nubia, many of the enthesal changes and osteoarthritis are focused on the hands and upper body. This is expected for a population who largely functioned as scribes and bureaucrats. This differs greatly from the postcolonial, independent, periods where enthesal changes are higher overall but are especially present in the lower body. This makes sense as the re-adoption of many aspects of the Nubian diet sourced from agropastoralism as opposed to redistributions of grain from the New Kingdom's center, were necessary to feed the population of Tombos. Also, during this later period, the people of Tombos began quarrying granite and turning it into sculptures. This new source of economic capital shaped and changed their everyday lives.

Something especially interesting is the role females played in these two different periods, reflecting a major shift in their everyday lives. Just as males' enthesal changes are much greater in the postcolonial period, the difference between the two periods is even greater than when looking at male skeletal remains. The drastic difference in the colonial period between the sexes could potentially reflect a sexual division of labor. During this period the only enthesal changes more significant in females than in males revolved around hand and finger movement. The closing of this gap in the postcolonial period could reflect the bridging of this division of labor as it became necessary for everyone to take part in the economic and political landscape of Tombos.

These examples are mostly focused on the large-scale

population view, but the approach is multiscale. On a smaller scale, Schrader examines a “chiefly” burial and compares its enthesal changes and osteoarthritis to that of a sacrificial burial associated with the “chiefly” one. Both individuals are around the same age and are the same sex. Besides the already known cultural determinations that allow archeologists to distinguish the life histories of these two individuals, the chiefly burial is clearly an elite, while the sacrificial burial in the corridor was likely a laborer for the said elite; the skeletal differences also differentiate their life histories. The enthesal changes and osteoarthritic indicators are far greater in that of the sacrificial burial when compared to the chiefly burial. In a vacuum, this information is still helpful and implies that the sacrificial burial had a far more labor-intensive life, but it does have caveats. The individual who was sacrificed could have a genetic predisposition to osteoarthritis and could have had a significantly different weight leading to more enthesal changes. Understanding the cultural context in which these burials took place helps us determine that the enthesal changes do in fact represent a difference in life histories.

Schrader does not let the reader forget that these changes, and the existence of this culturally hybridizing population, are the result of the actions of agents. The Nubia population of Tombos chose to stay in that area as opposed to moving further south where Egypt had less direct control and many Nubian cultural practices were continued. The Egyptian population of Tombos chose to stay in

Tombos even after the New Kingdom period ended and Egypt withdrew from the area. This is also benefitted by the context in which Tombos is situated, essentially a specialized administrative center and buffer zone where multiculturalism was likely encouraged during the New Kingdom period as opposed to Nubian lands north of Tombos where acculturation was the norm.

Sarah Schrader successfully presents the case that bioarcheologists, with proper grounding in social theory, are able to contribute greatly to the stories we tell about people’s everyday lives in the past. By examining human skeletal remains, the development of osteoarthritic characteristics and enthesal changes which build up over an individual’s life, bioarcheologists can distinguish how the daily lives of people may differ from those who came before as well as those they live near. By using stable isotopes as well as examining dental wear, decay, and dental calculus, a bioarcheologist can broadly reconstruct the diet of an individual, which in turn can give insight into both cultural practices and identity. This information when situated in proper context can help us better understand how people interact with, change, and negotiate identity within the social structures in which they live. These methods provide a wealth of knowledge for interpreting the archaeological record on multiple scales, in a quite enjoyable book with great information about how the people of Tombos negotiated their individual and communal identities during the colonial and postcolonial periods.