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Book reviews

The Bioarchaeology of Children. Perspectives from Biological and Forensic Anthropology. Cambridge Studies in Biological and Evolutionary Anthropology. By Mary E. Lewis. Pp. 255. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.) £70.00, ISBN 0-521-83602-6, hardback. doi: 10.1017/S002193200800326X.

This book is a comprehensive overview of what is known about child and adolescent biology in past populations and discusses problems associated with studying non-adult skeletons in an archaeological and forensic context. In nine chapters, in a clear and easy-to-follow style, the author covers issues such as the concept of childhood in the historical perspective, the status of children in past societies, infanticide and problems related to palaeodemography (i.e. the preservation of delicate bones), child abuse in forensic and archaeological records, and growth and development in the past and present.

The large part of the book consists of a discussion of a variety of methods used in non-adult osteology and forensic anthropology. This shows particularly well the difficulties encountered by researchers and forensic practitioners while studying non-adult remains, beginning with the fundamentals in both fields – age and sex assessment. Perhaps the most controversial is the assessment of ancestry in the forensic context. This part of the book also reflects the dilemmas the biological anthropologist involved in forensic identification has to deal with, and shows inaccuracies, encroaching upon terminology used in both fields in an attempt at some classification, such as biological affinity, geographical affiliation, ancestry, and even errors in naming ‘traditional’ groups (Caucasian instead of Caucasoid, p. 55).

Recent progress in the identification of pathological conditions in non-adult skeletons is presented in chapter 7, and trauma, a subject especially important for forensic anthropologists, is discussed in chapter 8. There are several summary tables, such as Table 2·1 with a list of archaeological sites with a large number of sub-adult skeletons, Table 4·2 with data on growth for past populations or Table 5·1 with child mortality data for 42 archaeological samples.

With over a thousand references (58 pages), the majority of the significant literature published in English on the bioarchaeology of children is represented. Unfortunately, only a few papers and books in languages other than English are mentioned. Perhaps, this is a task for the next and updated edition of this well written, informative and much needed book. Anybody working in the field or studying biological and forensic anthropology, and also archaeologists, will find this book a very welcome addition to their basic library.

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