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Book Reviews



INVESTIGATING ANIMAL BURIALS. RITUAL, MUNDANE AND BEYOND.
By James Morris. Pp. x and 238, Illus 90. Archaeopress (British Archaeological Reports
British Series, **535**), 2011. Price £43.00. ISBN 978 1 407308 12 8.

The title of this volume suggests a survey of all kinds of animal burials. In fact it is a study of a particular kind of articulated or semi-articulated deposit found not in funerary contexts but on settlement sites. Such deposits were discussed by Annie Grant at Iron Age Danebury and expanded upon by J. D. Hill, who coined the term 'Associated Bone Groups' or ABGs. The concept was later extended to other periods.

Morris explores over two thousand ABGs on sites in two areas of England — Yorkshire and southern England — from the Neolithic to the Medieval period. He argues that previous period-based interpretations were rather generalized and instead attempts to assign individualized interpretations to each deposit. In order to cover so much material, Morris had to rely on published reports; the volume's appendices and CD with databases and spreadsheets form a valuable resource.

Using the information provided by taphonomy, butchery, bone elements and burial context, Morris argues that it is necessary to examine each bone group individually in order to understand its 'biography'. He argues that the concept of ABGs has got in the way; 'ABGs are archaeological constructs... They have been 'created' by a scientific approach...which generates knowledge by engagement with the world through categories. Such an approach is not problematic, as long as we are aware of it. People in past societies did not go out and deposit an ABG...' (p. 180).

This well-written volume started as a Ph D; Morris states that he has resisted the temptation to rewrite and so the structure is still that of a thesis. Whilst in general the approach works, there are times when the format proves restrictive. Morris studies deposits in Yorkshire as well as southern England in order to 'move beyond the Wessex dataset' (p. 184). For a Ph D this works, but as a book it feels restrictive given the wealth of other material even within the British Isles. There are, for example, the Iron Age animal burials in the Western Isles and the red deer skeletons and cattle skulls from Neolithic Orkney. The Ferry Fryston barrow in Yorkshire, with its minimum of 162 cattle represented mainly by heads and right front limbs, is presumably omitted because it is funerary, though sites like this provide useful contrasts with domestic remains and in the definition of structured deposits.

Morris is good on the route archaeozoology has taken from a denial of any explanation beyond the processual, to a more willing engagement with post-processual dialogue.

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Attempts to apply functionalist explanations to extraordinary deposits sometimes led to odd conclusions: Morris says of one such deposit ‘we must ask the question, would thirteen polecats fall down a well at the same time?’ (p. 164).

This book will be invaluable to those researching animal bone deposits. Its data sets will be a starting point for many future studies. I would also recommend Morris’s readable and lucid explanations of taphonomy and butchery to non-archaeozoologists seeking to understand the reports set before them.

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