



# *The Archaeological Journal*

## Book Reviews



**RITUAL, BELIEF AND THE DEAD IN EARLY MODERN BRITAIN AND IRELAND.** By Sarah Tarlow. Pp. xxii and 226, Illus 34. Cambridge University Press, 2011. Price £55.00. ISBN 978 052176 154 3.

This is an accessible and stimulating book, offering by its scope and breadth a penetrative insight into early modern attitudes to the body, whether recently-deceased or long dead. Dr Tarlow's study is among the first to apply a meticulously researched range of multidisciplinary sources to an examination of human attitudes to and negotiation with the dead body, which can be incoherent and contradictory.

Through the medium of various — and on occasion, competing — belief discourses, she offers a range of interpretations which trace the ways in which human remains might be differently venerated, feared, assaulted or curated. She argues that it is the context of the treatment of the body after death or disinterment, which includes judicial, medical, familial or personal interventions, that informs different approaches. These are, she argues, attributable to relativities of power at the time of death and to the belief in some societies of the survival of power and agency after the death of the individual.

While acknowledging the archaeological ambiguities inherent in distinguishing between personal and official attitudes and approaches to the dead body, Tarlow suggests that some evidence of individual or familial fear of disturbance, removal and violation of the dead may be detected in the early modern period, such as 'mortsafes', which are iron cages sunk into the grave, as well as substantial coffins and other devices which inhibit access to the corpse. Whether the dead person or the surviving individuals in these cases believed in the resurrection of the physical body in some form is, of course, difficult to determine.

In her conclusion, Tarlow examines recent ethical considerations generated as a result of opposing archaeological, social and ethnic views on the curation, display and repatriation of human remains, and she offers cogent and well-argued contributions to the debate. The more committed repatriationist, whose definition of 'respect' can seem at times more emotionally aligned with the modern tendency for public demonstrations of grief with offerings of flowers, toys and other tokens at sites usually associated with violent death, may however take some persuasion. Are these actions 'respect' for the dead? Or perhaps the manifestation of the human propensity for 'muddle, emotion and habit' described by Tarlow.

There are a few minor niggles. The organization of the script can be a little dense and the typeface a little faint. There are a number of minor spelling and grammatical solecisms. The omission of Merrifield's seminal 1987 work on the *Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*

The final version of this review will appear in *The Archaeological Journal* 169 for 2012.

is slightly puzzling. Personal irritations apart, this is a satisfyingly provocative, accessible and scholarly volume, with a comprehensive bibliography attesting to both the multidisciplinary focus of the book and the prodigious research required to produce it. This book should be required reading for archaeology students and others interested in how past societies have dealt with the consequences of that last great leap in the dark.

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