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**Book review 'A Global History of Execution and the Criminal Corpse' by R. Ward (ed.)**

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Cheryl P. Anderson and Debra L. Martin (eds), *Massacres. Bioarchaeology and Forensic Anthropology Approaches* (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2018, 272 pp., \$95 hardback)

This volume, comprising ten chapters and completed with an Introduction and a Conclusion, is the outcome of a symposium entitled 'Blood in the Villages: Bioarchaeological and Forensic Evidence for Massacres'.

The twofold issue explored throughout this volume is specified in the introductory chapter: to explore the reasons why and the means by which massacres have been perpetrated through space and time by integrating both archaeological and more recent contexts and by adopting a complementary approach which brings together bioarchaeology and forensic anthropology. Anderson and Martin start by identifying a major obstacle that needs to be overcome, namely the wide array of existing definitions of the term 'massacre'. In their discussion they emphasise the fact that their own choice of definition is not necessarily the one adopted by the different authors in the various chapters. Yet, this admitted bias on their part is fruitful: by retaining the diversity of definitions and of qualifying criteria, they demonstrate the complexity of studying massacre. They also raise the question of the appropriateness of using this term to characterise indirect violence and long-term persecutions of groups, short of perpetrators directly causing the deaths of the victims.

The first six chapters focus on the American continent to expose and/or discuss archaeological contexts or osteological series. While all the chapters complement each other well, Chapter 5 reads slightly like an oddity. Indeed, it focuses on the identification of violence-induced traumas – a focus which seems irrelevant in the context of this volume. To demonstrate violence on human remains that are only partially contextualised does not appear to add much to the volume and could even be seen as counter-productive insofar as the strength of these first chapters is precisely to address the difficulty of identifying a massacre based on archaeological and osteological data. The chronology of the deposits, the evidence of the violence and its characteristics, the number of individuals, the state of the corpses (which can be dismembered, complete or incomplete, articulated or not), the composition by age and by sex of the osteological series, are all factors to be considered in a holistic manner: none of them is relevant by and of itself. To qualify as a massacre, the first

condition is that several individuals be buried simultaneously in a single feature. The actual number of individuals buried is in fact a variable – and thus irrelevant – parameter, since it is dependent on the size of the group in the first place. In any event, it is the data as a whole which allows for the *in fine* qualification – or not – of massacre.

The second issue addressed in these chapters is the motivation that underpins and leads to the massacre of a group. The process necessarily implies the existence of perpetrators, of victims, oftentimes of survivors and of a victimised community who deal with the cadavers. One of the limits of archaeological studies is that they – unfortunately – limit themselves to analysing victims. This is precisely the reason why other types of data, such as that collected through the studies of massacres perpetrated through time – in the recent past and until today – are paramount to shed light on the motivations and mechanisms behind this particular form of violence. This is the object of the four following chapters. The first two deal with, respectively, the genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and the thousands of civilian deaths caused by the war between the government and the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda from 1986 to 2006. These two case studies consider the impact of cadavers on the survivors (who already have to deal with the first trauma of having survived) and the problems generated by the political management of these crimes. Between instrumentalisation and duty of remembrance, the treatment and fate of the corpses of the victims of such acts of violence constitute a major challenge for the future. The last two chapters return to the American continent and explore the deaths of migrants discovered in the Arizona and Texas deserts. They discuss this increasing phenomenon of mass deaths and raise the question of responsibility for these deaths. In so doing, they somehow echo a point raised in the introduction, that of qualifying as a (new type of) massacre deaths that would occur indirectly and in the long term. In their contribution, K. E. Latham and her colleagues also highlight the role of and dilemmas faced by forensic anthropologists when establishing identities, determining causes of death and giving back their dignity to individuals who died far from home and whom no one can – and will – ever claim.<sup>1</sup>

The conclusion of the volume stresses the common denominator between the different chapters, namely, that, regardless of the reasons why and the methods by which these individuals were killed, what characterises a massacre is the fact that innocent people have been murdered.

To tackle such a topic was a challenge and I welcome both the audacity and the approach of Anderson and Martin. To turn to bioarchaeology and forensic anthropology and to rely on recent and well-documented contexts was a bold way to kick-start research on such an important topic. However, this perspective is not free of limitations: first, it makes achieving coherence difficult; second, the editors' bias as to their choice of definition of the term 'massacre', which is also one of the volume's strengths, constitutes clear evidence of the semantic obstacles, the inherent limits of bioarchaeological data and the challenges constituted by the particularities of modern times. In this respect, it is to be regretted that the conclusion did not go so far as pointing the way forward. In my view, theoretical thinking on massacres cannot be supported by archaeological contexts. It is precisely the contribution of

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recent, historical and ethnological contexts as well as the forensic anthropological analyses that will inform the archaeo-anthropological interpretations. To understand the mechanism of massacres through space and time, a common definition must be formulated to provide for a solid working ground. The two editors of the volume do specify in the Introduction the definition which they deem the most appropriate,<sup>2</sup> and it is, interestingly, towards this definition that all the chapters of the volume lean.

This volume is to be praised for having dared to be the first to approach massacres from this angle and this suffices to recommend it to all those interested in researching this highly topical issue, which still seems to come from the depths of time.

Aurore Schmitt

## Notes

- 1 K. E. Latham, A. O'Daniel and J. Maiers, 'Migrant Death and Identification: Theory, Science, and Sociopolitics', in C. P. Anderson and D. L. Martin (eds), *Massacres. Bioarchaeology and Forensic Anthropology Approaches* (Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2018), pp. 168–83.
- 2 P. G. Dwyer and L. Ryan, 'Introduction: The Massacre and History', in P. G. Dwyer and L. Ryan (eds), *Theatres of Violence: Massacres, Mass Killings and Atrocity throughout History* (New York, Berghahn Books, 2012), pp. xi–xxv.

Richard Ward (ed.), *A Global History of Execution and the Criminal Corpse* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 332 pp., £60 hardback).

Do the dead experience suffering and shame after dying? Philosophers and writers in history have at times argued the contrary; yet, as this edited volume reveals, post-mortem torments were nevertheless often an integral component of the death sentence and a fundamental part of penal regimes. While the focus of the book is on the treatment of the executed corpse in the early modern age, the Introduction places capital punishment in its historical context from the late Middle Ages onwards. In those days, the editor explains, the punishments of torture and death were inflicted more or less in random order – the executioner would continue the torments until the sentence had been carried out in its entirety, even if the convict died in the midst of it. The substantive chapters subsequently expose how, from the seventeenth century until well into the nineteenth century, post-mortem punishment became a deliberate judicial strategy, linked to a high degree to the social and political climate, and how the twentieth century saw a change towards post-mortem treatment of the body as part of a strategy of (non-)remembrance. Most chapters have a specific geographic and temporal focus and cover distinct themes that might at first sight appear limited in their scope. While each chapter on its own is worthy of study, the contribution of this volume to the existing literature is in the

complementarity of its components, which together reveal several key discourses running through the history of capital punishment and post-mortem treatment up until today.

First of all, the judicial narrative laid out mainly in the first five chapters recounts how, to varying degrees and not always in a linear development, the judiciary's approaches to the issues of the death penalty and subsequent corpse treatment transitioned from post-mortem punitive torture as retribution upon an individual for acts committed, to a doctrine of crime reduction through ostentatiousness and spectacle at executions. Even though there were contemporary challenges to its effectiveness, the power of deterrence was generally believed in. It was achieved through the public nature of executions, followed by post-mortem torment of the corpse, display of body parts and sometimes, in the case of punishment for particularly gruesome crimes, by locating (part of) this spectacle at the crime scene. As bodies were also a sought-after commodity by anatomists, especially in the eighteenth century, and the corpses of executed criminals and suicides were excellent material for science (as they were often young and healthy), in various European states post-mortem dissection was legally included in sentencing as punishment, such as by England's Murder Act of 1752, and even executed publicly as part of the deterrence strategy, though the measure met with popular resistance from time to time.<sup>1</sup>

Second, the volume exposes how the manner of execution and the treatment of executed bodies were used as a means of communication and affirmation of power by the state vis-à-vis its population. Chapters 1 to 5 testify in interesting detail how the ruling elites deliberately maximised the visual impact of the fate reserved for criminals who had challenged their authority by making their executions as public a spectacle as possible. However, authorities often struggled with the details, balancing contemporary views about crime and punishment with the practicality of the logistics of executions and with their perceived need for optimum visibility and effect.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, location was deemed important; considerations included the city limits, how to enhance dramatic impression, how to ensure sufficient space for onlookers and the symbolic meanings of the location.<sup>3</sup>

In nineteenth-century colonial areas too, the assertion of state power was a motivator in the administration of the death penalty, as chiefly illustrated in Chapters 6 and 8. Overseas, the political context was a more prominent feature in the meting out of capital punishments than it was in Europe, as imperial domination and maintenance of one's power position was considered key. Capital punishment was therefore often managed most cruelly for the sake of example-setting, following 'civilised' European norms in general, but reverting to the brutality of former centuries when colonial power was threatened.<sup>4</sup> Local traditions and beliefs around death, the human body, witchcraft and spirituality influenced the manner of sentencing to gain optimal effect.

A third dialogue emerging from the chapters is the appreciation by society of both the sentence and the memory of the convict. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the corpses or body parts of criminals were as a rule displayed for a certain duration at carefully selected locations.<sup>5</sup> Through this hanging in chains or

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gibbeting of bodies and spiking of heads, corpses became mangled, foul, were effectively denied a ritual burial, thereby making the culprits ignominious to society, excluding their memory and their voice from proper civic life.<sup>6</sup> Such was also the objective of punitive corporal measures pronounced against certain categories of persons already dead, the ‘self-homiciders’ – especially if they had killed themselves in prison to escape corporal or capital punishment.<sup>7</sup> In the overseas territories, crime by slaves was punished with severe mutilations even after such sentences had been outlawed in Europe, but, as slaves were property and an important workforce, such decisions could give rise to tense relations between the authorities and slave owners.<sup>8</sup> Further evidence of the interplay between capital punishment and popular opinion is illustrated through the cases of two European sailors sentenced to death in China, which became so talked of that a general opinion emerged on Chinese despotism.<sup>9</sup> The sometimes liberal application of the death sentence in the colonies until well into the twentieth century had its effects on the post-colonial (extra-judicial) practices of capital punishment and the display or concealment of the corpses in order to influence remembrance – a struggle also reflected in the treatment of the bodies of executed Nazi war criminals.<sup>10</sup> While some of the latter were cremated and their ashes scattered, others were buried anonymously, but exhumed after some years and transferred to more dignified cemeteries, causing somewhat of an international outrage at the creation of such opportunities for martyrdom and memorialisation.<sup>11</sup>

The reader of this volume will gain historical awareness of corporal and capital punishment and the treatment of executed corpses through a rich presentation of facts, cases and contemporary reception. In the opinion of this reviewer, however, its main value is the manifestation of the above narratives, which provide the researcher with insight into the importance of the role of the dead body in past and present societies, not only on a judicial level but also in the social and political landscape.

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## Notes

- 1 See J. Kelly, ‘Punishing the Dead: Execution and the Executed Body in Eighteenth-Century Ireland’, in R. Ward (ed.), *A Global History of Execution and the Criminal Corpse* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 37–70; see also P. Bastien, ‘Never Equal before Death: Three Experiences of Dying as Seen through Eighteenth-Century French Executions’, in *ibid.*, pp. 126–46 and A. Kästner and E. Luef, ‘The Ill-Treated Body: Punishing and Utilising the Early Modern Suicide Corpse’, in *ibid.*, pp. 147–69.
- 2 See S. Poole, ‘“For the Benefit of Example”: Crime-Scene Executions in England, 1720–1830’, in R. Ward (ed.), *A Global History of Execution and the Criminal Corpse* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 71–101.
- 3 *Ibid.* See also Z. Dyndor, ‘The Gibbet in the Landscape: Locating the Criminal Corpse in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England’, in R. Ward (ed.), *A Global History of*

- Execution and the Criminal Corpse* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 102–25.
- 4 See S. Hynd, 'Dismembering and Remembering the Body: Execution and Post-Execution Display in Africa, c. 1870–2000', in R. Ward (ed.), *A Global History of Execution and the Criminal Corpse* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 220–48.
  - 5 See Dyndor, 'The Gibbet in the Landscape'.
  - 6 See Bastien, 'Never Equal before Death'.
  - 7 *Ibid.* See also Kästner and Luef, 'The Ill-Treated Body'.
  - 8 See C. Anderson, 'Execution and its Aftermath in the Nineteenth-Century British Empire', in R. Ward (ed.), *A Global History of Execution and the Criminal Corpse* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 170–98.
  - 9 See S.-C. Chen, 'Strangled by the Chinese and Kept "Alive" by the British: Two Infamous Executions and the Discourse of Chinese Legal Despotism', in R. Ward (ed.), *A Global History of Execution and the Criminal Corpse* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 199–219.
  - 10 S. Hynd, 'Dismembering and Remembering the Body'. See also C. Sharples, 'Burying the Past? The Post-Execution History of Nazi War Criminals', in R. Ward (ed.), *A Global History of Execution and the Criminal Corpse* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 249–71.
  - 11 See Sharples, 'Burying the Past?'.