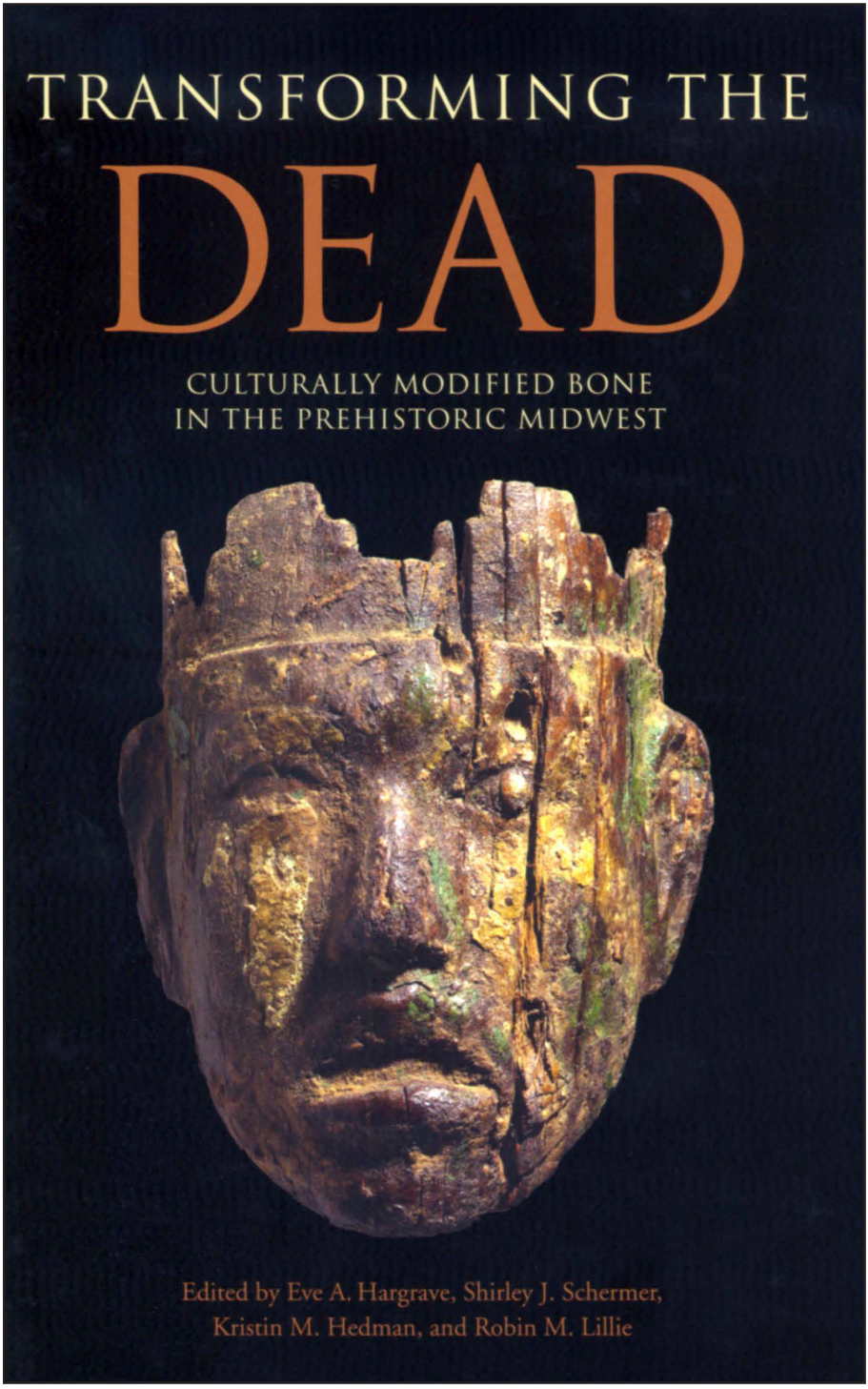

ARCHAEOLOGY / ANTHROPOLOGY / NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES

Edited by Eve A. Hargrave, Shirley J. Schermer,
Kristin M. Hedman, and Robin M. Lillie

TRANSFORMING THE DEAD

CULTURALLY MODIFIED BONE IN THE PREHISTORIC MIDWEST

The essays in *Transforming the Dead: Culturally Modified Bone in the Prehistoric Midwest* explore the numerous ways that Eastern Woodland Native Americans selected, modified, and used human bones as tools, trophies, ornaments, and other objects imbued with cultural significance in daily life and rituals.

"*Transforming the Dead* persuasively shows that human bone was used in everyday life and special rituals in prehistoric Native American culture. No other book on the market presents what these authors have."

—Keith P. Jacobi, author of *Last Rites for the Tipu Maya: Genetic Structuring in a Colonial Cemetery*

"*Transforming the Dead* encourages its readers to think in a broader perspective—outside of western normative dualities like life and death, the physical world, and the spiritual world."

—Debra L. Martin, coauthor of *Bioarchaeology: An Integrated Approach to Working with Human Remains* and coeditor of *Bioarchaeological and Forensic Perspectives on Violence: How Violent Death is Interpreted from Skeletal Remains*

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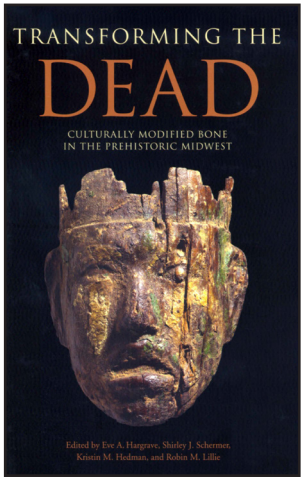

Transforming the Dead: Culturally Modified Bone in the Prehistoric Midwest

Eve A. Hargrave, Shirley J. Schermer, Kristin M. Hedman, and Robin M. Lillie, Editors. (2015). University of Alabama Press. xi+369 pp., 60 figures, 18 tables, references, index. $69.95 (cloth), $69.95 (e-book).

Reviewed by George R. Milner, Department of Anthropology, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park.

Much of what is known about human bones fashioned into various objects, many imbued with ritual and social significance, from prehistoric midwestern sites is summarized in 16 chapters by 18 contributors. The papers provide a sense of the spatial, temporal, and cultural distributions of these items, as well as how they were made, used, and discarded. This volume is appropriately a team effort, starting with a conference session, because many worked human bones were previously mentioned only in obscure reports, or not published at all, being known only to regional experts. References in many chapters round out the tally of midwestern human-bone artifacts, and introduce readers to such objects elsewhere in eastern North America and beyond.

The authors focus on purposefully modified human bones from Middle Woodland through late prehistoric sites, not the cutting, scraping, and fracturing that occurs when bones are cleaned, handled, and stored during protracted mortuary proceedings. Several contributors took pains to separate the mortuary processing of human remains from the intentional production of objects for ritually or socially significant occasions. Nevertheless, ambiguity still exists over whether some bones were altered to meet a specific need, such as for personal adornment or thaumaturgic purposes, or were damaged while performing other activities, including handling the dead.

As discussed by Kristin M. Hedman, there is an underlying, and reasonable, assumption that items fashioned from human bones commonly held some special significance. That is particularly true for bones decorated with symbols such as the forked eye or depictions of mythical beings, as well as those that were part of objects intended for ceremonial occasions, such as rattles or ritual finery including masks.

The contexts of discovery are potentially instructive because some human-bone objects were intentionally removed from circulation, notably by being placed in graves, whereas others were cast aside along with everyday refuse. Just because an object made from a human bone was once highly regarded and used for a special purpose did not mean that it was disposed of in a reverential fashion when no longer needed. Regardless of where the objects ended up, they occasionally were used for lengthy periods, perhaps in different contexts where they embodied equally diverse cultural meanings. The process of identifying a sequence of use based on intentional alterations and wear is well illustrated by Stephen P. Nawrocki and Paul D. Emanovsky's analysis of Middle Woodland mandibles from Indiana and Ohio.

Collectively, these chapters show how hard it is to distinguish ancestor relics from war trophies—the usual dichotomy—especially when there might have been additional, perhaps idiosyncratic, reasons to make and use objects from human bones, often in symbolically rich contexts. One such example is a tibia from late prehistoric Wisconsin, described by Katie J. Zejdlik, that was fashioned into a hide-flesher, a distinctive tool commonly used by Plains groups. It is a mystery why a human bone was selected for that purpose, although Zejdlik raises the possibility that nothing more might be indicated than a tibia was readily at hand and suitable for the task. The very rarity of human-bone artifacts, however, indicates something else could have been going on. Perhaps the hide flesher was only used in extraordinary circumstances by a single person or a narrowly defined group of people. That underscores the difficulty of making sense of unusual, and often unique, artifacts from midden deposits. Also of interest is what this particular kind of tool implies about an apparent uptick in long-distance group interaction and movement in the Midwest during the final centuries of prehistory.

Even when an object's characteristics make it clear that it signified something important, the full range of cultural meanings attached to it, and precisely how the item was used, typically remain obscure to us today. The volume's contributors usually present alternatives, pointing out those that are consistent with present evidence and occasionally eliminating unlikely possibilities when doing so. For example, an incised cranial fragment from a late prehistoric site in Illinois could have been fashioned from the bones of ancestors or enemies, as nicely discussed by Hedman. Unfortunately, that approach is not adopted by Robin M. Lillie and Shirley J. Schermer who airily dismiss the possibility that roughly contemporaneous incised cranial specimens from Iowa were somehow related to war. That claim, unencumbered by a supporting argument, simply pops up in their conclusion. Such speculation bereft of evidence embedded in a logically unfolding line of reasoning makes the difficult job of interpreting the past from small, incomplete, and biased archaeological samples even harder than it is already.

The authors of one chapter characterize their work as "intentionally atheoretical," and that label could just as easily be applied to the entire book (p. 102). The overall intent is to paint a rich picture of life and beliefs in selected societies. Of broader interest is how one can go about drawing inferences about the past from the form and composition of artifacts, how they were made, and where they were discovered. Two chapters stand out from the crowd in that respect: the one by Nawrocki and Emanovsky, and another by Della Collins Cook and Cheryl Ann Munson. Their work illustrates the value of incorporating forensic-related findings and approaches into bioarchaeological analyses.

For me, there are two take-away messages. First, when systematically studied, rare and (usually) ritually significant cultural objects yield valuable perspectives on past societies that cannot be obtained through other sources of archaeological information. Second, doing so is only possible when a firm grasp of archaeological detail is coupled with relevant findings from allied fields. In this book, the latter include skeletal studies that incorporate findings from both medicolegal and bioarchaeological research.