

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Forensic Recovery of Human Remains: Archaeological Approaches*

REFERENCE: Dupras TL, Schultz JJ, Wheeler SM, Williams LJ. *Forensic recovery of human remains: archaeological approaches*. Boca Raton, FL: Taylor and Francis Group, 2006.

The authors of this short volume (209 pp.) describe the target readership as “advanced undergraduates, graduate students, law enforcement and death scene personnel, forensic anthropologists, and forensic archaeologists.” While any attempt to reach such a wide audience is commendable, it is not clear that the authors have succeeded.

In Chapters 2–4, most advanced undergraduates, some graduate students, and law enforcement personnel will likely find useful information on types and sources of equipment as well as practical advice on location of surface scatters. The discussion of the use of cadaver dogs contains good advice for those unfamiliar with their deployment. The warnings concerning use of heavy equipment in the proximity of shallow graves bear repeating and will avert considerable damage to evidence if heeded by thoughtful readers. The descriptions of various types, uses, and limitations of geophysical gear in Chapter 4 will be helpful to those unfamiliar with them, although there is little here that has not been summarized elsewhere (1,2). The authors wisely caution that the most significant limitation on the use of any technology of this type is the “experience/skill of the operator.” There is no mention of the increasingly popular use of airborne infrared systems for searching large open areas.

Chapter 5 covers the collection of insect and plant data emphasizing what these kinds of evidence may add to an investigation. There are four appendices for entomological data and none for the many varieties of botanical evidence. Collection checklists for insect data are provided in appendices as well as a guide to mixing preservation solutions. The reviewer wonders whether some law enforcement officials or other nonprofessionals might be unable to respond to all the items listed in Appendices 4 and 5; e.g., the term “adipocere” appears on one checklist, but it is not to be found in the glossary. There is no discussion of natural interference with insect life cycles by other insects, e.g., certain species of ants, nor any mention of the importance of recording the presence of beetle “frass” (peritrophic membrane), a well-recognized time marker often associated with remains. The authors should note that placement of bodies in the proximity of cedar and certain other trees and some forbaceous plants will result in suppression of many sarcophagous insects possibly confusing estimates of

postmortem interval. Recalling the authors’ statement of need for an “updated and comprehensive reference,” failure to mention use of insect materials as sources for toxicological analysis and, increasingly, for DNA retrieval is disappointing.

Chapter 6 is a solid introduction to the principles of site mapping with a helpful discussion of the use of standard surveying equipment. There is mention of the use of “total station” technology, but the authors may underestimate the availability of this kind of gear in the accident-reconstruction sections of many urban and state police agencies, county survey offices, colleges, and universities, etc. Much of the procedure for conducting an exhumation is found in other places (1–4,6), but the guidelines provided here are clear and concise. The reviewer was gratified to note that important and often overlooked advice on capturing toolmark evidence from graves was provided. The authors wisely defer the subject of mass burials to other sources. The subsequent chapter illustrates some of these principles in the form of a case report.

Having warned readers about the dangers associated with interpretation of osteological evidence and the importance of leaving such matters to forensic anthropologists, the authors proceed to offer a tutorial in comparative and human osteology in Chapters 9 and 10. Inclusion of these chapters will tempt some (e.g., law enforcement officials and other likely first responders) to reach beyond their grasp attempting to distinguish bird from fetus, cat from neonate, carapace from skull, etc., while the target readership of “advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and forensic anthropologists” will find this treatment far from complete. Many of the photographs in these chapters fail because of poor reproduction quality, and others, along with a few line drawings, are rendered useless for lack of a scale. These chapters and their associated appendices, which are small skeletal inventory protocols, could have been omitted as professional analysts have them, and others don’t need them, or worse, will attempt to use them.

The table of contents, reminiscent of that in Killam (1), details the subtopics in a manner that makes for quick reference to a specific item or procedure. The glossary contains 151 entries, some with errors (see, for example the term *phalange*, the definition of *oblique plane*, the definition of *cranial skeleton*, or *puparia* as a singular form, etc.), although, perhaps, these complaints should be addressed to the copy editors. One hundred and forty-two references are cited; 19 of these, i.e., 13%, are to Haglund and Sorg (5,6).

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This book, written in a straightforward style, reflects the considerable collective experience of its authors, but falls short in two ways: first, by attempting to address too wide an audience. The result is excessive detail in some areas and too little in others, thus failing to achieve the intended “comprehensiveness.” Second, it is not clear that the authors have “updated” the collective knowledge found in other sources.

One hopes that subsequent editions of this book will receive the attention it deserves from a careful editorial staff. The problems of uneven coverage and editorial issues notwithstanding, this work will be of value in its present form as a *manual* or short *reference guide* for those who anticipate involvement in the location and recovery of human remains.

References

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