

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Forensic Anthropology: Contemporary Theory and Practice*

REFERENCE: Komar DA, Buikstra JE. *Forensic anthropology: contemporary theory and practice*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 362 pp.

Forensic anthropology is reaching maturity as a discipline of science. This assertion is supported by a vast literature, strong academic tradition, and growing number of full-time positions in government or other forensic laboratories. The book, *Forensic Anthropology: Contemporary Theory and Practice* by Debra A. Komar and Jane E. Buikstra is another reflection of this maturation.

Komar and Buikstra state that the purpose of their text is to provide “an in-depth examination of the current state of forensic anthropology from a theoretical perspective.” They refer the reader to the numerous choices of laboratory manuals for a more direct treatment of analytical methods. That said, some methodological areas, such as trauma, are treated in more detail than others and readers will benefit from the extensive experience of the authors in these areas. The book is divided into 10 chapters. The first three chapters cover the medicolegal underpinning of forensic anthropology as practiced in the United States and Canada. Significantly, there is an exposition of judicial rules for admission of expert testimony that includes the Federal Rules of Evidence 702 criteria, Frye Ruling criteria, Daubert Ruling criteria, and the similar Canadian standards. The points made concerning the importance of objectivity and reliability of methods under the new standards following the Daubert Ruling provide a common thread throughout the remainder of the chapters. Chapters 4 through 8 treat distinct methodological areas beginning with crime scene investigation and concluding with personal identification. Chapter 9 deals with the special considerations involved with mass disasters and investigations of human rights violations, areas in which forensic anthropologists have become heavily engaged in the past 20 years. The final chapter, entitled “Biohistory,” treats the “investigation of historical personages” and is an oddity in comparison with the remainder of the text.

The strength of the book lies in its tight grip on issues that will come to dominate forensic anthropology for the foreseeable future. These include the development and implementation of reliable, objective methods and the emphasis on validation prior to execution in casework. The authors discuss most of the cited methods in terms of how well they can meet the Daubert challenge. They opine that some of the methods currently in use by forensic anthropologists do not meet the standards. The importance of these issues to our discipline cannot be overstated, and for this reason the Komar and Buikstra text is highly recommended to all advanced students and professional forensic anthropologists.

The reader could take issue with details at various places throughout the book. For example, the authors’ treatment of DNA analysis in Chapter 9 probably underestimates the significant role that nuclear DNA has come to play in the identification of skeletal remains. The robust analytical capabilities at the International Commission on Missing Persons DNA laboratories in Bosnia and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory in the United States have come to include regular success in obtaining nuclear DNA profiles from nonrecent skeletal remains. While Chapter 6 provides a cogent discussion of trauma and pathology, it fails to consider these analyses in light of Daubert. This is presumably due to their descriptive nature. Perhaps there can be reliability issues in the methods used to arrive at interpretations of manner of death. Also, the book fails to mention the growing significance of laboratory accreditation and quality assurance programs in forensic anthropology. But these criticisms are at the level of hair-splitting and do not detract from the overall value of the text.

In summary, *Forensic Anthropology: Contemporary Theory and Practice* by Komar and Buikstra is an up-to-date overview of the discipline of forensic anthropology that focuses on many of the issues that forensic anthropologists are encountering in their practice today. It is recommended as an advanced text as well as a reference book for practicing professionals.

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