



Book Reviews

UNEARTHING CHILDHOOD - YOUNG LIVES IN PREHISTORY BY ROBIN DERRICOURT

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Robin Derricourt's *Unearthing Childhood – Young Lives in Prehistory* is a vital contribution to archaeological endeavours towards understanding childhood in prehistoric societies. For too long, the narratives of lives in prehistory favoured adults, particularly elites and the male. The focus of archaeological research has shifted considerably over the past 20 years, and previously overlooked groups, including children, are finally receiving the scholarly attention they deserve. It is estimated that children would have made up about half of any given prehistoric society. It is vital that their roles in the deep human past are acknowledged to provide us with a more holistic view of past lives, families and societies.

The book contains a wide range of case studies, primarily from Europe, the Middle East and Africa, while also considering examples from both North and South America, Asia and Oceania. Through the disciplines of archaeology, anthropology, primatology, environmental science and ethnography, Derricourt's survey addresses childhood in hominins, through to pre-modern hunter-gatherers and early agricultural societies. We can 'find' children in prehistory through artefacts and settlement archaeology. The book does important work of summarising the various forms of evidence for children in prehistory, from footprints, finger daubs on cave walls, rock art and artefact finds which may have been used as toys, to miniature weapons and crafts. Emphasis is placed on the only direct evidence for young lives in the past: the burials and skeletons of those who did not reach adulthood. The study of children opens up debates on fertility, birth and motherhood, childhood lifestages, family, infancy (the first year of life) and child rearing, learning and play, and social interactions of children with their peers and adults.

Derricourt arranges his survey by distinct themes, discussing infancy, children within the family, weaning and diet, clothing, learning, play, fighting and violence, and the treatment of children in death. Each chapter contains an ample collection of examples and case studies. The reader is introduced to the topic of childhood and the merits that lie within its study, as well as important current issues in the archaeology of childhood. The literature is often characterised with

inconsistent use of terminology to describe biological and social definitions of childhood: who is a child and what are the different stages of childhood? We are also confined by the observation that growth rates are variable between populations, and our cultural markers of childhood and maturation differ considerably. This would have also been the case in the distinctive cultural and temporal contexts of human prehistory.

Derricourt establishes the use of analogy as a central means to aid understanding of prehistoric childhood, looking to primate biology, social anthropology and history. Insights from studies on recent hunter-gatherer populations prove fruitful when applied cautiously, and particularly for the very deep human past and our hominin ancestors, a view to close primate relatives is applied.

Birth and infancy are explored via the use of primate comparisons, tracing the evolution of the hominin family, and assessing archaeological evidence in the form of rock art and carvings to elaborate on mother-infant in early modern humans.

The book covers a survey of the prehistoric family via footprints and rock art, before exploring family and mother-infant relationships in hunter-gatherers. We are taken through the weaning process, a perilous time and milestone in childhood development, before a wider discussion of evidence for the prehistoric childhood diet and feeding practices. Thus follows a chapter on clothing, covering and body ornamentation in prehistoric forager and early agricultural societies.

Learning to accomplish a skill that was valuable to the family and community would have entailed a transition in the lifecourse of prehistoric children, perhaps even as a rite of passage to adulthood. Children's integral role in cultural transmission is addressed in two chapters labelled 'Learning' and 'Playing'. The insights we are presented with are thanks to a growing body of literature which actively looks for children's spaces and activities in the archaeological record. Artefact finds are central here, and we see evidence for prehistoric children who were involved in tool use and making, rock art, pottery and crafts. While it is difficult to pinpoint tangible items indicative of learning during childhood in prehistory, recovering archaeological evidence for play may be even more challenging. Not only because some of the toys and playthings children were engaging with would not survive, but mainly because play is primarily between individuals, ie, children play with their peers. Derricourt considers primates at play to aid our grasp of play in hominins, and surveys the literature on child's play in both ancient and modern foragers and farmers. Where the archaeological evidence and context allows, we can infer the presence of miniature artefacts, toys and games for children's play. Feeding into the aspect of learning and play, Derricourt dedicates a chapter to conflict and violence. If fighting between groups and individuals was a part of daily life in prehistory, then the art of defence and attack would have been learned early on. Archaeological evidence for violence is visible in the finds of weaponry

and defence structures of early settlements. Injuries are recorded in the literature of child skeletal remains, although we have to be aware of the general perils of a hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

The book dedicates two chapters to those who did not survive into adulthood, starting with death and burial of children in foragers before moving on to early agriculturalists. It is through the burial evidence and skeletal remains that we can accumulate a better picture of children and their lives in the deep human past. We have to conclude that there certainly is no universal pattern of childhood and infant mortality in prehistory. Factors such as infanticide may or may not have played a role. The mortuary rituals that are archaeologically visible, are a reflection of adult reactions and behaviours to children and their deaths. The burial evidence is varied and a testament to the diverse treatment awarded to those who died in infancy or childhood. However, there are some commonalities across space and time. Infant burials often differ from those of older children and adults, a pattern observed in a variety of contexts, from Mesolithic Central European foragers to Neolithic settlements in the Middle East and advanced hunter-gatherers in Peru. Examples include infants found within settlement boundaries, in close proximity to the domestic sphere, away from the interment site of adults and other children, or with lavish grave goods in otherwise unfurnished contexts.

The thematic bulk of the book concludes with a view to the future of childhood studies. Amidst strongly advocating more emphasis on childhood as an important avenue for understanding past human societies, Derricourt also reminds us of the limitations of science. For example, we currently cannot distinguish between the prehistoric childhood experience of a girl compared to a boy. Osteological methods for determining the sex of non-adult skeletons remain inaccurate and heavily debated, and DNA analysis may not always be accessible, or indeed feasible. Neither are we able to interpret the evidence entirely free from bias, with a danger of 'presentism' influencing our views on infancy, childhood and adolescence across time and space. Modern Western society places children at the centre of the social group, awarding its youngest members the greatest care and effort. We cannot assume that this would have been the case in prehistoric societies too. Yet, by considering the variability of the childhood experience in the past, we are able to better understand and contextualise children and their realities in the present too.

Unearthing Childhood presents a broad survey of childhood through time, an insightful and informative read for both specialist and non-specialist audiences. The book does not try to paint a picture of the day to day lives of children in prehistoric societies, instead it offers an appraisal of the opportunities we currently have. Derricourt very comprehensively highlights the potential

of an emerging and important research area, while addressing limitations and areas for future research.

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*The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews
Editor*