

**Review of: Murphy, E. & Le Roy, M. (eds) (2023). Normative, Atypical or Deviant? Interpreting Prehistoric and Protohistoric Child Burial Practices. Oxford: Archaeopress. 254pp, 76 figs, 18 tabs. ISBN 978-1-80327-511-6 (print). Open Access: <https://www.archaeopress.com/Archaeopress/download/9781803275116>**

Pablo Barba

The volume under review gathers the results of the debates held in the session “*Systemic Approaches to Juvenile Funerary Rituals. Atypical, Deviant or Normative? Going Beyond Paradigms*” held in the 2019 European Association of Archaeologists in Bern. The editors, Eileen Murphy and Mélie Le Roy, compile a collection of twelve case studies on child-related funerary practices, previously introduced by a theoretical discussion on the terminology proposed for revision: “*normative*”, “*atypical*”, and “*deviant*”. The case studies emerge principally from Europe (only BENZ ET AL. –working on the Jordanian Neolithic – breaks the norm) and span from prehistoric (n=5) into protohistoric (n=3) and outright historic contexts (n=4). Considering these latter four contributions working with the Roman archaeological record, the tag “*Historic*” should have been added to the title of the book. Be that as it may, the editors and contributors bring about a diverse collection of essays exploring the social significance of funerary practices of subadults.

The introductory chapter by E. MURPHY and M. LE ROY discusses the value of the three principal concepts proposed by the volume. By “*atypical*”, the editors define a “*funerary practice that differs from the normative scenario identified for a given society but does not necessarily imply a negative connotation*” (p. 3). This latter nuance distinguishes atypical from “*deviant*” rites, which refer to “*funerary practices that differ from the expected common burial rites*” (p. 1) and “*evokes a rather negative response*” (p. 2). Although the term “*normative*” is not explicitly defined, it can be understood in opposition to the previous concepts as the usual or most frequent funerary practice for a certain society. The editors’ position towards the terminology is a cautious and meticulous one, detailing its possibilities and limitations through the case of unbaptised children in Medieval Europe. What might have started as an “*atypical*” burial, the spatial segregation of children from adults in Christian Europe eventually became a common practice (see HAUSMAIR, 2017, for a recent review not cited in this volume). The editors warn us

about adult-centric descriptions that too quickly define these burials as atypical or deviant simply because they do not conform to the adult pattern, and encourage readers and contributors to nuance their terminology and interpretations.

In this regard, a regrettably absent topic in the introduction – and throughout the book – is cultural change and the role normative, atypical, and deviant practices could have had in such processes. Few authors discuss in depth how any of the studied funerary practices developed, how atypical burials eventually became typical, or vice versa, and especially the role atypical and deviant burials could have had in cultural change. The authors could have paid attention to the negotiation of social rules regarding burial, and how those were omitted, broken, manipulated... Thus, I believe it would have been fruitful to connect the three main concepts with debates on structuration and agency (ROBB, 2010), which could have provided a framework to deviate from traditional analyses on normative practices.

In the first chapter of the volume, M. BENZ ET AL. propose the only case study not working with European material. The authors focus on the remains of an 8±2-year-old child buried inside the Jordanian Pre-Pottery Neolithic settlement of Ba’ja. They pay particular attention to the exceptional set of beads provided to the individual, as well to deliberate fragmentation of stone slabs and to usage of red pigments to create an eye-catching ritual. While the emphasis on the creation of memories through sensations is commendable, I feel the authors struggle to connect this chapter with the topic of the volume. Although they define the interment as outstanding with a special status and they briefly contextualise it in relation to other burials from the site and region, it is difficult to see how it fits within the discussion of normative, deviant and atypical practices. A more overt usage of the terminology provided by the editors would have helped – a comment applicable to other contributions, too (see below).

A. ANDERS reviews funerary practices of children in the Neolithic cultures of Hungary (6000-4400 BC). The first part of the chapter constitutes a thorough – although somewhat too descriptive – introduction to the funerary practices of the different subperiods of the Hungarian Neolithic. However, in the second half she develops a discussion of the data, claiming that adults and children had the same mortuary practices and elements, except for some cases of “*positive discrimination*” in which children are distinguished from adults such as pot burials, rich jewellery,

miniatures, or interments in tells. She concludes that these small variations occur at a local scale, and that no single norm could be found, but instead a diversity of burial practices depending on local preferences. While this is a valid and very important point I agree with, it is also important to acknowledge that archaeologists usually work with small datasets spanning over large periods of time and regions (in this case 21 sites are mentioned over 2000 years in Hungary), so it is not surprising to find diversity in our chronologically and regionally dispersed assemblages. Trends might have existed that the porous granularity of our data does not allow us to unveil.

Perhaps one of the most interesting and original contributions in the volume, M. LE ROY takes a landscape approach to the introduction of children in collective burials of the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age in the surroundings of Alès, South France (3500-1800 BC). Through a multidimensional analysis paying attention to demographic patterns, bone removal, number and temporality of depositions, and types of collective burial (megalith or cave), the author unveils three distinct funerary traditions well defined spatially in the region. Although the author emphasises further analysis is needed, what these might mean is not stated: are the traditions related to different contemporary communities or ethnic groups? To seasonal variations or subsistence patterns? Or to kinship, clan structures, status, or other principles of social organisation? Commonalities were found too, such as the underrepresentation of children under 5 years of age in all sites which, according to the author, could be defined as a deviant or atypical practice and indicate their different social status. However, he also poses the question to why certain children received a special different burial and were indeed allowed to be interred in the collective burials studied. Although he does not answer this question, see Barba (2021) for a possible account of the inclusion/exclusion of children from cemeteries in relation to negotiation of personhood, emotions, and power. In any case, I look forward to the advances of this direction of research and encourage the author to add other interesting dimensions of the landscape to the analysis, such as visibility, movement, location of settlements or uses of land.

In the next chapter, A. M. HERRERO-CORRAL addresses preservation status of subadult skeletons and differences and similarities between adult and child funerary assemblages during 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> mil. BC in the Upper and Middle Tagus valley in central Spain. The first half focuses on the under-

representation of subadults in the sample, which could be related to different funerary practices, archaeological and taphonomic biases. Through an analysis of the preservation conditions of the skeletons, she concludes that taphonomic bias might be a prominent factor explaining this underrepresentation, although different funerary practices should not be disregarded. While the nature of the preservation of immature bones constitutes a fundamental concern for childhood archaeology, I consider it received too much space in a volume on normative-or-atypical burials of children. Unfortunately, the author leaves little room for topics closer to the volume's intents. Indeed, the author briefly but compellingly suggests the necessity of studying both differences between adults and subadults as broad categories, but also differences within age stages of childhood. Consequently, while overall subadults and adults had similar burials and offerings, she shows how children under 6 years are principally buried in multiple burials – perhaps indicating their lives being linked to other individuals – and had very limited access to offerings, usually of minute size. Similar, children over 6 years can more frequent individual graves, but still have limited offerings and of smaller size. It is only adolescents over 16 years of age which have interments similar in all senses to adult ones, indicating perhaps an earlier start of adulthood. The chapter thus brings an increasingly necessary life-course approach to studying age identities.

C. McSPARRON and E. MURPHY provide a window to instances of “agency” and exceptional behaviours in atypical burials of children from the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age Ireland (2200-1600 BC). The chapter discusses funerary traditions phase by phase to contextualise child burials and highlights a few prominent atypical burials of subadults per period, whose thick description constitutes the centre of the discussion. According to the authors, the variety of extraordinary examples, which range from disarticulated bodies and unusual multiple burials to lavish interments, respond to very different social rationalities, such as migrations, emotional reactions of grievors, family plots or disastrous events. While the article rightly settles the necessity of studying “the full spectrum of burial practices for an era”, I am not convinced that the closing assumption “sometimes from the atypical... wider inferences about society can be made” (p. 119) holds true. For example, cist 1 at Dungate is a unique case of bodily disarticulation that could indeed be the result of moving corpses through a migration. But how many cases like

these were found? If migrations were common, they should affect many other burials in a similar manner. Equally, the Tara boy is a lavish burial that could well indicate ascribed status, but how common were such well-provided interments of children? Can we infer this was a ranked society based on that one unique burial? I believe there is a lurking risk behind generalising broad societal interpretations made from exceptional cases.

F. BORTOLAMI sets the focus on the family in her analysis of children burials from the Iron Age Veneto, Italy (10<sup>th</sup> c. BC-2<sup>nd</sup> c. BC). The chapter's analysis is admittedly preliminary, working with selected burials from two phases of one necropolis. However, the role of the family in the burial treatment of subadults is a question worth exploring further. The author finds that subadults were not treated as a unique age category in terms of their funerary ritual. More importantly, differences between children might be related to the ranking of lineages within the same household. As the number of graves included in the article is limited, the conclusions should be taken with care.

Child burials from Etruscan sites (6<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c.) in the Po Valley, Italy, constitute the core of A. SERRA'S contribution. The chapter deviates from previous contributions in that the focus of analysis is exclusively the spatial distribution and location of graves, rather than grave goods or type of burial. Similarly to the previous chapter, the analysis is quite incomplete still, as it has principally focused on certain sections of the necropolis of Valle Treba and one anomalous infant burial in the urban site of Marzabotto. However, two concepts are worth mentioning in my opinion. Firstly, the author rightly stresses the importance of space for the study of child burials and (ab)normality in the past (i.e., DENHAM, 2017; HAUSMAIR, 2017). Secondly – and as someone accustomed to working with legacy data – I would like to emphasise the meritorious revalorisation of the possibilities of old excavations through the analyses of archival material.

A. ARZELIER ET AL. provide perhaps the most complete text in the volume, combining spatial analysis, aDNA, osteology and demographic assessments, and the study of the grave goods, body position and burial type, all thoroughly anchored in statistics. The chapter revolves around the Iron Age cemetery of Urville-Nacqueville (2<sup>nd</sup> c. BC) in Normandy. The analysis identifies two funerary "entities" affecting the treatment of subadults, as well as preferences especially in terms of location in the necropolis and body treatment (cremation vs inhumation). The authors are cautious – in my opinion perhaps in excess considering the

wide variety of meticulous analysis provided – and do not explore the interpretative possibilities of the site further in the absence of comparative regional samples. Nevertheless, we are eager to see how the project develops.

The four last chapters of the book delve into the funerary customs of childhood during Antiquity and Late Antiquity. These chapters exhibit a different interpretative dynamic due to the variety of sources available: texts, iconography, and material culture can be evaluated conjunctly. Nevertheless, the archaeological record still constitutes the centre of the discussion brought by the different collaborators. R. DURAND'S chapter demonstrates these possibilities in his analysis of subadult graves of the Roman site of Avaricum, France (1<sup>st</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> c. AD). The funerary data shows a general accordance with the customs described in the textual record (i.e., dies lustricus, suggrundaria, delay of cremation...) in terms of spatial distribution and type of graves, but also a variability of gestures can be seen which indicates local reinterpretations of the afterlife. A similar variability in funerary rites is highlighted two chapters later by A. LATTARD & A. SCHMITT. Also working with material from France, in this case the burial assemblages from the towns of Forum Voconii and Forum Iulii in the Narbonensis. In this instance, the authors propose that the heterogeneity of deposits might emerge from familial preferences and the local histories of the various populations inhabiting the region at the time. Considering the chronological and geographical closeness of these and other articles (i.e., DJOUAD & CHEN), perhaps it would have been beneficial for the volume if the editors had allowed contributors to read and cite each other's chapters. This would have fostered discussion between authors, which would have not only benefited the reader enormously, but could have provided some argumentative coherence to the volume.

S. CHRISTIE'S contribution will be of use to anyone interested in debates on "deviance" in the funerary record, as hers is almost the only contribution in the book actively engaging with the concept (see **table 1**). Her chapter revolves around 12 burials of subadults from Late Roman Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire, United Kingdom. The theoretical significance of the contribution constitutes the concept of "relativity or normality" or analysing the range of common characteristics of the funerary practices of a community to address the position of a certain rite within the spectrum normativity-deviance. Through the similarities in the rituals between the analysed instances of de-

capitated bodies she argues that such rites should be characterised as minority, rather than deviant. While the terminological precision is necessary and welcome, it is not clarified whether the ritual is perhaps to be related to negative aspects that one might call deviant, following Murphy & Le Roy’s definition. However, she does acknowledge such queries are part of their project and will be addressed in due time.

In the last contribution, S. DJOUARD and A. CHEN explore the young infants unearthed in a structure of productive character from the Late Antiquity in Lunel-Viel, France. The chapter argues against the common characterisation of similar burial as fear-driven or dangerous, but rather defends their liminal character through an attentive look at their location, always close to boundaries.

Overall, the volume presents a set of well-thought chapters on children’s funerary practices and presenting interesting datasets. It is regrettable, however, that most case studies do not engage in depth with the tripartite terminology proposed by the editors. The main concepts – normative, atypical, and deviant – are used only

RA, MCSPARRON & MURPHIE, CHRISTIE), although it must be acknowledged that, in some instances, authors present their own terminologies (i.e., “minority rite” in Christie, or Anders’ “positive discrimination”). The lack of engagement with this terminology does not demerit at all the twelve chapters in the book: these essays exhibit relevant cases of either “special” or “normal” funerary treatment of children and offer relevant case studies for childhood archaeology. But, by not positioning themselves with regards to the terminology thoroughly presented to discuss by the editors, I believe an opportunity has been missed. A more intensive usage and/or discussion of the terminology could have given the volume with more coherence, solidity, and meaning. Additionally, it would have helped the volume to distinguish itself from other previous collections of essays studying children’s age identities in the funerary record (i.e., MURPHY & LE ROY, 2017). More importantly, the reader would have a clearer notion of the limitations and possibilities of applying this tripartite set of concepts in the study of children or other populations.

Chapter	“Normative”	“Atypical”	“Deviant”	Total
BENZ ET AL.	0	0	0	0
ANDERS ET AL.	2	1	1	4
LE ROY	8	6	8	22
HERRERO-CORRAL	0	0	0	0
MCSPARRON & MURPHY	0	15	0	15
BORTOLAMI	1	0	0	1
SERRA	13	5	3	21
ARZELIER ET AL.	3	2	0	5
DURAND	0	0	0	0
CHRISTIE	7	4	14	25
LATTARD & SCHMITT	3	2	3	8
DJOUAD & CHEN	1	3	1	5
Total	38	38	30	106

**Tab. 1** Quantification of the usage of the three main terms proposed for discussion by the volume in the twelve case studies. The figure indicates number of times each concept has been used, including derived words (i.e., normal, normality, non-normative, abnormal, deviance, deviancy). The table highlights the patchiness in the application of the core terminology explored by the volume.

106 times in total throughout the book, excluding the introductory chapter (**table 1**): at least three of the contributions do not refer to the terminology at all, while four chapters contribute together to 78 % of the usage of these terms (LE ROY, SER-

The limited role of the ethnographic record is also surprising in a debate on normal and abnormal funerary practices. In this sense, Murphy & Le Roy provide a useful comment: while the ethnographic record usually depicts a well-ordered

reality of funerary practices, this does not seem to be the case in the archaeological record, rife with variability of rituals, types of bodily treatment, location... Ethnographic accounts pop up in some chapters to provide purportedly similar patterns to the ones found archaeologically, but it is not drawn for a discussion of the terminology. Continuing with the previous argument, this is a lost opportunity to improve both disciplines. On the one hand, archaeology shows some limitations to ethnographic models on funerary practices, demonstrating limitations perhaps on the ethnographic methodology which has been incapable so far of recording the variability of rites found archaeologically. On the other hand, ethnography can provide very interesting models to enrich our interpretations and discussions. Johnson-Hanks (2002) criticism on the life cycle and her concept of "vital conjunctures" could have provided a useful theoretical tool for some contributions thinking about the life course and studying similarities, differences, and exceptions between age categories in the mortuary record.

More concerning is the lack of statistical testing to show the relevance of the patterns, which should really become a must in any archaeological interpretation. In some contributions, the essays analysis constitutes a rough description of graves which do not provide the reader with a clearer picture of the assemblages unearthed. So, when variability within children's burials or (dis) similarities between adults and subadults are presented, this is not always clearly quantified and solidly demonstrated, and thus should be taken with a pinch of salt. Arguably, some of the essays clearly work with limited localised samples (i.e., one or two sites) or with a few very exceptional cases which do not allow space for much testing. While we should value localised case studies focusing on one/two sites and their micro-histories, I believe these should not be the centre of discussion of childhood in the past. Consequently, we need larger reviews of funerary practices of children that consider the full spectrum of customs of a certain community, from their broad preferences (normality) to minority, deviant, or atypical rites. As childhood archaeology enters its fourth decade of history, such large evaluations should be becoming increasingly common.

All in all, E. MURPHY and M. LE ROY have compiled an interesting set of studies of funerary practices of children from European Prehistory to Antiquity introduced by a strong discussion on normativity and deviance. Although the data analysed by some contributors is still relatively

preliminary or of limited scope, they bring a range of relevant studies in terms of methodology, cultural patterns unearthed, and interpretations. As such, the book will certainly be of interest to anyone keen on the archaeology of childhood and studying age identities through funerary practices, but also to anyone discussing current topics in the archaeology of death. However, I cannot but feel that an opportunity has been missed here to advance in a discussion regarding the validity, possibilities, limitations, and dangers of the qualificatives "normative", "atypical" and "deviant" when studying children's interments.

## References

- Barba, P. (2021). Power, Personhood and Changing Emotional Engagement with Children's Burial during the Egyptian Predynastic. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 31(2), 211-228. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774320000402>.
- Denham, A. R. (2017). *Spirit Children. Illness, Poverty, and Infanticide in Northern Ghana*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Hausmair, B. (2017). Topographies of the afterlife: Reconsidering infant burials in medieval mortuary space. *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 17(2), 210-236. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469605317704347>.
- Johnson-Hanks, J. (2002). On the Limits of Life Stages in Ethnography: Toward a Theory of Vital Conjunctures. *American Anthropologist*, 104(3), 865-880. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.865>.
- Robb, J. (2010). Beyond agency. *World Archaeology*, 42(4), 493-520. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2010.520856>.
- Murphy, E. & Le Roy, M. (eds). (2017). *Children, Death and Burial: Archaeological Discourses* (1<sup>st</sup> ed., Vol. 5). Oxford: Oxbow Books. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1v2xtgd>.

Pablo Barba  
Institute of Archaeology  
University College London  
<https://ucl.academia.edu/PabloBarbaGarc%C3%ADa>

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4621-2661>