

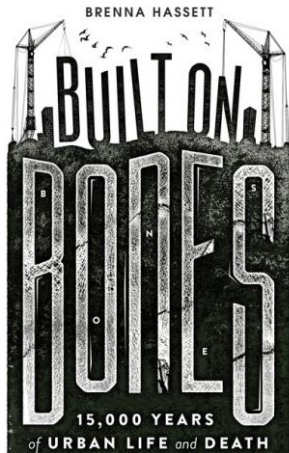
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REVIEWS



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Built on bones: 15,000 years of urban life and death

[by Brenna Hassett]

Bloomsbury Sigma
ISBN: 9781472922939
320 pages

I will start this review with a confession. Upon agreeing to review a book on urbanism, bodies, and the long-standing conundrum of *why* humans became sedentary and eventually urbanised — when all evidence indicates that life expectancy, health and other hallmarks of a good life sharply deteriorated — I did not realise that this was in fact not a research monograph, but a popular science book. The book is part of Bloomsbury's Sigma imprint, a series that according to the website "has something to feed everyone's inner scientist".

I must admit it was quite difficult to (attemptedly) put my archaeological training aside and approach a book of this kind as a layperson, but at least I have the questionable asset of not being trained in osteology. Overall, I found Hassett's book to be informative, full of jokes and anecdotes, and knowledgeable. The author has not made life easy for herself, writing a book for the general public from a bio-archaeological point of view that spans 15,000 years. The style of the book is highly personal — we are treated to details such as Hassett's college diet, the fact that she accidentally destroyed a 9,000-year-old wall when visiting Çatalhöyük, her exasperation with the British plumbing system with one hot, one cold tap (shared by many foreigners to the UK,

I can confirm), and the fact that she in the 1990's stalked Pamela Anderson every morning at a Starbucks in California.

The writing style will probably be a love-or-hate aspect of the book. It certainly does not read like the dry deliberations of many a 'popular' archaeology book, and I both chuckled and laughed out loud upon reading. But the tone can, at times, perhaps be a bit too cute. For the average reader picking up a volume with the promise of looking at 15,000 years of urban life and death from the perspective of dead bodies, I wonder how much the table of contents would be a deciding factor in whether to buy the book. Consisting entirely of song titles stemming from Monty Python to Red Hot Chili Peppers, chapter titles such as 'Tainted Love', 'What's New Pussycat', and 'Karma Police' do not provide much indication about what the book is about. More informative subtitles after the pop-cultural references would have helped the reader grasp the topics and structure of the book.

In fact, the book is well-structured, with an introduction, thirteen chapters and a conclusion successively and to a large extent chronologically tackling questions such as the beginning of sedentism (chapter 1); changes in subsistence practices and neolithisation (including a precise debunking of paleo diet, chapter 2); the domestication of animals (chapter 3); and the Neolithic revolution seen through key Anatolian sites such as Çatalhöyük and Aşıklı Höyük (chapter 4). The book next tackles a range of social and political questions, including urbanism and social inequality (chapter 5); interpersonal violence (chapter 6); systematic suppression and violence against groups such as subordinates, children, women, criminals, and outsiders (chapter 7); and warfare (chapter 8). The subsequent chapters consider the fatal consequences of living in highly populated, urban societies. Chapter 9 discusses infectious diseases such as leprosy and tuberculosis; chapter 10 reveals Hasset's fondness for the plague; and chapter 11 deals with the outcome of that tainted love; syphilis.

The final chapters deliberate urban forms of labour and how e.g. craft specialisation and intensive physical labour marks the body (chapter 12), and, as a case study of sorts, a discussion of early modern London (chapter 13). Finally, the conclusion weaves some of the strands together in an, again, personal discussion on

where we are going in an increasingly urban world. Hassett is a self-proclaimed optimist on behalf of cities, if only we can find a way to manage the socio-economic inequality “that has picked us off huddled mass by huddled mass” (p. 311-312). This self-proclaimed pessimist would say ‘good luck with that’; but the conclusion nonetheless ties the topics of the book together with contemporary social and political challenges, such as structural and domestic violence, asymmetrical power relations, and pandemics and large-scale migration, showing the reader why a book on sedentism, health, and violence is important.

Ideally, I would like to have seen some of the points of the conclusion raised in earlier chapters of the book. For instance, with reference to Ucko’s seminal *World Archaeology* paper (1969), Hassett rightly stresses the numerous ways people have dealt with the physical remains of the dead across time and space — surely a vital point in a book based on bodies. Moreover, it is not until the conclusion that Hassett acknowledges that she really has not defined urbanism in any way (although a perfunctory discussion of cities can be found on p. 94). Related to this, there is an unresolved tension in the book between the focus on the Neolithic, especially the famous Anatolian sites that are used extensively as examples, and *urbanism* as a phenomenon. Are Çatalhöyük and Aşıklı Höyük really urban sites? The literature seems to indicate that this is a much-discussed issue, a discussion Hassett could have included in her book. It would perhaps also have been possible to draw on a recent debate in *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, where Bisserka Gaydarska (2016) explores how urbanism is embedded in an evolutionary line of thought, and more or less rejects the term, with replies and commentary from other urbanists. Possibly, the book’s title would have reflected the content better if it were ‘15,000 Years of *Settled* Life and Death’. In addition to defining what she means by urbanism, Hassett could also have noted at the outset that her story of the development of urbanism naturally would be skewed — a 300-page book cannot cover all areas and sites, but a stronger statement about *why* she has chosen to focus on the sites and regions she covers would probably have been helpful for the reader.

Regarding formalities, the author and/or publishing house have made the choice not to include references in the text (nor in the jokey footnotes), but simply note that an electronic version of the reference list can be accessed online. I wonder if general readers would not have been happy with a brief 'Further reading' section towards the end of the book, and as an archaeologist, I certainly would have liked to see in-text references to a lot of the facts, evidence and issues raised, as it would be relevant to identify what discourse Hassett is writing herself into and leaning upon. This is, however, to some extent solved through naming key figures in various discussions, and, again, an academic archaeologist is probably not part of the core target audience of the book.

These critical comments aside, there are numerous highlights in Hassett's nuanced approach to archaeological evidence and bioarchaeological methods. She expertly touches on meta-archaeological topics such as androcentricity, research bias, and tautological reasoning, often through on-point anecdotes. As a non-bioarchaeologist, I thoroughly enjoyed the entertaining ways a lot of osteological topics were raised, and gained a better understanding of issues I was only vaguely familiar with. I found the chapter on structural violence to be perhaps the most important chapter of the book, including deliberations of child abuse in the past, evidence of domestic violence (40% of women from the site of Jinggouzi in Neolithic China had broken noses, according to Hassett), and contemporary and past violence against people perceived as deviant. I have rarely seen such a synthesis of crucial topics many archaeologists seem to find outside their interpretative or scholarly remit.

In one of the numerous humorous footnotes, Hassett asserts that all academic disagreements are "passive-aggressive and privately devastating. See for instance", she writes, "the reviews of this book". I hope that this review, at least, proves her wrong. Despite this reader's critique of some unresolved tension between urbanism and sedentism, occasional exasperation over the writing style, and the wish for a stronger introductory framework, I would warmly recommend fellow archaeologists to buy Hassett's book as a present for those relatives who cannot understand what you are really doing with your life (especially the ones into paleo dieting).

After your relatives are done with the book, read it yourself. Perhaps you will, like me, end up hoping that your path will cross Hassett's one day, when you can buy her a pint and get to hear some of her many stories in person. In the end, there is no question about it; Brenna Hassett certainly is both knowledgeable and entertaining, as is *Built on Bones. 15,000 Years of Urban Life and Death*.

References

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