



## Book review

**Bones and Ochre: The Curious Afterlife of the Red Lady of Paviland.** *Marianne Sommer.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007, xii + 398 pp, list of archives consulted, 14 figures, 2 appendices.

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In *Bones and Ochre*, author Marianne Sommer, a historian of science, aims to address her discipline's neglect of paleoanthropology and prehistoric archeology (11). Sommer situates her book among other recent works in the history of science, such as Keller (2000), Secord (2000), and Daston (2000; 2004), as well as those which contextualize the anthropological sciences, including Hammond (1980), Bowler (1986), and Delisle (2007). Drawing on both published and archival sources, Sommer takes on the large task of tracing the history of paleoanthropology through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as she follows the changing biography of the "Red Lady of Paviland." She uses this ochre-stained fossil skeleton and its role (along with that of associated artifacts) as an "anthropological object," at once a natural, material object and meaningful concept (6), to demonstrate the historically contingent nature of anthropological interpretation, as the Red Lady's age, sex, ethnicity, and place in human history shift multiple times from discovery in 1823 to the present day.

Sommer divides her book into three main parts, organized chronologically and each focusing on a specific individual. The first follows William Buckland (1784-1856), chair of geology at Oxford University, who discovered the skeleton in Paviland Cave in southern Wales. She situates Buckland's interpretations of

the skeleton, first as a Roman tax collector and then as a female witch or possible prostitute, within the historical context of a Biblical timescale and the beginnings of the evolution controversy.

The second part centers on William Sollas (1849-1936), a geo-anthropologist and successor of Buckland to the chair of geology at Oxford. Now operating within a framework of the new field of paleoanthropology, Sollas reinterpreted the remains as those of a Cro-Magnon male. Sommer also discusses how the Red Lady influenced Sollas's thoughts on the cultural and biological links between modern and ancient peoples as the accepted model of human evolution shifted from linear to branched.

In the third and final part, Sommer examines the "Definitive Report" produced by an international, multidisciplinary team lead by archeologist Stephen Aldhouse-Green, who was at that time at the University of Wales in Newport. The report, published in 2000, classifies the Red Lady as a (gracile) male shaman aged late 20s who lived 26,000 years ago. Sommer questions perceived claims of "internationality" and "interdisciplinarity" (264), noting that the book chapters from the various contributors were produced more or less in isolation from each other and remarking on the power and purpose of such claims in the contemporary context.

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The author provides an incredible amount of historical detail as she seeks to contextualize the interpretations of each individual who played a part in telling the Red Lady's story. These include Buckland and pre-evolutionary theories of change, Sollas and the mixing of anthropology with politics in the context of imperialism and nationalist tensions in Europe, as well as those numerous individuals who have reconstructed the burial scene for the public, as described in the chapter on "Visualizing Paviland Cave."

Sommer's story of the Red Lady touches on many recurring issues in anthropology, including the use of ethnographic analogy, repatriation of human remains, and the problem of contamination in ancient DNA studies, as well as broader themes such as the construction of national identity and the search for origins in today's globalized world. Especially interesting is the way Sommer makes connections between these issues in the case of the Red Lady, for example in her discussion of the use of mitochondrial DNA to establish the Red Lady's ancestral genealogy and how this affects Welsh claims on the skeleton and all it represents.

Furthermore, as Sommer states and I agree, as a case study her book speaks to current debates in archeology regarding relativism versus reflexivity, whether objects tell their own stories or whether archeologists project their own preconceived ideas and meanings onto them (7). It also contributes to discussions of the social construction of scientific knowledge and the influence of institutional, political, and technical factors, among others, and how scientific paradigms and theories frame interpretation. Perhaps Sommer's most important contribution here is in demonstrating the instability of current interpretations and conclusions.

*Bones and Ochre* will thus be of interest to scholars and students across various disciplines from anthropology and archeology to the history of science and the sociology of scientific knowledge. It provides interesting material for use in a course on the history of anthropology and perhaps other anthropology courses, as it illustrates well the contingent and constantly evolving state of anthropological knowledge. Sommer offers here a rich contribution in an area of the history of anthropology which deserves further attention.

## References

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