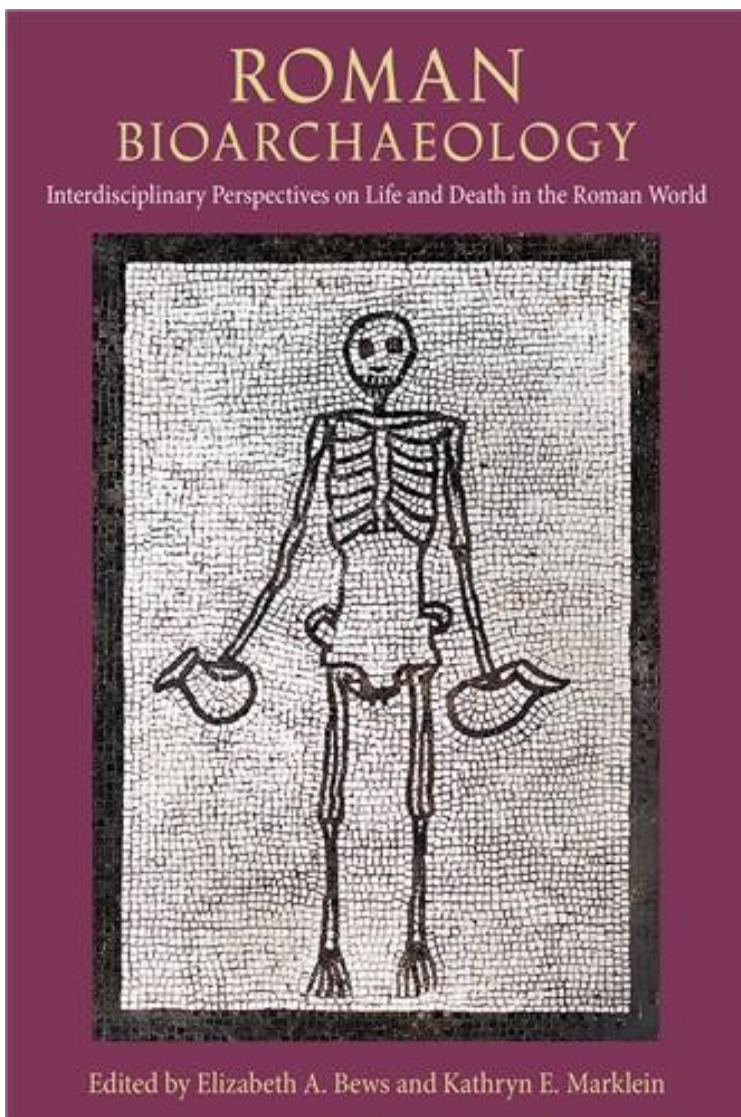


Book Review: Roman Bioarchaeology: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Life and Death in the Roman World

Edited By: Elizabeth A. Bews and Kathryn E. Marklein, University of Florida Press. 2025. ISBN: 9781683404774. \$90.00 (Print).

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Empires are not monolithic systems; they are comprised of, shaped by, and negotiated with the individuals who live within them. Elizabeth A. Bews' and Kathryn E. Marklein's edited volume, *Roman Bioarchaeology: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Life and Death in the Roman World*, captures exactly that. Throughout the chapters of the book, Bews and Marklein bring in a variety of contributors who use bioarchaeology as a means to bring individuals to the forefront. Though Roman bioarchaeology is a relatively new field, scarcely 30 years old, the overwhelming amount of information brought together within these pages makes it an invaluable resource to anyone interested in the Roman period. In addition, *Roman Bioarchaeology* is the first book to combine studies from multiple areas of the Roman Empire rather than providing a more regional review. The authors of the different chapters intentionally incorporate often understudied areas outside of the Italian peninsula and Roman Britain, as well as research published in languages other than English. Beyond this volume's evident value as a compendium of Roman bioarchaeology, its true strength lies in its theoretically grounded and accessible approach. *Roman Bioarchaeology* may be written about the Roman world, but the various authors' conscientious and socially-informed approaches to their research questions, as well as the clear explanations of complicated bioarchaeological methods, make this an invaluable resource for any bioarchaeologist.

The structure of the volume helps guide all audiences, from the most experienced bioarchaeologist to one completely new to the field, through the various topics in a way that helps to connect all of the information across the different methodologies. The first three and final three chapters provide a nuanced approach informed by social theory to well-known bioarchaeological methods, aligning with more recent trends in the field towards more critically informed interpretations. Bews and

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Marklein's introductory chapter provides a general overview of the current state of Roman bioarchaeology, while also introducing their overall goal to "show how Roman bioarchaeology . . . serves to promote the humanity of the people who lived in and created the Roman world" ([Marklein & Bews, 2025, p. 16](#)).

The chapters on sex and gender and childhood introduce aspects of bioarchaeology that are relatively familiar to most readers, but in ways that are newer to the field. Contributors Quade and Gowland raise critical points about the need to consider sex and gender as a biocultural process of becoming, emphasizing the need to examine as many aspects of identity as possible when drawing conclusions. In their chapter on childhood, Pitt and Lewis take a theoretically informed life course approach to exploring how early life experiences varied throughout the empire.

The more technical chapters of this volume synthesize literature and present new findings on isotopic data, biodistance, and aDNA. Despite their more technical methods, the authors of these chapters avoid the notorious "black box" by describing the science behind these processes in a way that is both informative and accessible. These explanations provide a baseline level of understanding for those less familiar with these methods and guide the reader through critical interpretations of the research presented. All of these authors set a precedent which reflects the value of multidisciplinary approaches in the study of both population and individual lived experiences during the Roman period, a precedent which is readily transferred to bioarchaeological study in other regions.

Contributors on violence, the rural-urban divide, and identity call into question traditional understandings of these concepts. Themes of these chapters include a need to pay closer attention to the ways that identities are formed, negotiated, and re-negotiated, and how multiple lines of evidence which reflect the many aspects of human identity are essential for examining the impact of identity on lived experience. Sammut, Marklein, and Bews, in particular, comment on how, while a rural-urban divide may have existed, it should not be essentialized into completely dichotomous categories.

Bioarchaeologists have long called for a move towards a more theoretically grounded bioarchaeology which considers the entanglements between biology and culture ([Armelagos, 2008](#); [Goodman, 2013](#); [Goodman & Leatherman, 1998](#)). This book brings together information from across the empire, something previously only done at a regional scale. Bews and Marklein conclude that Roman bioarchaeology is still in a state of becoming. They call for a field driven by research questions guided by theories as opposed to methodological advancements, and one which moves away from the unidirectional Roman-centric model of imperialism to an emphasis on human agency. They also address the need for sharing and standardizing data and argue that there is an ethical imperative to shift focus to curating existing collections prior to excavating new ones. Overall, *Roman Bioarchaeology* is an excellent resource both for exploring bioarchaeological findings in the Roman world, and for providing nuanced theoretical approaches which should be applied to bioarchaeology at large. This volume uses social theory to inform bioarchaeological research which avoids essentializing any singular aspect of the human experience and is a valuable text for bioarchaeologists across all regions.

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