

Jarvis Hayman and Marc Oxenham, *Human Body Decomposition* (Academic Press, Elsevier, London, 2016, 162 pp., \$39.95 paperback).

What happens to a body following death is still as an important question today as it was when scientists first started to study the decomposition process over 200 years ago. The answer to this question is not only of interest to forensic anthropologists, pathologists and academics studying the human body, but also of vital importance to the medico-legal arena. As highlighted in *Human Body Decomposition*, co-authored by Jarvis Hayman and Marc Oxenham, the first known written accounts of forensic methods and attempts to estimate the time since death date back to thirteenth-century China and a textbook entitled *His Yuan Lu* (The Washing Away of Wrongs).<sup>1</sup> Only since the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, has scientific research been undertaken to try to understand the chemical changes that happen to a body after the end of life and, more importantly for medico-legal investigations, how these changes may relate to time since death. This book provides a historical account of research into the methods and accuracy of the determination of the post mortem interval in human bodies.

As many reference text books in forensic anthropology offer only a brief overview of bodily decomposition process the authors of this book set out to provide a detailed description of the quantitative research that has been conducted into estimating the time since death and the state of current understanding on the different identified stages of decomposition. As such the book is broken down into five separate chapters each relating to one of the stages from bodily cooling to a becoming a fully skeletonised body, with a discussion of the methods used to attempt an estimation of time since death.

The first chapter deals with the stage immediately after death when the body begins to undergo chemical changes and cools in temperature. The causes and presentation of rigor mortis are discussed in detail, highlighting the subjective nature of this phenomenon which is often used in detective fiction as a plot device relating to time since death (e.g. *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*<sup>2</sup>). Thus the chapter concludes with the note that the use of any one supravital reaction, such as rigor mortis, to determine the post mortem interval in the early period after death is not to be recommended; rather, a combination of methods should be used. Indeed there is a general theme of caution throughout the chapters of this book as various methods

are examined. The second chapter focuses on the use of temperature-based methods as the body cools to the ambient temperature; however, error rates of two to four hours within a twelve-hour time frame highlight the variable nature of decomposition in the human body even in the early stages. Chapter 3 assesses the use of biochemical markers in closed compartments of the body such as the eye that were thought to have had greater potential for more accurate estimations. Whilst much research has been undertaken, the authors conclude, however, that such markers still provide only limited value in establishing the post mortem interval. The later stages of decomposition, where insect activity and burial environment are important factors in the speed and nature of bodily decay are addressed, in the fourth chapter, but again the concluding remarks are that at this stage the majority of methods employed, such as radioactive isotope dating, produce large error rates. The book concludes with a discussion of trends in more recent research into quantifying time since death, such as the use of Accumulated Degree Days introduced by Vass and colleagues in the 1990s,<sup>3</sup> and the fact that more research is required before estimation of the post mortem interval can be determined with any degree of certainty. A conclusion is presented at the end of each chapter, along with a bibliography for that chapter. However, the effectiveness of the book overall would have been improved by taking a more synthesised approach to the material and themes. This becomes more apparent during the later chapters where limitations due to similar contextual variants are considered, such as burial environment or the presence or absence of clothing, and this can become a little repetitive.

The strength of this book, however, lies in its comprehensive description of the research undertaken into the examination of the chemical processes of bodily decomposition, starting from the moment of death right through to skeletisation. Research conducted on remains from mortuaries, international forensic cases, animal and human experimental data are all covered in a largely chronological approach. The level of the book is pitched at readers who already have a good understanding of the nature of decomposition and the chemical processes involved. It is very useful to have a summation of all of this research in one volume that can, as the authors state in their preface, act as a starting point for students and future researchers in this field. Although it is only a short book, the work will provide a valuable reference for students, academics and investigators in the areas of pathology, forensic anthropology and the burgeoning field of death studies.

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## Notes

- 1 Sung Tz'u, *His Yuan Lu (The Washing Away of Wrongs)*, translated from the Chinese by B. E. McKnight (Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan, 1981).
- 2 D. L. Sayers, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (London, Ernest Benn, 1928).
- 3 A. A. Vass, W. M. Bass, J. D. Wolt, J. E. Foss and J. T. Ammons, 'Time since Death Determinations in Human Cadavers using Soil Solution', *Journal of Forensic Science*, 37:5 (1992), 1236–53.

## Book Reviews

Zuzanna Dziuban (ed.), *Mapping the 'Forensic Turn'. Engagements with Materialities of Mass Death in Holocaust Studies and Beyond*, Beiträge des Vienna Wiesenthal Institute zur Holocaustforschung (New Academic Press, Vienna, 2017, 368 pp., €28 paperback).

This ambitious volume proceeds from a conference organised at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies. It attempts to locate on the map of many social sciences and humanities disciplines the now much-talked about 'forensic turn'. The use of the term has spread in recent years, but its definition remains wide and somehow vague and this very vagueness permits a multiplicity of approaches, as is shown by this volume. The forensic turn can be strictly understood as the study of evidence procured by the analysis of human remains, evidence brought to court-rooms or other public forums of transitional justice. The subtitle of this important volume is less restrictive, mentioning 'engagements with materialities of mass death'. And if the Holocaust is the topic of most of the contributions, a comparative approach is offered too, with articles dealing with Nazi camps in general, the former Yugoslavia and, more marginally, other confrontations with post-mass-violence situations, like in today's Spain. In her strong and detailed introduction the editor defines this general (and, the volume shows, rather diversified) trend, stating: 'Considered a response to the dramatic rise in public and scholarly interest in the practices and processes pertaining to material legacies of mass political violences at sites related to the Holocaust and beyond – especially those structured around the application of forensic science in investigating its material remains (objects, buildings, structures) and mass graves (the search for, exhumation, and reburial of bodies) – this book addresses this phenomenon from divergent disciplinary and conceptual perspectives' (p. 11). The chapters are organised into four loosely defined sections – in fact some chapters could belong to several of those sections. The section on 'Forensic Fields' deals with the bringing of evidence in legal procedures. A reflection by Robert-Jan van Pelt on the role of expert witnesses in Holocaust-denial trials focuses on the architecture of killing facilities. Eyal Weizman completes this examination of buildings and architecture by showing how technologies can aid the human eye and, if appropriately used, can make visible until-now non-detectable evidence. Weizman details in some fascinating examples how 'architecture and memory became entangled in a way that cannot easily be divided into subject and object, testimony and evidence, matter and memory' (p. 87). This statement could be expanded to the entire volume, as the question of memory, both individual and collective, pertains greatly to the various analyses. In a more theoretical chapter, Ewa Domanska wants to lead us towards a 'necrosymbiosis', seeing the reconsidered status of human remains through the forensic turn, opening it to a trans-species philosophy (which appears rather strange and even slippery when the forensic turn should be considered mostly as a new humanist enterprise to recover the identity of the dead and to rebuild family and community history). In the second section, Claudia Theune, Caroline Sturdy Colls, Rob van der Laarse and Francesco Mazzucchelli each consider the recent change in the treatment of bones on the sites of mass killings in

Europe. Those sites have always been contentious, heavily loaded and the subjects of micro or macro political powerplays, but in recent decades archaeologists have started to screen them, sometimes because the sites needed to be ‘cleaned’ to make way for building new memorials, or sometimes for scientific purposes. In the conclusion to his contribution Rob van der Laarse reminds the reader: ‘I would like to argue that playing with the dead is never an innocent game. Forensic archaeologists and physical anthropologists may claim that “bones don’t lie”, but human remains and belongings are by far the most tabooed, politicised and signified “evidence” of Europe’s “age of extremes”’ (p. 167). The third section gathers chapters on ‘Politics and the Agency of Dead Bodies’, in which Admir Jugo and Sarah Wagner examines the memory politics and forensic practices of exhumations in Bosnia and Herzegovina; Malgorsara Wosinska attempts a ‘Practical Approach to Human Remains in Comparative Genocide Studies’; and Zuzanne Dziuban herself tries to ‘theorise ashes’, which is a wide and important topic dealing with the forensics of the Holocaust, considering the huge proportion of victims whose bodies were cremated (the exact proportion is unknown, but could be as high as two-third of the corpses). Showing how fruitful new approaches to this forensic question can be, in the same section Layla Rensha, draws on ethnographic interviews with relatives of war dead ‘to identify how certain properties of forensic evidence are foregrounded and shaped into narratives about the past and about the dead’ (p. 215). She describes the teleological purpose ascribed to the survival of material traces, as if the dead collaborated in their own recovery. The fourth and last section is entitled ‘Beyond the Scientific/Legal Notion of Forensics’. Roma Sendyka has written a fascinating contribution showing how the forensic turn has influenced practices of memorialisation, with the emergence of micro memorials, whose materiality is local and whose forms are often surprising. Many contributions draw on recent art works, developing the analysis of a new ‘forensic estheticism’ – which most of the time provokes controversies among the public and in the art world, especially when ashes and human remains are physically used to create the art. In this last section, Stephenie Young describes a new ‘forensic imagination’, analysing works on the memory of violence in the former Yugoslavia. The last contribution is from Johanne Helbo Bondergaard, who has a doctorate in comparative literature from Aarhus University. This is the only chapter solely of literary scholarship and it analyses the recent memoir of the Swedish writer Göran Rosenberg, *A Brief Stop on the Road from Auschwitz*. Rosenberg tells his own memory of growing up in Sweden as the son of two Auschwitz survivors and the seminal chapter of the book is the retelling of the son’s journey to the last camp where his father was interned – and where he was liberated. The analysis of his confrontation with a landscape of memory and with the changing memorialisation of the camp’s mass graves is a welcome final contribution to this engaging and complex volume.

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## Book Reviews

Alexander Laban Hinton, *Man or Monster? The Trial of a Khmer Rouge Torturer* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2016, 360 pp., £20.99/€24.88 paperback).

*Man or Monster? The Trial of a Khmer Rouge Torturer* presents a detailed analysis of Duch, a former Khmer Rouge Comrade, and his trial before the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). From 1975 until 1979, Duch served as the Deputy and Chairman of S-21 security centre, also known as Tuol Sleng, during the Khmer Rouge's reign in Cambodia. The ECCC arrested him in July 2007 on allegations of crimes against humanity, breaches of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the murder and torture of over 12,000 prisoners. Five years later, on 7 February 2012, the Supreme Court Chamber of the ECCC rendered its appeal decision and sentenced Duch to life imprisonment.

In his book, Alexander Laban Hinton<sup>1</sup> covers the entire time-span of the trial, from its commencement in 2008 to the final decision in 2012. The chapters proceed chronologically, moving from the start to the conclusion of Duch's trial, while occasionally going outside the inner court-room to address the broader implications that the trial has, for example, on the victims of the atrocities. This book offers a detailed and multidimensional overview of both the Khmer Rouge and one of its perpetrators. As such, it strenuously balances the Khmer Rouge's crimes, operations, goals and ideology with the life, character and crimes committed by one of its followers. As the trial – and thus book – proceeds, the reader is offered a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics between the narratives of the prosecution, the defence counsel and the defendant. Hinton's observations of Duch's trial, numerous interviews and analysis of court records contribute to the rich analysis which Hinton offers the reader throughout the entire book. By sharing his own personal experiences and observations, Hinton delivers a unique 'behind-the-scenes' perspective on Duch's trial and proceedings – both inside and outside the court-room. In addition, his ethnographic writing makes the book accessible even to those who are less familiar with legal proceedings.

Beyond the expert analysis of legal proceedings, the most intriguing aspect of the book is perhaps what is suggested right from the front cover, which features a graffitied photo of Duch at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, in addition to the thought-provoking title: *Man or Monster?* As explained by Hinton, some visitors of the Genocide Museum decided to graffiti Duch's photo 'to articulate an understanding of him and the violent acts he had committed at the site.'<sup>2</sup> The book considers both how Duch was 'graffitied' by participants and observers at his trial and the way the Khmer Rouge framed their victims at S-21.<sup>3</sup> For perpetrators of mass atrocities, such frames hinge on the 'banality of evil' as well as the 'banality of everyday thought', our everyday ways of framing and categorising the world.<sup>4</sup>

The title *Man or Monster?* not only defines the book's angle but also sets the stage for the main frames used to consider Duch, or perpetrators of mass atrocities in general. Although it may seem from the outset that there is only one 'either-or' outcome, the author leaves the reader to question whether we *can* and *should* narrow a 'complex human life' down to two possibilities; possibilities which reflect whether someone is considered part of *us* or *them*. Against this background, the book shifts

through shades of characterisations which may fit the 'either-or' approach of man or monster. According to Hinton, however, this simplification and categorisation – the renderings of us and them – directly parallels a key dynamic in the genocidal process.<sup>5</sup> By using the Khmer Rouge as an example, he demonstrates that they, like other groups, have committed mass murder, offered a singular vision of the world that made sharp demarcations between *us* and *them*. As such, narrowing a complex human life down to two possibilities amounts to the same categorisation that took place in Democratic Kampuchea, where people were transformed into the other, the enemy.

The front cover serves another purpose. The importance of understanding the implications of framing is demonstrated in the very beginning of the book. The foreword commences with an entry in the Exhibition Comment Book of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum which mentions: 'A picture says a thousand words.' Although Hinton considers that this may be true, he argues that 'what is seen depends on the language a person speaks, on the frames mediating that person's articulations, and on what that person edits out.'<sup>6</sup> The title, front cover and book make the reader aware that there are many ways to graffiti or frame Duch: for example as monster, teacher, torturer, suspect, father, evil, witness, perpetrator, victim and cog in the machine. Language and culture, in this sense, also play a large role. While Duch is labelled in English as 'evil' on the front cover, there is also Khmer text, and Duch's eyes have been re-coloured with a white pen (as his eyes have been made un-visible). What has been written in Khmer can be understood only by those who are able to read it. In addition, while Duch's re-coloured eyes may suggest the demonic, Hinton explains that from a Cambodian Buddhist perspective they may also convey ignorance, the state of being that may lead to sinful actions. Hence, when an English-speaker without knowledge of Cambodian Buddhism looks at Duch's photograph, this alternative articulation of Duch will remain unseen.<sup>7</sup> The front cover, in combination with this explanation, thus makes the reader aware of what he or she does not see, what is being erased implicitly from our own articulation, and adds an extra dimension to articulating perpetrators of mass atrocities as either man or monster: the many facets of understanding that are necessary to grasp the full extent of mass atrocities and international criminal justice. Hinton concludes his book by drawing a parallel between Duch and the reader, mentioning that, like Duch, we constantly render articulations of self, other and the world. Although this is how we give meaning and categorise the complex world around us, Hinton's book makes the reader aware that considering the two prevailing possible categories of being either men of monsters in relation to perpetrators of international crimes does not do justice to the same type of categorisation that may provoke the commission of these crimes: the fine line between categorising *us* and *them*.

This book is indispensable for perpetrator studies and those focusing on international criminal (transitional) justice. The book successfully develops a critical reflection of those who commit mass atrocities and creates awareness of the framing we use to explain their (criminal) behaviour. It amplifies and adds to existing scholarship on perpetrators of international crimes, international criminal courts and tribunals, and transitional justice. The author refines scholarship in relation

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to perpetrator studies and contributes to – and literally reframes – the debate on whether those who commit horrific crimes *can* and *should* be framed as either men or monsters. Hinton places emphasis on how and why we may frame perpetrators of mass atrocities as either men or monsters and questions the assumption that these are the only two possible options. Not only does he challenge the reader to consider those who commit mass atrocities as men, but he also adds the critical note that it is precisely the existence of these two possibilities (man or monster) which may drive ‘men’ into committing the ‘monstrous’ crimes. In Hinton’s own words, all of us are graffiti artists, and throughout his book he provokes the reader into reflecting on what he or she would write on Duch’s photo at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.

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## Notes

- 1 Alexander Hinton is Distinguished Professor of Anthropology, Director of the Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights, and UNESCO Chair on Genocide Prevention at Rutgers University, New Jersey.
- 2 A. L. Hinton, *Man or Monster? The Trial of a Khmer Rouge Torturer* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2016), p. 9.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 296.