

Editorial

This is the first volume of the *Bioarchaeology of the Near East*, a new journal intended to be a bridge between biological anthropologists and the archaeologists interested in the history of human populations inhabiting the Near East. Thousands of human skeletons have been excavated during more than 150 years of archaeological research in the region, but this vast amount of data has hardly been transferred into important research results, with few exceptions, such as studies of Egyptian mummies or various attempts to define the transition to agriculture in the areas of the Fertile Crescent. Especially the research on proto-historical and historical human populations seems to be seriously underdeveloped, although potentially promising if we take into account the constantly increasing amount of both archaeological and textual evidence.

This situation may be explained as the result of three independent and equally important factors. First is the poor state of preservation of human remains in the climatic conditions of the region, again with Egypt as a prominent exception. In other areas, such as Mesopotamia, Syria or Iran, the most populated places were subject to annual fluctuations in humidity and temperature, which after hundreds or thousands of years made human bones very fragile. Another important issue is the context of skeletons which are more frequently found in settlement areas than in separate cemeteries. Continuous human activity over burial places contributed to further destruction of bones. In the past, when osteological research was focused on cranial and facial metric measurements, the problem of bone preservation was more serious, but even now—in the age of biochemistry and ancient DNA studies—it frequently frustrates researchers.

The second factor is the political situation in the region, and relative lack of infrastructure. Most work must be done at the excavation houses far away from the laboratories, and the export of even small samples may turn out to be problematic or impossible. There are a few cases of successful transportation of large human skeletal collections abroad—as with the Japanese Hamrin project in the early 1980s—but actually such costly and difficult operations can be attempted only occasionally, under conditions of a strong support from local authorities, significant budget allocations and enthusiasm of the archaeological team leaders. All this may be secured only if the expected results are extraordinary. Again, there is one exception—Israel with its academic infrastructure, but also with religious restrictions on excavations of human remains.

And the last point, contributing to the underdevelopment of studies on Near Eastern human remains, is the lack of communication among people involved in this kind of research. Again, Egypt and to some extent Israel are exceptional, but in other areas the common way of research is just taking more or less detailed observations and measurements, which are published as appendices to archaeological reports or in journals in which we would never expect to find a paper about human remains from our region of interest. Only a limited number of authors attempted to gather these data in composing more synthetic papers, which presented considerable challenges due to the dispersion of publications and sometimes the extreme differences in methodological approaches of research.

The present journal may then be treated as an ambitious attempt to offer some relief at least against the third problem, and perhaps also toward some aspects of the two other issues discussed above. The journal is primarily conceived as a tool for information exchange and, in consequence, the establishment of a forum and a community of people interested in the human population history of this very important part of the world. There is no doubt that our community of interested scholars specializing in the region is rather limited and that the *Bioarchaeology of the Near East* will never become as thick as general anthropological journals. However, at least

in my opinion, it is worth trying, should there be a chance of bringing together and better integrating our small community hence contributing to the progress of our research.

As a community-integrating device, each volume of the journal will be divided into two parts, the first publishing regular papers, subject to the peer-review process, and the second containing short fieldwork reports, as standardized brief communications (usually of 2-3 pages) about recent studies on human remains in our region of interest. Such reports will not be strictly reviewed, and the idea is to provide the readers with up-to-date, concise information about recent activity of their colleagues. I hope that many of us will acquire a habit of concluding each fieldwork season by issuing such a report for publication in the *Bioarchaeology of the Near East*. If so, the project will be successful and it is hoped that such exchange of data may become a base for further collaboration, larger and/or integrated projects and finally the publication of original research papers in our journal or elsewhere. There is also room for papers on methods, even if the properties of these methods are shown not solely in Oriental populations, as in the case of two articles published in the present volume. Although we focus on research on human remains, other branches of bioarchaeology, namely archaeozoology and archaeobotany, will also be represented in the journal, but only under the condition that these papers would be directly connected to the research on past human populations.

There were some dilemmas with the name of the journal, and this was the subject of many discussions between the editor and the members of the Editorial Board. The forerunner to the present journal was the annual *Studies in Historical Anthropology*, established by the late Professor Andrzej Wierciński in 2001 as a journal dedicated to all types of research on past human populations. However, only one volume was issued before Wierciński's death and for four years the title was suspended. In 2005 Prof. Alina Wiercińska decided to continue publishing the journal and three thematic volumes were issued in a dramatic struggle to catch up with the synchronization between the calendar and the volume numbers. However, very quickly we realized that the publication of the next thematic volumes would have been more and more strenuous because of approaching deadlines.

The third volume of the *Studies in Historical Anthropology* was dedicated to the research on the Pre-Pottery Neolithic site of Nemrik 9 in Iraq, and contained also some papers on the subject of human remains excavated at other Near Eastern sites. The present journal is established to follow this track. Originally we decided to give it the title *Historical Anthropology of the Near East* to underline that the journal would be focused to the studies on human remains from proto-historical and historical periods, between the Chalcolithic and the Islamic period. So far much more effort was put in the research on the transition from hunting-gathering to agriculture than in the studies of such important processes as urbanization or formation of super-regional empires. Therefore, it seemed suitable to support research on these later less well published periods. In such a context, 'historical anthropology' should be understood as methods of the biological anthropology used for answering historical questions. However, recently the term 'historical anthropology' has been intensively exploited by cultural anthropologists who define it in many ways (as history of anthropology, anthropology of history, ethnic history, even history of material culture) but always far away from our field of research. In order to avoid a misunderstanding of the journal's name, it was eventually turned into *Bioarchaeology of the Near East*, which is perhaps a bit less precise but hopefully better understood outside our field.

Perhaps even more problematic is the second part of the name, i.e. the Near East. There is general agreement that this term denotes Anatolia, the Levant and Mesopotamia, or—in other words—the Asiatic part of modern Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel. However,

some authors also include here Armenia (or Transcaucasia in general), the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt or even Nubia (northern Sudan) and Iran. Moreover, the relation between the definitions of the Near East and of the Middle East is unclear. For that reason we will adopt the broadest possible interpretation of the Near East, and define it as the region more or less resembling the former Achaemenid Empire and limited by the Black Sea, the Caucasus Mountains, and the Caspian Sea in the north, the mountains of eastern Iran in the east, the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea in the south, and the Nile valley from the IVth Cataract northward as well as the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea and the Ægean Sea in the west. With such geographical limits perhaps more adequate would be the title *Bioarchaeology of the Southwest Asia and Egypt*, but again, the use of the term 'Near East' is better grounded in archaeological literature. To avoid any further terminological confusion, it may be taken as a rule that papers on past human populations from neighbouring regions, i.e. Greece, Sudan, Central Asia, and the Indian Subcontinent will also be accepted. In that way all of us will be able to choose our individual definition of the Near East, even if as broad as possible, but in the limits of common sense.

Most authors of papers published in the journal are and will be people doing research on human remains, but—apart from the integration of our small community—the second aim of the *Bioarchaeology of the Near East* is to provide archaeologists, historians, and philologists interested in our region with up-to-date results of studies on Near Eastern human remains. To achieve this aim, it is very important to secure efficient channels of distribution. The journal will be printed in the traditional way in a small number of copies, but more important is the distribution through the Internet. *Bioarchaeology of the Near East* is an open access journal and the copyright is only to secure the integrity of the papers and their proper citation. All volumes will be available without any restriction at www.anthropology.uw.edu.pl, a site provided by the Department of Historical Anthropology, Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw, Poland, which is the institutional host of the journal. After issuing the first volume, it will be the duty of the editor to submit the journal to those indexing directories and services, which are visited by potential readers.

Having presented the journal, I would like to thank wholeheartedly all members of its Editorial Board, who agreed to take a part in such a risky venture as the establishment of a new journal, and strongly supported the editor in the initial stage of the project. Should the *Bioarchaeology of the Near East* become a well recognized and widely quoted a journal, it would be the consequence of their vast knowledge, engagement and hard work for the common good of our field of research. Many thanks are also due to Mrs. Elżbieta Jaskulska who transformed the manuscripts into a material volume.

Basic information about the *Bioarchaeology of the Near East*, and the guidelines for the authors may be found in the inner sides of the journal's cover.

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Editor