

Book review: Mario Šlaus: Valuable Bones

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AUTHOR:

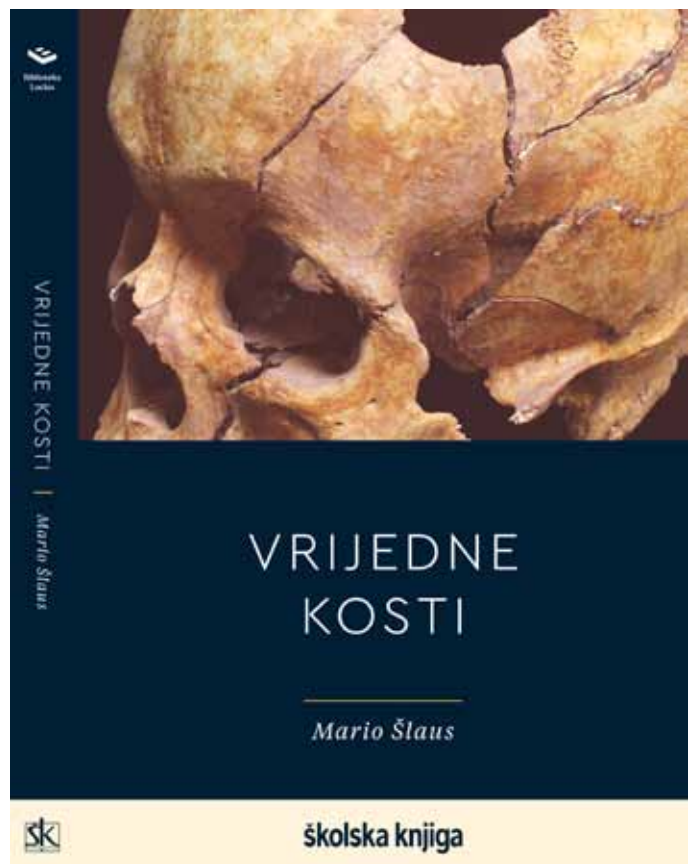
MIRNA ŠITUM

While I am here not in the role of a reviewer, but rather to promote this book, I feel I need to point out that the honorable academicians who reviewed this book: Ivan Gušić from the Geological-paleontological Department of the Faculty of Natural Sciences in Zagreb, and Pavao Rudan from the Institute of Anthropology, described the book “Valuable Bones” as a unique contribution to anthropological science that in the form of an inter-disciplinary manuscript combines various aspects of medicine with history, archaeology, ethnology, mathematics, and statistics.

I can only guess why I have asked to tell you something about this book, as I am not an anthropologist but just a friend of some of them, and neither am I an archaeologist, although I am in love, and deeply appreciate the monumental archaeological museums in my country. Additionally, I am not an expert in any of the scientific fields that are necessary to write a book like this.

I can, therefore, only assume that it is because of the large medieval stone monuments that define my birthplace in the hinterland of the Dalmatian coast, monuments that are, on one hand, clearly defined by their own time and the European middle ages, and on the other, are deeply connected with older traditions dating to antique and prehistoric times, monuments among which I have grown up and to which I always return. Or possibly it is because of the fact that osteology, a vital ingredient of this book, is one of the most complex parts of anatomy, a subject that I studied during my own prehistory, a time that was defined by my great teachers at the School of Medicine. Or, perhaps, because I still mourn the bones of my friends and comrades that I lost during a time of great pain, honor, and glory, 30 years ago during the war for the liberation of Croatia, to whom I have never really had an opportunity to say goodbye. Possibly it is because I combined my own scientific curiosity with the beauty of my mother tongue because I love books, because I cherish my language, and because I believe that these books ennoble my country, make her better, particularly when they are written by such wonderful authors as Mario Šlaus. When it comes to anthropology, particularly bioarchaeology and forensic anthropology I can think of no better, or more relevant author, not only in Croatia but also at the international level, then Professor Mario Šlaus who is able to clearly, with no unnecessary embellishments, describe and document the role of a forensic bio-anthropological scientist.

Unlike his scientific publications, many of which have been published in the most prestigious scientific journals of the world, his new book “Valuable Bones” is a unique example of how to present the results of anthropological analysis to the general public in a way that is easily understandable. In seven chapters, on 405 pages, with 137 illustrations and tables, accompanied with an abundant



and up-to-date scientific literature, the author presents the results of numerous anthropological analysis that have stemmed from his research.

The text is garnished with spontaneous, subjective, remarks and humorous observations. Thus, for instance, when describing why women today live longer than men, the author states that this is due to a variety of factors including among others: differential models of behavior in which men are more prone to taking risks than women, and combine this trait with an inability to adhere to doctors orders. He then drily observes. “There is an objective reason for this. We are not that smart.”

In the forward of this book he states that the book is intentionally written in such a manner that it is understandable to non-professionals, interested layman, students, intellectuals, anybody and everyone who is interested in how our ancestors lived. It is the great ability of this author that despite this approach, the book loses none of its scientific credibility.

Dr. Šlaus has an uncanny ability to infuse old bones with new life. His original style of writing carefully balances between scientific facts and an almost intimate relationship with the reader. Very fre-

quently Dr. Šlaus infuses the book with his own personal observations and emotions. Because the bones that Dr. Šlaus analyses are a measure of human life, and all of that which it contains, the topic that obsesses him, the one with which he is playfully engaged, and to whom he returns when he has both happy and sad, is important and relevant to anybody who wants to understand life - from its very beginning, to its end. I would like to share with you my own personal thoughts on some of the chapters of this book. A fine example that shows how Dr. Šlaus - by using simple analogies from, at first glance, completely differing and unrelated scientific fields, is able to lucidly and simply explain his main scientific thesis, is present in the first chapter entitled "Demography, Mortality and Expected Lifespan". In this chapter Dr. Šlaus uses an analogy between archaeological populations and meerkats, and then additionally combines this with the experiences of the great Russian poet Pushkin in order to explain the incredibly high, at least from our modern perspective, childhood mortality that afflicted our ancestors. And just to be perfectly clear, this high childhood mortality afflicted not only those of our ancestors that lived during prehistoric, antique or medieval times, but also people who lived during the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, when approximately 30% of all children died before their first year. He compares this scientifically documented fact with the mortality of meerkats - small, cute mammals belonging to the mongoose family that live in large family groups in southern Africa whose subadults had a much better chance of surviving childhood than people living at the beginning of the 20th century. He additionally illustrates this by citing the beginning of the novel "The Captains Daughter" by Alexander Pushkin in which the hero begins his tale by stating that he had nine brothers and sisters, but he was the only one to survive childhood. The second chapter "Physical Stress and Everyday Activities" Dr. Šlaus begins with, at first glance a complicated and mysterious story of palindromes and anagrams related to Early Christians whose lives were full of secret codes that were necessary to ensure their survival during the harsh persecutions they suffered during the early periods of the Roman empire, and by using these mysterious, secretive codes he brings us to minute, barely visible, secretive changes in bone morphology that by the process of functional bone adaptation develop from extreme physical stress and continuous, repetitive, everyday activities that characterized the lives of our ancestors. The third chapter "The Parallel Lives of Men and Women" which, had I been the author of this book would have been entitled "The Parallel Lives of Women and Men" (I am always surprised when priests address their flock as "brothers and sisters" and not "sisters and brothers" so I take every opportunity to publicly protest this fact) Dr. Šlaus describes the history of the women's Suffragette movement and describes the many inequalities between men and women, not only today but also during our history - and then

tempers this by citing and documenting cases of public displays of emotion and love recorded for instance on antique tombstones, in the lyrical poetry of Gaius Valerius Catullus, in Goethe's poem Dr. Faust and others.

The fourth chapter entitled "Mass Graves" is, as are all of the preceding, brilliantly written.

In my opinion is the most haunting one. It brought back memories that I have kept hidden and buried deep inside me and brought back a time during which I defied War, Man and even God. A time during which I closed the eyes of many of my best friends and comrades. It filled my soul with pain and suffering and the remembrance of carrion birds fighting over a piece of meat that they brought from who knows where, so that reading this chapter I again thought to myself - when will this world finally end, and so bring an end to the sins of man! I'm not sad I read it. I suppose it's good to, from time to time, go over these wound again so that one can become a better human being. So for this, thank you Mario! The following chapters "Our Daily Bread", "Violence", and "Infectious Diseases" further demonstrate the author's all encompassing interests and his holistic approach to documenting the differences between our present lives and the lives of our ancestors.

In conclusion, I would like to say that Dr. Šlaus writes as if he was talking at the same time to a group of highly learned intellectuals, and to a group of curious children, with total disregard to any and all constricting forms. Rather, his approach to this book is similar to that of an author writing a novel, communicating not only with his readers, but also with the bones that he analyzes and with himself. Citing at the beginning of the book Saint Augustine, who once said that the dead have never left us, they are still here but they are invisible, Dr. Šlaus precisely places his book "Valuable Bones" in the context of never ending life. Because the dead never do really leave us - their genes, culture, and values are bred in our bones. Dr. Šlaus is not only an exceptional scientist; he is also a romantic intellectual, and somebody to whom the science of anthropology is both his life and hobby. He is simply the bone whisperer.