



The Archaeological Journal

Book Reviews



A BIOARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY OF MEDIEVAL BURIALS ON THE SITE OF ST MARY SPITAL: EXCAVATIONS AT SPITALFIELDS MARKET, LONDON EI, 1991-2007. By Brian Connell, Amy Gray Jones, Rebecca Redfern and Don Walker. Pp. xx and 303, Illus 250. Museum of London Archaeology (MoLA Monograph, **60**). Price: £28.00. ISBN 978 190758 611 8.

This volume is an excellent addition to the Museum of London Archaeology Monograph Series. It documents the systematic osteological and bioarchaeological analysis of a sample of 5387 skeletons from the much larger population of 10,500 individuals recovered from excavations of the Augustinian priory and hospital of St Mary Spital, London.

St Mary Spital is unique in its unprecedented size, but also in the accuracy of dating and phasing achieved by a targeted programme of stratigraphic and radiocarbon dating techniques. The majority of burials have been ascribed to four phases dating to *c.* AD 1120–1200, 1200–50, 1250–1400, and 1400–1539. Furthermore, approximately half of the cemetery population were interred in multiple graves and burial pits containing up to forty-five individuals. These burial pits represent catastrophic events whereby groups of people were buried in a restricted period of less than a week. The radiocarbon dates recovered from these mass graves coincide with a series of recurrent famines and epidemics, which have been identified as the probable cause of the mass mortality.

The initial chapters provide a detailed background to the cemetery and methodology employed during the excavation and post-excavation analysis of the skeletal remains. The results of the osteological analysis are presented in a systematic way to summarize the large and complex body of data acquired. The analysis covers demography, stature, non-adult growth, metric analysis, dental disease, joint disease, trauma, infectious disease, nutritional and metabolic disease, neoplastic disease, congenital and developmental abnormalities, and a number of conditions of un-categorical aetiology. The palaeopathological results outlined in Chapter 3 are succinctly and clearly presented. Although not consistently provided throughout the volume, in a number of cases a brief description of the pathology is provided which would be understandable to the non-specialist reader.

The wider cultural meanings of the osteological findings are occasionally touched upon in the results chapter; however, Chapter 4 presents a thorough interpretation of the data in its bioarchaeological and biocultural context. The results are presented not only in terms of variation between males and females and different age groups, but also in regard to the associated burial practices and socio-cultural, environmental and historical context of the

The final version of this review will appear in *The Archaeological Journal* 170 for 2013.

cemetery and the contributing population. The extensive comparative analysis of the data with contemporary sites on a national and European scale further increases the value of the volume as a source of data; in so doing the study greatly enhances the understanding of health in London, as well as Europe, during the medieval period. Every page holds an interesting revelation, whether it is regarding demographics, specific pathological conditions, health, lifestyle and history of London, the impact of urbanization of childhood health, or some of the earliest cases of syphilis in Europe. The illustrations are a mixture of good-quality colour and grey-scale images of the excavation, palaeopathological cases and historical resources, which enhance the text.

Overall, Connell and associates have produced a wonderful and affordable volume. The book is a valuable resource for osteologists and bioarchaeologists but also provides a thoroughly fascinating account for any reader with a myriad of interests.

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