

## **The Third Meeting of the Osteoarchaeological Research Group, University of Leicester School of Archaeological Studies, 18 November 1995**

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The Osteoarchaeological Research Group (ORG) was formed in 1993 as a forum for discussion and exchange of ideas amongst osteoarchaeologists, with a specific aim to draw the fields of human remains and animal remains studies together. The newsletter *Organ* appears quarterly, as well as special additional issues in conjunction with meetings. The 1995 meeting was well attended, and as well as receiving a program of the papers and posters, it was also useful to see the abstracts and papers from the first two meetings on sale for a nominal fee.

ORG is a comparatively new group with little funding, and their meetings are not as polished and professional as larger more established groups. These meetings are however an excellent forum at which new workers in the field can present papers. The good attendance and wide range of delegates creates a good opportunity to meet other researchers in similar fields.

The title of this year's colloquium was 'Current/Recent research in Osteoarchaeology'. The papers and posters represented a wide range of topics in both human osteoarchaeology and zooarchaeology. The first paper, delivered by Katherine Boyle of King's College, Cambridge, was concerned with the analysis of a faunal assemblage from the Lazaret Cave site in Nice, France, dating from the late Acheulian period (*ca.* 130,000 BP). A large part of this assemblage comprised red deer and ibex, a medium-sized antelope. This paper dealt with work on the ibex remains. The site would have been in an ecotonal area between a maritime and an alpine environment resulting in a broad resource base and, consequently, a very interesting assemblage. Butchery evidence suggested dislocation. This, coupled with the fact that almost all the elements were axial, suggested that the carcasses were being cut up at the kill site, and the useful parts brought back to the cave for further processing. The main uses of the carcasses were for marrow, meat, and grease. Boyle concluded that the ibex were being killed at a close to medium distance from the cave and that breakage indicated intensive processing.

Ian Baxter, a freelance osteoarchaeologist at Leicester, presented his research on species identification of equids. This research began as a result of the discovery of a donkey skull at Medbourne, a fourteenth to fifteenth-century Augustinian friary in Leicester. Donkeys are rarely found on archaeological sites and their identification is difficult and complex. Criteria are based on both metrical and morphological variation between species. Baxter concluded that much more work needed to be done on identifying equids other than horse, because the criteria available are not always reliable. The problem of the identification of the mule (donkey/horse hybrid) was mentioned. This hybrid has so far been virtually invisible archaeologically, but could well have been widely exploited by man in antiquity.

The remaining papers of the day dealt with human osteoarchaeology. Mary Baxter from the University of Cambridge presented a review of work on the taphonomy of human remains from Christchurch Spitalfields in London, a known age population.

The work was carried out by the speaker prior to the initiation of her PhD studies. Measurements were taken on various skeletal elements to try and quantify the amount of disintegration that had taken place. The four point disintegration scale developed by Tony Waldron on the West Tenter Street material was expanded, with levels from one to ten identified. Results showed that disintegration was highest amongst juveniles, and there was almost no difference in disintegration between males and females.

Simon Mays continued the series with a presentation concerning the regional reviews of research priorities in human skeletal remains projects for England. As many people are no doubt aware, English Heritage has commissioned reviews of its approach to environmental archaeology. The country has been divided into three regions: northern England, the Midlands, and the South. Specialists are based at universities within each of these regions. The reviews endeavour to cover the whole range of environmental specialties, and will help English Heritage to determine its policy for funding such work in the future. Simon Mays, the English Heritage human bones specialist, has assessed the amount and type of human remains held within each of the regions, and a database which will be regularly updated has been compiled and is available at the Institute via Naomi Mott. How the study of human remains has contributed to environmental archaeology in general, and considerations of how it might help in the future, are also considered. Similar work is being done in other areas of environmental archaeology. This is of interest to all those involved in environmental archaeology. It is therefore important that significant considerations be raised and brought to the attention of those writing the report as soon as possible.

Margaret Cox from the School of Conservation Sciences at Bournemouth University discussed the St. Pancras Crypt Project. St. Pancras is scheduled to provide a centre for young homeless people through the development of the crypt and grounds. In accordance with PPG16, archaeological work must be carried out. 556 individuals were buried in the crypt of the church from 1822-1855; information on them is recorded in the burial register, and coffin plates enable a concordance to the correct individual. Thus, this project offers similar potential to the study of human remains as did Spitalfields. The advantage here is that methodologies learnt at Spitalfields can be applied in practice here. The evaluation revealed great potential. Environmental monitors have been placed in the crypt to measure temperature, humidity, CO<sub>2</sub>, and methane. The excavation is designed to incorporate stringent health and safety measures in accordance with the dangers of anthrax, smallpox, and post-traumatic disorder all considered. The research priorities are taphonomy and preservation, evaluation of osteological methods, late eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century life and death, and the history of disease. Data to enable the study of these issues will be recorded from the individual burials; however, an invitation has been extended to anyone with research interests in different areas not mentioned in the existing list of research aims of the project, such as soft tissue histology. Those interested should contact Margaret Cox before the excavation begins in Spring 1996.

Jenny Wakeley of the Department of Preclinical Science and School of Archaeological Studies at the University of Leicester presented a case of malignant disease in human skeletal remains. Evidence for malignant disease in archaeological material is rare, so it is always interesting to hear of new cases. An older, probable female skeleton was excavated from the medieval lay cemetery of Abingdon, Oxfordshire. On the basis of lesions visible on the surface of the bones, and observations made of radiographs, a

diagnosis of Metastasis and Multiple Myeloma were proposed. Wakeley thoughtfully brought some skeletal elements to the meeting, and these were passed around during the presentation for the viewing benefit of the audience. General opinion seemed to back up Wakeley's original diagnosis.

The final paper of the meeting dealt with a very interesting deposit of disarticulated human remains from the excavations at Kintbury Square, and was presented by Andy Smith, an alumnus of the School of Archaeological Studies, at the University of Leicester. Dating of the material was thought to be earlier at first, but ceramic evidence suggested a date of at least the twelfth to thirteenth-centuries. The burial consisted of body parts from at least three individuals, although there were only two skulls. One of the crania had signs of trauma, possibly resulting from a sharp blow with a heavy weapon. It also exhibited an incised area and hole that looked not dissimilar to a failed trepanation. Various gruesome explanations were suggested, including the idea that the head had been rammed into a stake! A pagan practice would seem odd in a situation so close to Christian holy ground. The fact that this area would have been the site for fairs and markets was mentioned. Were these unfortunate individuals executed rather than murdered or sacrificed?

For further information about ORG, contact Sue Anderson at the Suffolk Archaeological Unit.