

INTRODUCTION

The original research design for this project involved the study of the human skeletal remains from three sites located in the North-East of England and excavated by Professor Rosemary Cramp of the Department of Archaeology in Durham. These sites were the two Saxon and Medieval Monastic Cemeteries from Monkwearmouth, Sunderland and Jarrow, Tyne and Wear, and the churchyard of a small medieval church at The Hirsell near Coldstream.

In the course of time, the research involved in this study has grown to encompass four other sites from the Newcastle and Cleveland areas. These are as follows: Blackfriars, Newcastle; Blackgate (Castle), Newcastle; Norton, Cleveland; and Guisborough Priory, Cleveland. The sites are discussed in more detail in Section 1 on the cemeteries. The layout of the thesis, from Section 3 onwards, follows that of a conventional archaeological human bone report involving the study of age, sex, stature, metrical and non-metrical skeletal characteristics and dental analysis. The reasoning behind this is discussed in Section 2, which reviews past and recent work on skeletal populations and the way in which they are studied and published.

In each section beginning at Section 3, methodologies for each field of study are discussed and some of the more recent work is reviewed. It is hoped that this will give an insight into more specialised forms of research being carried out in each field, some of which may eventually replace existing techniques of analysis. In almost every case the present author has used the simplest methodologies currently available, often due to the fact that these are less time consuming and more economically viable, but sometimes also because they are the best we have at present. Since funds were not available for more specialised research to be carried out on these skeletal collections, it was felt to be more reasonable to compare them using the 'everyday' techniques which would be found in a normal skeletal report, rather than to use no comparative analysis at all.

The research has involved the comparison of all seven sites in all the fields of study mentioned above, as far as was possible from the evidence available. However, the two north-eastern monastic sites of Jarrow and Monkwearmouth have populations which are almost contemporary, of the same monastic order, and relatively close together. These are therefore the perfect choice for such a comparison, and although other sites in the area will be considered, these two will probably yield the most useful information due to their spatial and temporal proximity. The Hirsell group is the largest one which was available for study, and also the one most likely to contain a different population stock. For these reasons, the three sites originally included as part of this research project have often been given more prominence in this work. No apologies are made for this, as it is felt that comparisons with other sites are not invalidated by it, since they can to some extent be seen as a control when differences and similarities between the three main sites are considered in detail.

Work on all the groups has yielded important insights into the way of life of late first and early second millennium inhabitants of the North-East of England, some of which would not have been noted without a comparison between the sites. However, it must be remembered that interpretations based on skeletal evidence alone cannot be regarded as pure fact. Although this may reduce the importance of comparative analysis, since the results of skeletal studies on individual groups may not be reliable, it is felt that the fact that all these groups have been analysed by the same worker(s) will lessen the impact of this problem to some extent. However consistency, when it involves consistently incorrect results, is obviously not a virtue, and it will be necessary in the next few years to reconsider the techniques applied to a number of fields within skeletal research if valid comparisons are to be made both within and between skeletal populations. The problems and difficulties associated with erroneous conclusions are discussed within each section of the thesis, especially with respect to techniques of ageing (see Section 3.1), which have recently been shown to be hopelessly inaccurate. At present, as with many other problems in skeletal research, there seem to be no positive solutions, and it is a case of either not studying skeletons at all or studying them to the best of our ability and hoping that they will stay above ground long enough for revisions to be made where possible. With this in mind, it can be seen that the techniques applied to the seven skeletal groups considered here are probably the best which could have been utilised given the time and resources available.