

*The Black Death Cemetery, East Smithfield, London* (MOLAS Monograph 43). By Ian Grainger, Duncan Hawkins, Lynne Cowal & Richard Mikulski. 22 x 30 cm. xi + 63 pp, 36 b&w pls and figs, 13 tables. London: English Heritage/Museum of London Archaeology Service, 2008. ISBN 978-1-901992-82-3. Price: £10.95 hb.

This compact monograph describes the recovery of skeletons from the Black Death cemetery of East Smithfield in London. It was one of two burial grounds opened for plague victims, the other being West Smithfield. Excavated between 1986 and 1988, the skeletons have been the subject of many studies prior to this publication, including contributing to research on palaeodemography of catastrophic and medieval attritional cemeteries, disease and, controversially, ancient pathogen DNA analyses. Thus, this definitive monograph is very welcome, at least in the eyes of a bioarchaeologist. As the Summary states, this is 'the only large scale excavation and post-excavation analysis of a proven Black Death cemetery in this country... [and so is] of international importance' (p x). There are four chapters, with a fifth devoted to 'Specialist appendices'. This is the first of three volumes for the whole site.

Chapter 1 (Introduction) chiefly describes what is known of the history of the cemetery. Chapter 2 (The Excavations) charts the pre-Black Death use of the site, then the available documentary evidence for the use of it as a place to bury those who died of the infection. In the western cemetery area, burials were found in rows; surprisingly, most were buried carefully, with evidence for a high proportion being disposed of in coffins, something that might not have been expected for the time and circumstances. In the eastern cemetery area, four N-S parallel rows of graves were found but the skeletons were 'severely contaminated by chemicals from the Royal Mint' (p 17). Comparison with other mass burial trenches in Britain and elsewhere indicates the unique nature of this burial ground. Chapter 3 (The Black Death in London in thematic essays) looks at the cemetery in light of current research on the Black Death. Comparisons of the skeletal data with other contemporary, non-Black Death cemeteries in London are usefully made. For example, with regard to stature and mortality, the authors refer to palaeodemographic research on the London skeletal assemblage which suggests the cemetery did not represent a catastrophic death assemblage (cf R Gowland & A Chamberlain, 'Detecting plague: palaeodemographic characterisation of a catastrophic death assemblage' *Antiquity* 79, 2005, 146-57). Finally, the legacy of the cemetery post-1350 is described. The concluding Chapter 4 highlights the site's significance and future potential for research. The appendices document pottery, accessioned finds, textiles and human bone. The summary human bone data section is divided into the western cemetery, the three mass burial trenches (two in the western and one in the eastern cemetery), and the eastern cemetery, giving data for a total of 634 skeletons of 759 excavated. Importantly, the skeletal data are fully available from the Museum of London's website. The methods of analysis used are well documented and the data on age, sex, stature and disease are described. Stature for both males and females appeared to lie below the average for Britain at this time which, it is suggested, represents 'stress' during the growing years (disease- or diet-related); it may indicate poor people more susceptible to disease – something supported by high rates of enamel hypoplasia (defects in dental enamel dietary deficiency/disease during growth) and cribra orbitalia in the eye sockets (likely an increased infectious disease load indicator).

The supporting illustrative materials are all of high quality. This monograph will be a very useful addition to the 'Black Death' literature for both bioarchaeologists and medical historians; it is one recently supplemented by the proceedings of a 2001 conference on the plague (M Signoli, D Chevé, P Adalaina, G Boëtsch & O Dutour (eds), *Plague: Epidemic and Societies*. Florence, 2007).

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