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A report on the human skeleton recovered from an archaeological watching brief at Willerby Parish, Staxton, North Yorkshire

by

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Summary

A single human inhumation was uncovered during redevelopment of a garage complex. The mostly complete skeleton represents the remains of an adult female of perhaps 25-35 years of age and of possible Anglian date. A range of remarkable pathological conditions was noted, including crush fractures of some of the vertebrae and a healed broken neck, which the individual had survived for some time. This trauma had resulted in a partly twisted spine. The presence of severe calculus deposits and advanced periodontal disease perhaps suggests a general period of ill health prior to death. The possible presence of further skeletons in the vicinity must be borne in mind should future development occur.

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Introduction

The articulated remains of a single human inhumation were uncovered during redevelopment of a garage at Staxton, North Yorkshire. The skeleton was excavated and submitted to the Environmental Archaeology Unit (EAU) for further analysis.

Preservation of the material is poor to fair, with what appears to be extensive chemical erosion and root etching apparent over the entire skeleton. Most of the long-bone diaphyses are badly damaged or missing.

The greater part of the skeleton is present, although the metatarsals and phalanges of the left foot are missing along with almost all phalanges from the right foot. The left parietal bone of the skull and the proximal half of the left humerus are also absent. The appearance of numerous obvious fresh breaks from both these relatively robust elements indicates probable breakage and loss during excavation.

Sex

A number of corroborative criteria indicate that these remains are probably those of a female. These include a moderately wide sciatic notch, a well developed preauricular sulcus, moderate sized mastoid processes and a moderately small dental arch. The long bones also appear to represent a fairly gracile individual.

Age

Age was assessed on the basis of tooth eruption, occlusal wear, cranial suture fusion

and the appearance of the pubic symphysis. It was clear from the appendicular skeleton and teeth that the remains represented an adult. All long bone epiphyses were fused and third molars erupted. Patterns of occlusal wear in the teeth suggest an age of between 25-35 years, and the unfused nature of cranial sutures and appearance of the pubic symphysis imply a fairly young adult.

Pathology

A number of abnormalities were noted on the skeleton and teeth of the individual. These included an apparent crush fracture of the 4th and 5th cervical and 4th lumbar vertebral centra, almost certainly the result of a fall of some kind. The neural spine of the 4th cervical vertebra was also apparently fractured during the same episode, resulting in a broken neck. However, much remodelling had taken place indicating that the individual survived the injury for a considerable time. Lateral and anterior thickening of almost all the thoracic centra indicates the presence of a functional scoliosis (twisted spine) which would have affected the quality of life to some substantial degree.

A marked protrusion of the occipital region of the skull (Bathrocephaly) was also noted in this specimen. Although little is known of the aetiology of this condition, it is thought to be congenital in origin, perhaps the result of birth trauma.

Evidence of dental pathology was also particularly apparent. Dental caries was particularly severe in this individual and affected all molars at their cervical region (i.e. at the cemento-enamel junction). In

contrast severe dental calculus (tartar) deposits were noted on all incisors on both buccal and lingual aspects. The deposits were also probably deposited on their occlusal surfaces, perhaps indicating that a period of illness, prior to death, had facilitated calculus deposition through loss of normal mastication (i.e loss of appetite and failure to eat).

Interestingly, both lower third molars have been lost antemortem, since their partially resorbed sockets are still evident. The upper third molars are also absent and again appear to have been lost antemortem, although the alveolar bone has almost completely remodelled. Periodontal disease appears to have been somewhat advanced in this individual, a condition usually associated with advanced age. This is perhaps further evidence of a general poor degree of health for some time prior to death.

A possible date for the Staxton individual

Although no grave goods, which could provide a secure date, were found associated with this individual, the known presence of both Beaker and Anglian inhumations in the area provides a framework within which to work. Several skeletal characteristics, however, also provide additional general clues.

1. The overall shape of the skull suggests the individual to be somewhat brachycephalic (long-headed), a racial affinity not usually associated with prehistoric populations.

2. The presence of severe dental caries also implies a post-Roman date, since this condition appears to be rare in prehistoric samples.

Implications

Despite its substantial novelty value, a single poorly dated skeleton is of little intrinsic or statistical value in providing information about past populations and, as a result has been dealt with and recorded in a relatively superficial way. However, the possibility that this represents part of a larger cemetery must be borne in mind when any future development of this area is planned. Whether of Beaker or Anglian date, it would represent an extremely important assemblage from a period which is extremely poorly represented both regionally and nationally.

Bulk samples taken from Staxton watching brief

All of five bulk samples, wet sieved at the EAU, proved to be almost completely sterile. There were few biological remains present in any, although some additional small fragments of human bone were recovered.