

Five human skeletons from the Chapter House of Jervaulx Abbey, North Yorkshire.

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Report to the Ancient Monuments Laboratory, June 1986.

Introduction

As part of the process of restoring and maintaining the fabric of Jervaulx Abbey, near Leyburn in North Yorkshire, five stone sarcophagi at the Eastern end of the Chapter House were opened. The sarcophagi were found to contain parts of poorly-preserved human skeletons, having been somewhat disturbed at the Dissolution. The skeletons were thought to be those of former abbotts of this Cistercian house. As the stone grave-covers were to be mortared into place over the skeletons, the opportunity was taken to examine the remains to see if any information could be obtained about the deceased.

The skeletons

In all cases, bone was in a poor state of preservation, being soft and friable, with only the most robust parts of the skeleton remaining. Cancellous bone was particularly poorly preserved. No biometrical data could be obtained and, somewhat curiously, only one tooth was found in one grave, and none in any of the others. The skeletons are numbered in sequence, 1 being the most Northerly. Skeleton 1.

This skeleton comprised fragments of the cranial vault; shafts of both femora; the right patella; parts of the proximal shafts of both tibiae; a mass of decayed bone corresponding to the feet, although a fragment of one astragalus was found by the right tibia around midshaft; the manubrium, displaced to a position by the left hip; and small fragments of the dorsal parts of ribs. The skull was that of a fully adult, possibly quite aged, individual, although there was no sign of senile thickening of the vault, or of senile osteoporosis in the femoral shafts. The surviving patella showed slight lipping of the articular facets, probably representing minor joint degeneration consequent upon age rather than significant arthrosis. Although the poor condition of the femora precluded accurate measurement, a rough measurement of 430-440mm was obtained, consistent with stature rather below the modern average for an adult male. However, all muscle insertions were well-developed, and the impression was of a sturdily-built individual.

Skeleton 2.

This was composed of the cranial vault; left ulna; right ulna and radius; the right humerus, displaced to a position near the right hip; the 4th left metacarpal positioned between where the femora should have been; left femur shaft in situ but rotated such that the posterior aspect faced anteriorly; and the

right femur placed where the left tibia should be, rotated in the same way as the left femur. Despite the reorganisation of the skeleton, it was apparent that this individual had originally been laid in an extended supine posture with both arms folded over the chest. The humerus was short and strongly developed, with prominent attachments for the biceps muscle. The distal articulation exhibited slight marginal exostoses: again, this was probably only minor age-related degeneration. The cranial sutures were all obliterated, with extensive remodelling of the sutural bone. Despite the absence of senile degenerative changes in the skeleton, it is suggested that this individual was of considerably advanced years, and much the oldest of the five cases in this report.

Skeleton 3.

The remains comprised parts of the cranial vault, and traces of the left fibula and a rib. The sagittal and lambdoidal sutures were closed but not obliterated, suggesting that this individual was fully adult but not elderly at time of death. Very approximately, an age bracket of 35-45 years could be postulated.

Skeleton 4.

This skeleton had been much disarranged, and comprised fragments of the frontal bones; the left upper lateral incisor; the shaft of the left femur overlying the right shoulder; one metacarpal in the centre of the thorax and two left metatarsals mesial to the right elbow; a fragment of rib by the left shoulder; left and right radii and ulnae apparently in situ; the right femur lying with its proximal end by the left shoulder and distal end by the right hip; fragments of both tibiae in situ; and a small fragment of astragalus near the right hip. The skeleton was that of a strongly-built adult, apparently in the prime of life, although there was no direct evidence of the age at death.

Skeleton 5.

This skeleton was represented by only two fragments: the distal end of the left radius located where the skull should have been, and a fragment of skull near to where the knees might have been expected. The skull bone was conspicuously thin, but the sagittal suture was fully obliterated, so the remains, such as they are, are those of a fairly old individual.

Discussion

The poor state of preservation and extensive disarrangement of the skeletons has severely limited the available evidence. To generalise, however, skeletons 1 to 4 all appear to have been of fairly small stature by modern standards, but strongly-built and robust. The solitary incisor found with skeleton 4 bore several minor interruptions to growth of the enamel (enamel hypoplasia), which probably reflects a childhood disrupted by periods of illness. What is very clear is that the bones have degraded, and are continuing to degrade, at a

brisk rate. Assuming the reinternment work of HBMC masons to be good for several decades, at least, it seems likely that subsequent investigation of these skeletons would find little or no bone remaining.

T.P.O'C. 3rd June 1986