

Bones, Loaves and Cobblestones

A Report on St. Valery-sur-Somme, France
Bioarchaeology Field School
Summer 2014

With winged feet we lifted off from the tarmac in Montreal, thrusters at the ready to propel us over the Atlantic and onwards to France – a country known to most for its breads, cheeses, and wines but to us for a collection of Medieval skeletons offering new research possibilities.

THE REMAINS

The remains held in St. Valery were originally excavated several hundred miles to the south, just outside of Amiens, when ground was broken for the building of the A16 (a highway from Paris to the northernmost tip of France) in 1994. Over

2,000 sets of human remains were hastily removed from two separate burial sites alongside two separate religious buildings from different periods of history. Government officials held the remains for a short period of time until funding cuts were made and it was suggested that the remains be cremated and then reburied to save “space”. Scientific and historic enthusiasts involved with the excavation found alternative housing to preserve the scientific integrity and historical possibilities for future research on the collection. On a small lot in Poutrincourt, just a few minutes from the historical town of St. Valery the remains were boxed, cataloged and remained untouched for the past 20 years.



INVENTORY

Eager to dirty our hands in the musty enquiries of bioarchaeology we engaged in a two-week process of documentation - inventorying the remains and expanding our knowledge on the variability of the human skeleton. We were unprepared for the feline and rodent visitors that awaited us at the site but were even more unprepared for the state of the vessels for the remains. Some boxes required our attention for hours, each individual bone requiring intense scrutinization to determine to which individual it belonged while other remains have entirely lost provenience. It was these bones that evoked the most heartache for me, even above those from the children and infants that dominated my research. Dr. Megan Moore, the lead instructor at the field school, assured us that in the near future better accommodations for the remains would be possible – the interest in human biological remains and the possibilities for DNA, histological and pathological analysis are on a rise in Europe and throughout the



globe promising greater funding to research in bioarchaeology, forensics, and ancient population genetics in the future.

In the end we were able to completely inventory around 125 boxes, which accounts for over half the available boxes (some remain at other sites throughout France) containing human remains excavated from the Saleux site. I had a sore back and horrible tan lines but a much better understanding of the varying sizes of tibial tuberosities and could estimate dental age without referencing a book by the end.



DATA COLLECTION

The second two weeks were dominated by data collection. Each student on the site had a predetermined research strategy focusing on collecting data from a particular portion of the skeleton and age category. As I had expected, finding individuals with my specifications was not difficult due to the extraordinary number of sub-adult individuals within the collection with dentition and complete long bones available. In total I analyzed 30 sets of skeletal remains ranging from six months to 19 years of age for evidence of non-specific stress indicators. There is

something about holding a complete femur that fits in the palm of your hand that really hits home just how young a majority of the population was and begs many questions about the health and wellness of the Saleux populations. My research breaches one of these questions – what do the stress markers on sub-adult skeletons represent and when during their short life spans were they subject to stress severe enough to leave an imprint on their bones? At this time I have no clear analysis to share but it is clear that stress in all its forms was abundant within this population.

Throughout data collection we were introduced to several different technological advances made available and tailored to bioarcheology with the help of Dr. Emily Hammerl of the University of Nebraska Lincoln and Dr. Marilee Benore of the University of Michigan Dearborn. Dr. Hammerl taught us to use a Digitizer with a stylus to



measure the distances between landmarks on bones which would eventually allow her to create a 3D image of each bone. We were also introduced to a portable 3D laser scanner and a handheld dental x-ray as alternative methods for producing images of small bones like teeth, carpals, and tarsals. I myself stuck to the traditional and somewhat variable digital caliper for my measurements of dental enamel hypoplasias on the teeth of each individual as well as full size radiographs of corresponding long bones which were taken at the Department of Radiology, Amiens University Hospital in Amiens, France for my study.



On several occasions we also had visitors from the local community, the Lancheres mayor and two local newspapers of Picardi to name a few. Their inquisitive questions and interest in our research put each of us on the spot but had a positive influence on the perception of our studies in the community. Donning ceremonial scrub smocks and posing for numerous action shots with calipers and the bones we hoped to promote a positive light on osteological analysis for future researchers.

TRAVEL AND FUN

Amongst data collecting and inventorying we made time to also experience the culture of France, enjoying the food, wine, and historical monuments of the areas we visited. From living beside the castle of St. Valery where William the Conqueror assembled his fleet and Joan of Arc was held captive to walking through the Notre-Dame of Amiens Cathedral the tallest complete cathedral in France, we took a walk nearly every day through medieval history. On a short trip to Paris we also took time to walk through the subterranean catacombs and like your typical osteologists took note of all the a-typical malformations we could see by the light of our phones. A perfect backdrop to our study of peoples from the middle ages, the cities and towns offered up their cobble stone walkways, bakeries and hearts to us – their touring osteologists.



BUDGET:

Program Fee\$2,195

- Airport transfer after arrival in Paris
- Accommodations on site (based on multiple occupancy)
- Weekday meals
- Museum entrance fees and site visits
- Health insurance

Additional Costs:

- Airline ticket.....\$1,300
- EMU Tuition and fees.....\$1,100
- Weekend meals.....\$100
- Misc.....\$300

Subtotal.....\$2, 800

Total Fees\$4, 995