

ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSIGHTS INTO A PLAGUE-ERA BURIAL SITE FROM EUROPE'S FIRST PERMANENT LAZARET

Gabrielle Boisseau, Ambika Flavel and Daniel Franklin

University of Western Australia, School of Social Sciences, Center for Forensic Anthropology,
Crawley, WA, Australia

Background: The second plague pandemic spread throughout Europe between the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries and caused high mortality. As trade was instrumental in its spread, plague was prevalent in port cities such as Venice (Italy). Aiming to reduce transmission, Venetian health officials established Lazzaretto Vecchio in 1423 as the first permanent isolation hospital for individuals showing signs of infectious disease, including plague and leprosy. Over the following two centuries, thousands of people are believed to have died and been interred on the island.

Objective: Salvage excavations undertaken during building works in 2004-2005 uncovered 109 fossae (communal graves) across the island. This study focuses on establishing a demographic profile of Europe's first permanent lazaret.

Materials and methods: Fossa 6 was selected to be representative of the Lazzaretto Vecchio population, as it contained well-preserved skeletal remains of 53 discrete individuals. The grave likely dates to either the 1575–1577 or 1630-1631 plague outbreak. Using biological anthropological methods, an osteobiographical profile was created for each individual.

Results: Of the 53 individuals, 36% were estimated to be female, 32% were estimated to be male, and 32% were estimated to be subadults (sex assessment not attempted). The most represented age at death was between 3–12 years and 35–50 years, each accounting for 26.4% of the sample. Young adults (20–35 years) accounted for 20.7% of the sample. A range of pathological conditions was observed, including degenerative bone disease and possible treponemal infection. A higher proportion of females is consistent with other Italian plague assemblages. Age at death distributions resembled those of previously studied European plague assemblages except for individuals aged 13–19 years old being less frequent in the present sample (5.7%).

Conclusions: The isolated setting of the hospital at Lazzaretto Vecchio provides unique insights into early disease control interventions and the health status of the interred individuals.

Keywords: Plague; Second plague pandemic; Osteobiography; Catastrophic burials; Lazzaretto; Venice (Italy).