

BIOARCHAEOLOGICAL INSIGHTS INTO A RURAL MEDIEVAL POPULATION FROM ST. MARGARETHEN IM BURGENLAND (AUSTRIA, 11–13TH CENTURIES CE)

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Background: Little is known about the demography and life courses of high medieval communities living at the Austro-Hungarian border during a period characterized by both political and climatic changes. In 2021 however, a rescue excavation in St. Margarethen im Burgenland (Austria) led to the discovery of a burial site comprising three stratigraphic layers dating from the 11th to the 13th centuries. A total of 124 individual burials oriented along a west-east axis and interred without grave goods (except for the lowest Layer 3) as well as a substantial number of scattered skeletal remains outside their primary funerary context were recovered.

Objective: This discovery offered the unique opportunity to investigate the biological identities and life trajectories of an unknown population.

Materials and methods: The biological profiles (age-at-death, sex, stature) of all individual burials from Layers 1 and 3 were studied using standard macroscopic methods. Life courses were further investigated by documenting metric and non-metric diversity, stress markers (linear enamel hypoplasia, porotic lesions, enthesal markers) and pathological changes (dental pathologies, fractures, infections, degenerative conditions), building on a previous study of Layer 2. From all commingled human remains a minimum number of individuals was determined, and macroscopic sex estimation was performed on preserved pelves.

Results: Both the age-at-death and sex distribution of individuals from primary burials accords with the expected pattern of natural mortality for a rural community. Multiple individuals exhibiting abnormal endocranial blood vessel impressions (44.0%), periosteal new bone formation (14.0%), traumatic (9.43%) and pronounced osteoarthritic changes (29.27%) indicate a generally poor health status. In addition, at least 5 cases of different congenital disorders were observed. Between stratigraphic layers metric differences in the robustness of long bones could be discerned. From the commingled assemblage, a minimum number of 63 subadult and 85 adult individuals was determined, revealing a noticeable absence of infants and a majority of studied pelves estimated to be male.

Conclusion: We propose that these findings are indicative of a rural, non-militarized community in which individual life courses were shaped by both social and environmental factors.

Keywords: Medieval cemetery; Osteobiography; Palaeopathology.