

Juvenile Mortality Ratios in Anglo-Saxon and Medieval England:

A contextual discussion of osteoarchaeological evidence for infanticide and child neglect

Abstract

This thesis presents an osteoarchaeological analysis of juvenile mortality profiles questioning the speculations made by some archaeologists that the under-representation of infants from Anglo-Saxon and medieval burial populations could be due to the practice of infanticide in England during these periods. Morphological and metrical age estimation and sex assessment methods are used to determine the age-at-death and sex of 1275 children from fifty-three Anglo-Saxon and medieval sites located in southern England. The age and sex distribution of the Anglo-Saxon and medieval children under six-years-old are then compared with age-specific United Nations demographic statistics to see whether or not a normative mortality profile is presented by the archaeological populations. This study identified an abnormal age-at-death distribution for the early Anglo-Saxon perinatal individuals. Excess female mortality was observed for the perinatal individuals from all three periods; early Anglo-Saxon, late Anglo-Saxon and medieval, and for the neonatal and infant individuals from the early Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods. The results of this osteoarchaeological analysis are discussed in conjunction with a review of the Anglo-Saxon and medieval documentary evidence which examines the possible social and economic motives for infanticide. Whilst this analysis of the historical sources revealed laws and penitentiary warnings against the neglect and deliberate murder of infants, the late Anglo-Saxon and medieval documents provided little evidence to suggest the social devaluation of women that would support a hypothesis of preferential female infanticide. There are few surviving early Anglo-Saxon documents however, so the significance of the abnormal mortality profiles from this period is considered.

Keywords: Infanticide, Anglo-Saxon, Medieval, mortality, sex assessment, infant.

Principal Supervisor: Professor Holger Schutkowski, Deputy Dean, Professor of Bioarchaeology School of Applied Sciences Bournemouth University

Associate Supervisor: Dr Jo Buckberry Lecturer in Biological Anthropology, Division of Archaeological, Geographical and Environmental Sciences, University of Bradford.

External Examiner: Professor Dawn Hadley, Professor of Archaeology at the University of Sheffield.

Internal Examiner: Dr Andrew S. Wilson, Lecturer in Forensic & Archaeological Sciences, Division of Archaeological, Geographical and Environmental Sciences, University of Bradford.