

JOINT PATHOLOGY IN ANCIENT ANGLO-SAXONS

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For the palaeopathologist the study of ancient skeletal material is not only of interest for what it reveals about the nature and relative frequency of the different diseases afflicting early man. It sometimes gives us an opportunity of handling dried specimens of bone lesions which, though not clinically rare today, are not easily collected for osteological display because of their wholly benign nature. Four such examples involving different joints are presented here.

Case 1—Destruction of humeral head. The specimen shown in Figure 1 is from an Early Saxon burial ground at Caister-on-Sea, near Great Yarmouth. It shows severe destruction of the head of the left humerus in a young woman, perhaps from pyogenic arthritis. The rest of the humerus is normal, but unfortunately the scapula and clavicle are missing. Slight eburnation of the affected surface suggests long continued movement at the joint after the damage occurred. From the appearance of the bone alone it does not seem possible to exclude neuropathic arthritis of the Charcot type, but syphilitic lesions of this kind have never been conclusively identified in bones of the Saxon period.



FIG. 1
Case 1

Case 2—Osteochondritis dissecans. This specimen (Fig. 2) is from Late Saxon material from a burial ground at Thorpe St Catherine, near Norwich. It shows an excellent example of osteochondritis dissecans in the medial condyle of the left femur of a man. The irregular floor of the cavity erodes the bone to a maximum depth of 10.7 millimetres. An area of eburnation, not easily seen in the photograph, borders the medial margin of the lesion. This example seems to be the first recognised as such from archaeological material of this date.

Case 3—"Bamboo" spine. The specimen shown in Figure 3 is Early Saxon, from a burial ground at Burgh Castle, near Great Yarmouth. It shows osteophytosis with "bamboo" fusion of vertebrae from a man aged about thirty to thirty-five. The disease has involved the heads of the right seventh and eighth ribs, which are ankylosed to the vertebrae. By the age of thirty-five some degree of osteophytosis is almost universal in Anglo-Saxon populations but costo-vertebral ankylosis is rare.



FIG. 2
Case 2

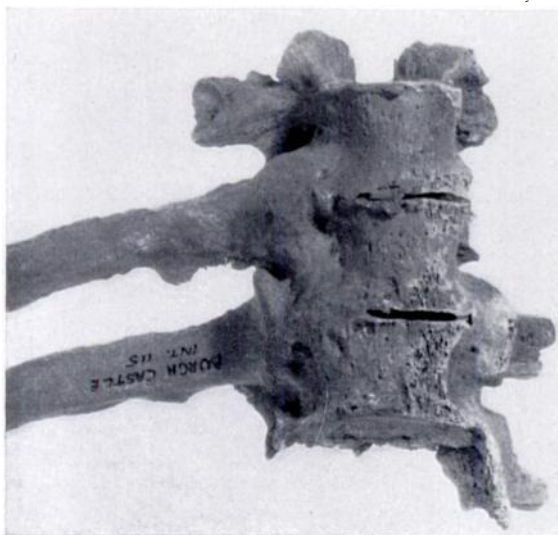


FIG. 3
Case 3



FIG. 4
Case 4

Case 4—Osteoma of acetabular fossa. This specimen (Fig. 4) from a middle-aged man is also Early Saxon material from Burgh Castle. The osteoma measures 8 by 6.5 millimetres. The femoral head did not show any abnormality.

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