Symposium: “Bioarchaeological Insights into Ancient Imperialism: Perspectives from the Old and New Worlds”


Symposium abstract:
Archaeological studies of imperialism have examined changes in material culture, settlement patterns, and the built environment, yet the effect of imperialism on the body, both as a physical and social entity remain less explored. This session demonstrates that skeletal analysis is not an end in itself, but when situated within its archaeological context and placed in a theoretical framework aimed at elucidating past imperial strategies and effects, bioarchaeology can address issues such as the role of militarism and violence; ethnogenesis; use of the body in ritual; forced migration; and unequal access to resources, among others. The papers cover a wide geographical and temporal range to highlight similar anthropological themes addressed by those studying ancient empires.

Health effects of the Han Dynasty collapse on a peripheral population in Northeast China
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Following the Han Dynasty (206BC – AD220) collapse, many non-Chinese tribes fought for rulership in northern China. Bioarchaeological analysis of nearly 500 individuals who lived during this period in the peripheral northeast provides insight into the physiological effects of political upheaval, as well as the health consequences of a shift to an agricultural lifestyle upon a formerly pastoral population. While grave goods such as horse-riding equipment and implements of farming and warfare offer perspective into their lives, skeletal markers of stresses experienced during childhood, and through dietary deficiencies, trauma, and osteoarthritis give testament to the health challenges this population faced.