

Medieval Ballyhanna
Medieval skeletal remains of an 800 year-old Ballyshannon man
Eileen M Murphy

I would now like to move closer to home and look at a Medieval individual from County Donegal. This individual was excavated in the Ballyhanna cemetery in Ballyshannon a couple of years ago. The population comprised some 1000 individuals which now form the focus of the Ballyhanna Research Project which is funded by the National Roads Authority and involves collaboration between Michael McDonagh of Donegal County Council and staff and students of Queen's University Belfast and the Institute of Technology in Sligo.

The individual was a 25-35 year old male and he displayed lesions on most of the post-cranial bones of his skeleton. The affected bones displayed numerous large bony nodules at their extremities and these were particularly pronounced on the upper and lower limb bones. The two bones of each lower leg were fused together. The left forearm bones were very deformed, with a notably shortened, curved and gracile appearance. The morphology of the leg bones indicated that the individual would have been knock-kneed.

All of the lesions are very typical of a developmental condition known as diaphyseal aclasia or multiple hereditary exostoses, and which can be known more colloquially as bumpy bone disease. The condition is known to have a definite genetic origin and it generally affects more than one member of a family.

Indeed, a Medieval archaeological case recovered from St. Clemen's Church in Visby on the island of Gotland clearly demonstrates this fact. The remains of a young (17-20 yrs) pregnant woman were discovered at this site and both she and her unborn baby displayed the characteristic nodules of the condition. The baby was considered to be mature and the presence of numerous large nodules on the pelvic bones of the woman probably meant that it had been impossible for her to give birth to the child, and that she had died during childbirth.

The symptoms that modern individuals with the condition experience include pain at the sites of the lesions, interference with normal movement, impinged nerves – including compression of the spinal cord – and the risk that the bone growths would become cancerous. It is clear that the Ballyhanna individual would have had an abnormal appearance, with enlarged lumpy bones, a deformed left forearm and knock knees. In most modern cases the condition first becomes obvious when the person is a young child, often around three years of age, although, as the example from Visby demonstrates, the lesions can be evident soon after birth. As such, it is highly probable that the Ballyhanna individual would have been recognised as having a physically debilitating condition from a young age.

The post-excavation work on Ballyhanna is ongoing but it would appear to be the case that the individual had been accorded the same form of burial as other unaffected members of his society. He had been buried in an earthen pit in an extended, supine position with an east-west orientation. Basically, he appears to have been accorded a typical Christian burial. So, it would seem that he was certainly treated as a normal member of society in death. The fact that he survived with the condition on a fairly long-term basis, reaching adulthood, would tend to suggest that he had been afforded some form of life support measures. We can only hope that he had a good quality of life and was treated well by other members of his community but, of course, we cannot assume this would have been the case.

Academic profile

Eileen Murphy obtained a 1st class honours BSc in Archaeology at Queen's University Belfast in 1993. She then gained an MSc with Distinction in Osteology, Palaeopathology and Funerary Archaeology at the Universities of Sheffield and Bradford. In 1994 she commenced her PhD research within Queen's University Belfast, which was awarded in 1998. The title of her Doctoral thesis was *An Osteological and Palaeopathological study of the Scythian and Hunno-Sarmatian period populations from the cemetery complex of Aymyrlyg, Tuva, South Siberia*. During the period between Autumn 1998 and Spring 2000 she worked as a self-employed osteoarchaeologist, while also completing a Certificate Course in Tourism and Cultural Management. In the period between June 2000 and October 2001 she worked as a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at Queen's University Belfast in a post funded by Historic Scotland. She was appointed as a lecturer in Palaeoecology in October 2001 and was granted a permanent lectureship in Osteoarchaeology and Palaeopathology in June 2003.

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