

Sex, Stress, and Death: Health and Survival in the Context of Medieval Famine and Plague

Abstract: Sharon N DeWitte (PhD, Pennsylvania State University, 2006) is currently an Associate Professor at the University of South Carolina. Her research specialties are bioarchaeology, paleoepidemiology, and paleodemography, and she focuses on the evolution, ecology, epidemiology, and consequences of disease in past human populations and the ways in which such research informs our understanding of disease in living populations. She will discuss her recent bioarchaeological research on demographic and health trends before and after the 14th-century Black Death in London. Her research reveals declines in survivorship and, by inference, health for both males and females before the Black Death, but improvements thereof in the aftermath of the epidemic. Temporal patterns of developmental stress markers reveal seemingly disparate patterns between the sexes. These differences might reflect variation between the sexes in sensitivity to stressors, the effects of nutrition and disease on pubertal timing, disproportionate access to dietary resources for males in the aftermath of the Black Death, the disproportionate deaths of frail individuals during the epidemic, or some combination of these factors. Dr. DeWitte will highlight future directions in medieval plague bioarchaeology that are motivated by these findings.