HUMAN OSTEOLOGY
in Archaeology and Forensic Science
To Theya Molleson
and Don Brothwell,
who taught us so much
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Author Biographies

**Trevor Anderson**
Vichy House, 15 St Mary’s Street, Canterbury, Kent CT1 2QL, UK

Trevor Anderson received his first degree in Ancient History and Archaeology from the University of Birmingham in 1977. After several years of working with human bones, including Norwegian material, he obtained an MA (with distinction) in Funerary Archaeology and Palaeopathology from the University of Sheffield. For the past 11 years he has been resident osteoarchaeologist with the Canterbury Archaeological Trust, where he has examined thousands of skeletons ranging in date from Neolithic to Victorian. In recent years he has also been employed as a consultant to external UK projects, and has also been involved in the examination of medieval rural populations in Southern Italy. He has published over one-hundred articles and bone reports, which have included the first evidence of cleft lip and palate; endemic syphilis; Freiberg’s infarction; Madelung deformity; as well as cranial meningioma and prostatic carcinoma. His main research interests are the history of congenital conditions and neoplastic disease.

**Lynne Bell**
Department of Palaeontology, The Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 5BD, UK

Dr Lynne Bell is a Wellcome Research Fellow in the Department of Palaeontology at The Natural History Museum, London. Her training is in archaeological science and mineralized tissue biology; she obtained her PhD from the Department of Anatomy, University College London, which detailed microstructural diagenetic change to the mammalian skeleton and its taphonomic significance. Current research projects include DNA preservation within a mineralized cell, and stable light isotopic dietary and spatial tracking. She has published extensively in archaeological, forensic and medical journals.

**Sue Black**
Department of Forensic Medicine and Science, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK

Dr Sue Black originally studied human anatomy at the University of Aberdeen (1978–87) specializing in the identification of human skeletal remains. She has held positions as a Lecturer in Anatomy, firstly at St Thomas’ Hospital, London, and then at UMDS. In 1992 she took up a part-time position as Forensic Osteologist in the Department of Forensic
Anthea Boylston

Calvin Wells Laboratory, Department of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bradford, Bradford BD7 1DP, UK

Anthea Boylston is Contract Organiser for the Calvin Wells Laboratory in the Department of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bradford. She received an MSc in Osteology, Palaeopathology and Funerary Archaeology at the same university in 1991. Since then she has been working on human bone assemblages for a number of archaeological units, including the City of Lincoln Archaeological Unit, the City of Gloucester Archaeology Unit, Humber Archaeology Partnership, Northern Archaeological Associates, Bedfordshire County Council and the British Museum. In 1996 she organized a group of MSc students to assist in the recovery of individuals from a mass grave dating to the Battle of Towton (AD 1461) and is in the process of co-editing a monograph on the results of this excavation.

Megan Brickley

Department of Ancient History and Archaeology, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK

Dr Megan Brickley graduated in Ancient History and Archaeology from the University of Birmingham, and then obtained an MSc in Ancient History and Archaeology of Disease from the Institute of Archaeology, London. Her doctoral research, undertaken jointly between the Institute of Archaeology and the Hard Tissue Research Unit (Department of Anatomy, University College London), was in age-related bone loss and osteoporosis. She is currently Lecturer in Environmental Archaeology at the University of Birmingham. She has a number of publications on techniques for studying bone density and osteoporosis, and is currently running a NERC funded research project to develop a ‘standard’ to measure bone-loss in archaeological bone.

Don Brothwell

Department of Archaeology, University of York, The King’s Manor, York YO1 7EP, UK

Don Brothwell, BSc (Hons), MA, PhD, is Professor of Human Palaeoecology, University of York. Previous posts were at the University of Cambridge, The Natural History Museum, London, and University College London. His research has included studying bog bodies, vitrified forts and ancient foods, but most of his life has been involved with various aspects of skeletal biology. He has over one-hundred publications including numerous research papers and books on the subject of human osteology.
Keri Brown
Department of Biomolecular Sciences, UMIST, Manchester M60 1QD, UK

Keri Brown, BA, MPhil, has been a Research Assistant in the Department of Biomolecular Sciences, UMIST, since 1990 where, in collaboration with Dr Terry Brown, she has carried out research into ancient DNA from animal and human remains. She helped to develop the MSc course in Biomolecular Archaeology, and teaches both archaeology and biomolecular applications. She has a strong background in archaeology, having published research on the Southern Italian Neolithic, and having regularly excavated in Italy and elsewhere. Her grounding in biomolecular archaeological research is equally strong, having published reviews and reports on cremated bone, human and animal bone. In 1996 she was appointed to the Editorial Board of Ancient Biomolecules. Her research interests lie in using ancient DNA to uncover aspects of prehistoric social organization previously unobtainable by conventional techniques, such as kinship, sex identification and palaeodisease. She is currently working on ways to improve biomolecular-based methods of sex identification of human remains.

Andrew Chamberlain
Department of Archaeology and Prehistory, University of Sheffield, Northgate House, West St, Sheffield S14 ET, UK

Dr Andrew Chamberlain is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Archaeology and Prehistory, University of Sheffield. Following undergraduate studies in Geology at the University of Liverpool and graduate training in Archaeological Science at the University of Southampton, he returned to Liverpool to study for a PhD in Human Evolution. Since 1990 he has co-directed the University of Sheffield/Bradford University graduate training programme in Osteology, Palaeopathology and Funerary Archaeology. He is the author of Human Remains (British Museum Press, 1994) and many research articles. Research interests include human evolution, palaeodemography and cave archaeology.

Matthew Collins
Department of Fossil Fuels and Environmental Geochemistry, Drummond Building, University of Newcastle, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU, UK

Dr Matthew Collins co-heads the Ancient Biomolecules Group at the University of Newcastle researching the deterioration of proteins with specific reference to bone. Originally trained as a Zoologist, he conducted PhD research into taphonomy before joining the Geobiochemie Werkgroup of Professor Peter Westbrook in Leiden, The Netherlands, where he was trained in biochemical and immunological methods. He spent time in Glasgow and Bristol (the latter in Professor John Parkes’s Geomicrobiology group), before being appointed a lecturer in Biogeochemistry at the NRG (University of Newcastle). His current research interest is in the modelling of protein diagenesis, in particular racemization kinetics.
Margaret Cox
School of Conservation Sciences, Bournemouth University, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Poole BH12 3BB, UK

Dr Margaret Cox obtained a PhD in Archaeology from University College London in 1989. She is Reader in Archaeological Science at Bournemouth University where she has developed an MSc in Forensic Archaeology. She currently works with many police forces in the UK and has worked for the UN in Kosovo. Before joining the School of Conservation Sciences at Bournemouth she was an archaeological consultant with an engineering firm. Before this she was Conservation Archaeologist in the Somerset Levels and Moors. She was Historian and Senior Osteologist for the Christ Church, Spitalfields Project in the 1980s. Previous publications include a co-authored volume on the Christ Church Project (with Theya Molleson) and the editorship of Grave Concerns: Death and Burial in England 1700–1850 (1998). She is currently writing (with Charlotte Roberts) a book on disease in Britain from prehistory to the present, and another on women’s health from the Roman period to the 1930s.

Chrissie Freeth
Calvin Wells Laboratory, Department of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bradford, Bradford BD7 1DP, UK

Chrissie Freeth obtained a BA (Hons) in Archaeology from the University of Bradford, where she is currently writing up her PhD thesis. Her doctoral research focuses on the prevalence of dental diseases in British archaeological populations. Other research interests include the evidence of dental treatment in the past.

Angela Gernaey
Department of Fossil Fuels and Environmental Geochemistry, Drummond Building, University of Newcastle, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU, UK

Dr Angela Gernaey (formerly Child) co-heads the Ancient Biomolecules Group, University of Newcastle. The main research areas of interest for the group are the preservation of mineralized proteins, and microbial biomarkers for palaeopathological diagnosis. Originally trained as a microbiologist, the subject of her PhD thesis was the microbial degradation of bone protein. The Ancient Biomolecules Group has investigated the chemical degradation of collagen and osteocalcin and is currently looking at the degradation of bone as a composite, with EU funding. Funding has also been obtained to develop microbial lipids as disease biomarkers, in collaboration with Professor David Minnikin. The research concentrates on the diagnosis of ancient tuberculosis and leprosy. She has published articles on the preservation of ancient biomolecules, and the detection of ancient diseases, particularly tuberculosis.
Robert Hedges
Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art, University of Oxford, 6 Keble Road, Oxford OX1 3QJ, UK

Dr Robert Hedges is Professor in Archaeology at the University of Oxford and Deputy Director of the Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art in Oxford, where he has been since 1971. Since 1980 he has been Director of the Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit. His main research aims are in the application of physical and chemical techniques to help broaden archaeological knowledge. Previous and current research interests have concentrated on obtaining archaeological information from molecular, and particularly isotopic, evidence. This has emphasized dating (mainly radiocarbon dating by accelerator mass spectrometry, but also uranium series dis-equilibrium dating, especially of bone and teeth), as well as stable isotope signatures of organic material. His research projects have also extended to include attempts to understand the changes in bone during burial, in both organic and inorganic components, and he has tried to develop a physical chemical basis for the interaction between bone and its burial environment. He has published in the areas of preservation and analysis of ancient DNA, ancient proteins, methodologies of dating by radiocarbon and uranium series methods, and the development of stable isotope analysis for the reconstruction of ancient diet.

Louise Humphrey
Human Origins Group, Department of Palaeontology, The Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 5BD, UK

Dr Louise Humphrey is a researcher in the Human Origins Group at The Natural History Museum, London. She is a BSc in Archaeology and a PhD in Biological Anthropology. Research interests include the nature and causes of inter- and intra-specific variation in the relative timing of developmental events in the skeleton and dentition in humans and other primates, and she has publications in this field. This incorporates ongoing research into the relationship between events occurring in early life and subsequent variation in skeletal and dental development, adult morphology and survivorship.

Christopher Knüsel
Calvin Wells Laboratory, Department of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bradford, Bradford BD7 1DP, UK

Dr Christopher Knüsel is lecturer in Biological Anthropology in the Department of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bradford, and is Course Manager for the MSc in Osteology, Palaeopathology, and Funerary Archaeology, run jointly with the University of Sheffield. He came to the University of Bradford as a Leverhulme Research Fellow in 1991. Research interests include skeletal biology, especially with regard to activity-related bone change and orthopaedic disabilities; funerary archaeology, particularly in northern and central Europe in the Iron Age; palaeopathology; and human evolution. He has recently co-authored ‘Comparative degenerative joint disease of the vertebral column in the medieval monastic cemetery of the Gilbertine Priory of St. Andrew, Fishergate, York, England’, American Journal of Physical Anthropology; and ‘The man–woman or “Berdache” in Anglo-Saxon England and post-Roman Europe?’, in Social Identity in Early Medieval Britain.
Mary Lewis
The Calvin Wells Laboratory, Department of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bradford, Bradford BD7 1DP, UK

Mary Lewis is a final year PhD student at the University of Bradford. Her research focuses on the health of non-adults in urban and rural environments from the early medieval to the Industrial period in Britain. In 1993 she received an MSc in Osteology, Palaeopathology and Funerary Archaeology from the Universities of Bradford and Sheffield. Since then she has worked on various projects including the analysis of maxillary sinusitis in urban and rural populations, and in Denmark, examining the health of children from a medieval monastery and leprosy hospital. Research interests cover many aspects of urban–rural health, incorporating research into growth, metabolic and infectious diseases, and non-specific indicators of stress. She has an additional interest in childhood leprosy, its diagnosis and significance in the transmission of the disease in the past. She has co-authored a number of research papers.

Simon Mays
Ancient Monuments Laboratory, English Heritage, Fort Cumberland, Fort Cumberland Road, Eastney, Portsmouth PO4 9LD, UK

Dr Simon Mays obtained a PhD in Archaeology from the University of Southampton in 1987, and he is currently a Human Skeletal Biologist (Senior Scientific Officer) in the Ancient Monuments Laboratory, English Heritage, Portsmouth. His research interests cover all areas of human osteoarchaeology and his book The Archaeology of Human Bones (1998) is a key text on the subject. Recent research articles include ‘Infanticide in Roman Britain’, Antiquity; ‘Carbon stable isotope ratios in medieval and later human skeletons from Northern England’, Journal of Archaeological Science; and ‘Osteoporosis in earlier human populations’, Journal of Clinical Densitometry.

Jacqueline McKinley
Wessex Archaeology, Portway House, Old Sarum Park, Salisbury SP4 6EB, UK

Jacqueline McKinley has been a Project Officer (Osteoarchaeologist) at Wessex Archaeology, Salisbury, for the past five years. Her time is divided between running archaeological excavations and the analysis of human remains excavated by Wessex Archaeology and other archaeological organizations. She also regularly lectures on cremation at various university departments. Her archaeological career has included a combination of site and specialist work, working for a variety of different organizations across the UK, and as a freelance archaeologist. Her predominant specialist research interest comprises the study of cremated remains and the mortuary rite of cremation, which has involved observations at modern crematoria and of experimental pyres. Previous publications include The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Spong Hill, North Elmham. Part VIII: The Cremations (1994), based on the analysis of 2500 cremation burials.
David Minnikin
Department of Chemistry, University of Newcastle, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU, UK

David Minnikin is Professor of Microbial Chemistry at the University of Newcastle. His current research interests are: structure, role and taxonomic potential of bacterial lipids, particularly those from mycobacteria; the synthesis and evaluation of inhibitors of long-chain fatty acids, such as mycolic acids, to pinpoint new drug targets in Mycobacterium tuberculosis and to elucidate the mode of action of existing drugs; and the evaluation of lipids as biomarkers for ancient and modern leprosy and tuberculosis. He has co-authored a number of papers on these subjects, including 'An integrated procedure for the direct detection of characteristic lipids in tuberculosis patients’ and ‘Identification of the leprosy bacillus and related mycobacteria by analysis of mycocerosate profiles', Annales de la Société Belge de Médecine Tropicale; ‘Detecting ancient tuberculosis’, Internet Archaeology; and ‘Demonstration of Mycobacterium tuberculosis complex DNA in calcified pleura from remains 1400 years old’, Letters in Applied Microbiology.

Richard Neave
Unit of Art in Medicine, Stopford Building, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PT, UK

Richard Neave trained as an artist and entered the Middlesex Hospital, London, in 1957 to study medical art. In 1959 he moved to the University of Manchester as the Medical Artist at the Manchester Royal Infirmary. His current appointment is that of Artist in Medicine and Life Sciences in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Nursing at the University of Manchester. In 1973 he became involved with the reconstruction of human heads and faces on skulls as part of an archaeological study of ancient Egyptian remains. This in turn led to the application of the technique in the forensic area, and such work has continued to expand ever since. His current interest lies particularly in the area of reconstructing heads on skulls mechanically made from digital information acquired from CT scans. Publications include ‘Reconstruction of the head of Phillip II of Macedon’, Journal of Hellenic Studies; ‘Reconstruction of the skull and soft tissues of the head and face of Lindow Man’, Canadian Society of Forensic Science Journal; and (with John Prag) Making Faces.

Christina Nielsen-Marsh
Department of Fossil Fuels and Environmental Geochemistry, Drummond Building, University of Newcastle, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU, UK

Dr Christina Nielsen-Marsh is a Research Associate in Archaeological Science at the University of Newcastle. She currently works as the scientific advisor on archaeological bone analysis for a European-funded project, ‘The Degradation of Bone as an Indicator in the Deterioration of the European Archaeological Property’. Alongside this project she has various research interests including the degradation mechanisms of archaeological bone, the development of differential scanning calorimetry and mercury intrusion porosimetry as screening methods for bone survival, and the diagenetic analysis of Central and South American megafauna remains. Before joining the Ancient Biomolecules Group at Newcastle, she worked at the Research Laboratory for Archaeology, University of Oxford, with Robert Hedges where she completed a DPhil in archaeological bone diagenesis.
Alistair Pike
Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art, University of Oxford, 6 Keble Road, Oxford OX1 3QJ, UK

Alistair Pike is currently a doctoral student at the Research Laboratory for Archaeology, University of Oxford, and the Department of Earth Sciences, Open University. His research interests are directed towards not only uranium uptake in archaeological bone and uranium-series dating, but also span bone diagenesis, burial-environment geochemistry and hydrology, and dating the origins of modern humans. After graduating from the Department of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bradford, he spent two years as a Scientific Officer at English Heritage and a year at the Department of Scientific Research of The British Museum.

Kim Piper
Department of Oral Pathology, St Bartholomew’s and the Royal London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Clinical Sciences Research Building, 2 Newark Street, London E1 2AD, UK

Dr Kim Piper is a lecturer in Oral Pathology at St Bartholomew’s and the Royal London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Whitechapel, London. Her research interests centre around bone cell biology with work on both osteoclast cell function and regulation of osteoblast cell commitment. Her work as an oral pathologist centres on the diagnosis of pathology in the head and neck, she has long held an interest in palaeohistopathology. She has co-authored research papers on these subjects, including ‘Tuberculosis of the mandible in a child’, Journal of Laryngology and Otology; and ‘Volumes of chick and rat osteoclasts cultured on glass’, Calcified Tissue International.

John Robb
Department of Archaeology, University of Southampton, Southampton SO17 1BF, UK

Dr John Robb was awarded a PhD by the University of Michigan in 1995, and is currently Lecturer in European Prehistory at the University of Southampton. He has worked on human skeletons from Italy, Iran, Palestine, England and the USA. He is particularly interested in using skeletons to investigate social change in later prehistory and in incorporating skeletons into the theoretical interpretation of social relations. Publications include Material Symbols (1999), and numerous articles and book chapters. Besides studying human skeletons, he is interested in archaeological theory and is currently excavating prehistoric sites in Calabria, Southern Italy.

Charlotte Roberts
Department of Archaeology, University of Durham, South Road, Durham DH1 3LE, UK

Dr Charlotte Roberts has recently taken up the position of Reader in Archaeology at the University of Durham. Before this she was Senior Lecturer in Biological Anthropology, Department of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bradford. She qualified as a State Registered Nurse in 1978 and obtained a BA in Archaeological Studies from the University.
of Leicester in 1982, followed by a MA in Environmental Archaeology and Palaeoeconomy from the University of Sheffield in 1983, and in 1988 a PhD in Biological Anthropology (trauma and its treatment in antiquity). Her key research projects include studies of evolution and palaeoepidemiology of infectious disease; sex and gender, environment and climate and their effects on health patterning in the past; recognition and interpretation of disease associated disability and stigma in the archaeological record; biocultural approaches to palaeopathology. She has co-authored a number of key texts, including *The Archaeology of Disease* (2nd edn, 1995) and *Studies in Crime: An Introduction to Forensic Anthropology* (1996).

**Juliet Rogers**

**Rheumatology Unit, Bristol Royal Infirmary, Bristol BS2 8HW, UK**

Dr Juliet Rogers is a Senior Research Fellow in Palaeopathology in the Rheumatology Unit, University of Bristol. She is the only palaeopathologist working in a clinical medical department, and as well as being medically qualified, she has a wide experience of working on archaeological material. She has been involved in the recovery and examination of skeletal material from many sites, including Hazelton, Wells and St Oswald’s Priory. For the past ten years she has been leading the team undertaking examination of skeletal material and analysis of the data from St Peter’s, Barton-on-Humber, one of the largest collections so far recovered in this country. She is currently writing up the results of this work. Research interests include the palaeopathology of joint disease and, in collaboration with Tony Waldron, she has worked on the definition of the palaeopathological diagnostic criteria of these diseases. Together, they have published *Field Guide to Joint Disease in Archaeology* (1994), as well as a series of papers on these diseases. She also runs a series of undergraduate courses at the University of Bristol.

**Louise Scheuer**

**Department of Anatomy and Developmental Biology, Royal Free and University College Medical School, Royal Free Campus, London NW3 2PF, UK**

Dr Louise Scheuer is an Honorary Senior Lecturer at the Royal Free and University College Medical School. Her main interests are in the development of the juvenile skeleton, the skeletal biology of past peoples, and forensic osteology. She has taught human anatomy to medical and dental students, run a BSc course in Forensic and Archaeological Osteology and taught osteology to postgraduate groups in London, Bradford, Glasgow and Bournemouth universities, and at the Law Society, London. She also undertakes consultancy work for the Metropolitan and other police forces. Together with Sue Black, she was awarded a Leverhulme Research grant for the conservation and re-evaluation of the St Bride’s crypt skeletal collection. Both she and Sue Black have been writing *Developmental Juvenile Osteology* (forthcoming, 2000), a work on the juvenile skeleton.

**James Steele**

**Department of Archaeology, University of Southampton, Highfield, Southampton SO17 1BJ, UK**

Dr James Steele is Lecturer in Early Hominid Studies, University of Southampton. He teaches palaeoanthropology and Palaeolithic archaeology at undergraduate level, and convenes the MA in Osteoarchaeology. Research interests include hominin evolution
(brain organization, socio-ecology, diet, geographical distribution); initial human dispersals into the Americas; and skeletal markers of handedness. He has published articles on these and related topics in World Archaeology, International Journal of Osteoarchaeology, etc., and has co-edited (with Stephen Shennan) a book entitled The Archaeology of Human Ancestry: Power, Sex and Tradition (1996) on reconstructing hominin behaviour.

Gordon Turner-Walker
Institute of Archaeology and Cultural History, Vitenskapsmuseum, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, N–7491 Trondheim, Norway

Dr Gordon Turner-Walker is a researcher in Archaeological Science and Conservation, based at the Vitenskapsmuseum, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim. He gained a BSc in Astrophysics at Queen Mary College, University of London, before working in field archaeology for several years. In 1989 he completed a Diploma in Archaeological Conservation at the University of Durham, followed by a PhD in the characterization of fossil bone, also at Durham. His primary interests lie in diagenesis studies of ancient bones, and the application of electron microscopy and other imaging techniques to the quantification of post-mortem changes in bone tissue. He is currently a post-doctoral fellow at the University Hospital, undertaking research on the distribution and severity of osteoporosis in the medieval population of Scandinavia.

Andy Tyrrell
Archaeology and Archaeological Science Research School, University of Sheffield, 2 Mappin Street, Sheffield S1 4DT, UK

Dr Andy Tyrrell has recently completed a PhD at the Department of Archaeology and Prehistory, University of Sheffield. He graduated from the University of Bristol in 1992 from the School of Archaeology and Geology and then went on to study for an MSc in Osteology, Palaeopathology and Funerary Archaeology at Sheffield and Bradford universities. He has co-edited (with Bill Frazer) Social Identity in Early Medieval Britain (1998). He has also recently been involved in a forensic capacity with the UN ICTY in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Research interests include quantitative anthropological genetics and micro-evolution, early medieval population dynamics, forensic facial reconstruction and other forensic applications of biological anthropology, and ancient and modern attitudes to ethnicity. He has publications in these areas.

David Whittaker
Department of Basic Dental Science, University of Wales College of Medicine, Dental School, Heath Park, Cardiff CF4 4XY, UK

Dr David Whittaker is Reader in Oral Biology and Forensic Dentistry, University of Wales College of Medicine, where he is also Course Director for an MSc in Forensic Dentistry. He has 30 years of experience in this field and appears in Court regularly. He lectures and advises throughout the world, and in his capacity as a Consultant Dental Surgeon examines at under- and postgraduate levels, both in the UK and abroad. He has authored and co-authored more than one-hundred publications in the scientific literature, and is first author of a standard text on Forensic Dentistry. He has also published in the archaeological field, particularly in relation to the Christ Church, Spitalfields, London, project.
Preface

Human remains from archaeological contexts form one of the most important sources of evidence about our past. Human osteoarchaeology, the study of human skeletons from archaeological sites, can provide information on health, demography, diet, activity patterns, physique and genetic aspects of earlier populations. When combined with other archaeological or historical evidence, osteological data can contribute to the study of a broad range of topics including early migrations of peoples, ancient warfare and the study of the effects the rise of social inequality on human health and lifestyles. Osteological analyses also clearly have a wide range of forensic applications, such as aiding the identification of unknown human remains, and resolution of criminal investigations, including war crimes.

In the preparation of this volume, the Editors invited leading specialists to contribute chapters that would review the current status and future potential of a particular field. All contributions were subject to confidential peer-review. The volume begins with an historical overview of osteological research in Britain. The main part of the book is organized into six sections: juvenile health, growth and development; palaeodemography; disease in the past; human variation; assaults on the skeleton; and microscopic, biochemical and analytical approaches.

No textbook can be completely comprehensive, and while we have attempted to cover most of the main areas of research in osteological analysis as practised in north-western Europe, some aspects are not included. Perhaps the most notable omission is the determination of race. We consider that concepts of race are scientifically unsatisfactory, and that they are not useful in archaeological work in a north-west European context. Even in forensic work, race determination is often rendered problematic by the phenomenon of mixed parentage. That aside, we have intended to provide broad coverage of core essentials such as age and sex determination which underpin many other analyses, while at the same time also considering cutting-edge applications such as DNA analyses and chemical methods in palaeopathology, and higher level data analytical techniques used in fields such as palaeodemography.

One of the most significant points to come from many of the chapters is the need to test, refine and develop techniques on collections of skeletons of known ancestry, sex, age and socio-economic background. At present most such collections are from modern contexts, and there is a real need to undertake further methodological research on documented archaeological samples to obtain direct information on the reliability of our methods on earlier human populations.