Introduction

The long awaited book on the skeletons from the Mary Rose excavation has now been published. This is a comprehensive summary, which puts the skeletal remains into their historical and archaeological context. The book opens by setting the scene of the historical background. A description of the discovery, excavation and raising of these important finds follow this. The subsequent four chapters are mainly based on documentary evidence and discuss the ship and how it was built, the social fabric of the period, the administrative side of running a ship, including victualling and pay, and finally, the crew of the Mary Rose.

The Human Remains

The final section focuses on the human skeletal remains recovered from the Mary Rose, starting with an in-depth description of Stirland’s difficulties attempting to assemble skeletons from loose bones; followed by the osteological data, a brief description of pathology and an account of the activity-related skeletal manifestations. This book demonstrates the enthusiasm of the author for the project and her in-depth knowledge of the subject, with which she has been actively involved for over one and a half decades. The book is clearly laid out in nine chapters and easy to read. The figures and black and white photographs support the text very effectively. The book is informative and successfully builds interpretation from the skeletal remains. However, there are some problems that detract from the volume. The chapters are changeable, illustrating where Stirland is enthusiastic and
confident and where she attempts to provide information without thorough background knowledge. The chapters involving people, such as the society of the 16th century, the crew of the Mary Rose, the osteological data and a vivid and detailed description of the occupational pathology are well written and convincing. However, Stirland’s endeavour to describe the historical context, especially in the first chapter, is often confusing, sometimes repetitive and suffers from grammatical inconsistencies. The dental and general pathology is discussed briefly and haphazardly. This chapter would have greatly benefited from graphs to illustrate the percentages of skeletons or bones affected by different conditions.

Conclusion

It is not clear who the book is aimed at. Unlike the very well-illustrated and vividly informative ‘coffee table’ book published in 1982, The Mary Rose: The Excavation and Raising of Henry VIII’s Flagship by Margaret Rule, Stirland’s book falls short of this by the lack of detail and colour photographs. This is particularly disappointing, considering the price of £55. Nevertheless, this is clearly not an academic book either. The style of writing, lack of graphs and tables, insufficiency of exact numbers and percentages of skeletons/individual bones affected by pathological lesions and lack of a catalogue of osteological data in an appendix form illustrate this. This means that the skeletal report in the form of this book could not be used as a comparative sample with other skeletal assemblages, which is unfortunate. Margaret Rule’s promise that (1982:184): ‘Even a brief preliminary study by Mrs. Anne Stirland, a human skeletal biologist, suggests that generalisations about height and nutrition will go, to be replaced by a statistical study of the remains of a hundred or more healthy people who died together at one specific moment in time’ has not been fulfilled.

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