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A rare case of child abuse from early modern Lithuania

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article was to describe the outcome of a probable case of physical abuse in the remains of a child dating from the 16th–18th centuries CE. The skeleton of a subadult was recovered during archaeological excavations carried out in the village of Užubaliai, located in Alytus in southern Lithuania, and subsequently curated in the Faculty of Medicine at Vilnius University. The bones of this child were observed macroscopically and then submitted for radiological investigation. In order to speculate on the presence of abuse, features such as the presence, quantity, and type of injuries were considered. Stages of healing and the occurrence of additional nonspecific stress markers, such as linear enamel hypoplasia or Harris lines, were also recorded. The remains revealed the presence of lesions showing three stages of healing, including antemortem and perimortem fractures. Periosteal reactions were also observed on many of the bones. Traumas with high specificity for abuse, such as rib and scapular fractures, were assessed. Finally, endocranial new bone formation was also noted as a possible sign of neglect. The pattern of observed injuries showed evidence that was compatible with a case of physical abuse.

1. Introduction

Children have always been vulnerable. Forensic studies demonstrate them as fragile victims of war and conflict and most importantly, victims of their family members (Ross and Juarez, 2014). The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (2010) defines child abuse as “any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation”. The majority of deaths from such maltreatment or physical force occur in children less than four years old (Christian, 2015). Within this context, bruises are the most prevalent type of injury, while fractures are the second most common (Flaherty et al., 2014). Nowadays, such abuse cases are of concern worldwide, as evaluation of maltreatment practices from a medico-legal viewpoint lack systematic guidelines (Den Otter et al., 2013).

Skeletal trauma resulting from intentional physical contact is the only type of child abuse discernable when analyzing skeletal remains from archaeological contexts. However, little evidence of child trauma has been described in the archaeological record. This may be because subadult remains are more affected by past burial practices and

taphonomic factors than adults (Lewis, 2014). It could also be attributed to the rapid healing in children which often remodels the callus or any other deformity to maintain normal bone growth and development (Lewis, 2014). Therefore, an injury pattern is rarely pathognomonic for physical abuse (Christian, 2015; Flaherty et al., 2014; Kemp et al., 2008), and any case from archaeological contexts should be evaluated with caution. This study concerns an archaeological case of probable child abuse from early modern (16th–18th centuries CE) Lithuania.

2. Material and methods

Užubaliai, a small village at the time, was part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – a European state that existed from the 13th century until the late 18th century CE, when the sovereignty of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth was ended by the so-called Third Partition. At its greatest extent in the 15th century, it was the largest multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state with a large diversity of languages and religions in Europe. Although historical records do not provide an exact stratification of the Užubaliai community, it may follow the medieval concept of suzerain. Under this model, people lived and worked

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Fig. 1. Location of Užubaliai, in Lithuania.

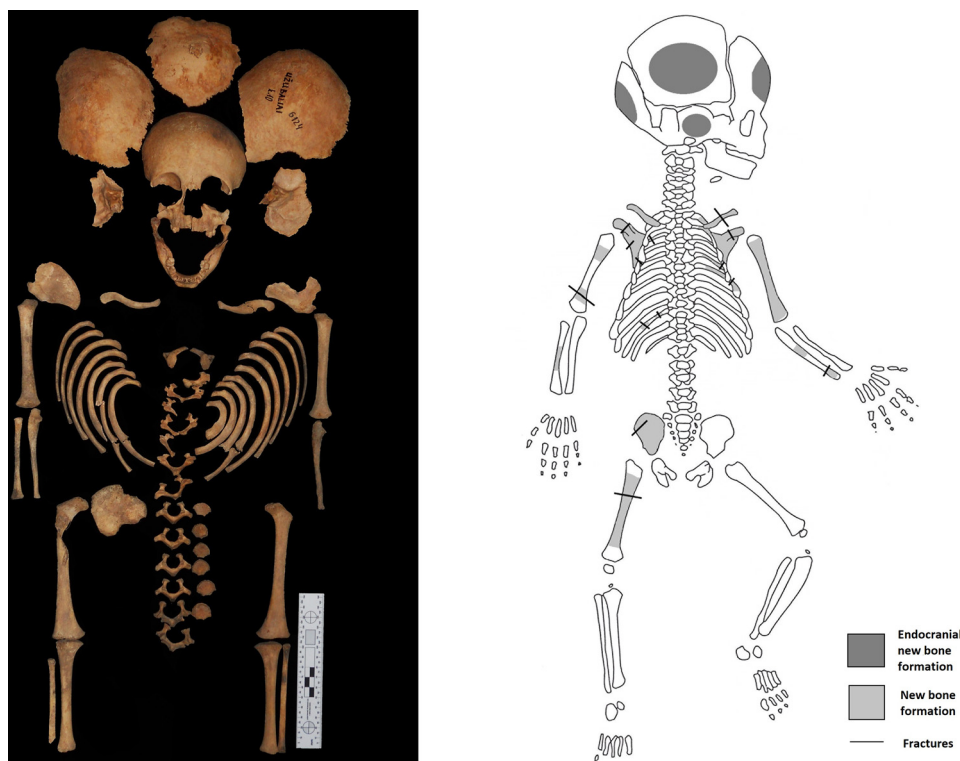


Fig. 2. a) Image of the child remains from grave No. 10; b) Schematic drawing of the individual from grave No. 10 showing distribution of fractures, areas of periosteal reaction, and endocranial new bone formation.

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