

## 15. CONCLUSION

Megan Stoakley & Richard Newman

The initial aim of the archaeological excavation at St Mary's (Leith) was to identify the origins of coffined burials noted in the archaeological evaluation. Three likely contexts were postulated for the burials: the 1560 siege of Leith, the 1645 plague outbreak and the early 20th-century smallpox hospital. Archaeological excavations conducted in 2016 uncovered a total of 81 individuals interred on the site of the school. Dating evidence recovered from the bodies provides an early to mid-17th-century date for the inhumations while detailed analyses conducted on the human remains (including pathological examinations of the remains, dendrochronological analysis on the coffin wood and coffin manufacture technological data) provide overwhelming evidence that the burials are associated with the 1645 plague outbreak in Leith. The cemetery population at St Mary's (Leith) fits a catastrophic palaeodemographic profile, particularly in comparison to similar sites in London.

The plague outbreak of 1645 devastated the community of Leith. The high death toll and the monumental task of burying a huge number of diseased corpses would have caused panic and chaos among an urban population already suffering the stresses of endemic poverty, frequent famine and the uncertainties of the political and religious upheavals of mid-17th-century Scotland (Dunnigan & Ewan 2006: 3; Cullen 2010: 11). Over 56% of the population of South Leith was wiped out (ES online 2018: XXV). Public health measures to contain the pestilence were brutal and oppressive. Historical documents such as the Kirk Session Records document the presence of wooden huts and booths located in Leith Links to accommodate the overwhelming number of sick citizens (Aldinstone (*Register of S. Leith Church 1643–60*)). The cemetery was undoubtedly associated with this temporary settlement at Leith Links.

Analysis of the individuals and cemetery demographic data from St Mary's (Leith) reveals that the inhabitants would have had a heightened

fear of the diseased corpse; the hasty construction of the coffins, the position of the bodies in the pits and the presence of everyday objects on the bodies would indicate strongly that it was a case of burying the bodies as quickly as possible. It is highly likely that citizens not afflicted by the plague outbreak, or not as badly, were put to work, tasked with clearing streets, cleaning victims' houses and burying the deceased. Despite the clear evidence of hasty burial practices with this cemetery population, it is evident that some of the deceased were buried respectfully and with reverence.

Differing attitudes to the burial of children are evident in this cemetery population; virtually all of the younger children (<10 years of age) were buried in coffins. This evidence shows that the living treated deceased children differently, that there was a need for their reverent and respectful burial despite the fear and dread of the plague.

Strontium isotope analysis revealed a population which was largely local to Leith, and the presence of personal confessional beads (rosary and/or paternoster) on five individuals indicates Catholic affiliations, in a town that had signed the Covenant. There was no evidence from the buried corpses of Leith's role as a port with international connections, but the construction of the coffins from pine derived from Norway suggests a trading connection with that country and probably with its south-western coastal forest area. Other evidence indicates 17th-century connections with the Low Countries and Germany.

Overall the excavation of the plague victims at Leith confirms historical accounts of the use of part of Leith Links as a cemetery for the 1645 plague. The archaeological evidence in part supports historical accounts but in other ways amplifies them, redressing the balance of some of the more sensationalist views. The story of the excavation of the plague victims was completed with their reinterment in a communal grave within Leith municipal cemetery in March 2018. Within the recommitment service a silver baptismal bowl was used which had been gifted to South Leith parish by three burgesses of Leith in 1648, in thanksgiving for their having survived the plague three years previously.