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New Post-Doctoral Scholar Joins Staff in 2010-2011

By Charles Cobb

For the upcoming 2010-2011 academic year, we are pleased to welcome Dr. Molly Zuckerman as the third of our post-doctoral scholars. Dr. Zuckerman has just completed her PhD at Emory University with a specialization in bioarchaeology, or the analysis of human trauma and disease through bone. Her larger research interest is in the field of epidemiology, the study of the spread of disease in human populations.

Although epidemiology is a field pursued by many physicians and other health-care professionals, they tend to focus on current diseases or those of the recent past. Bioarchaeologists have been able to push back the timeline on our understanding of both infectious and non-infectious diseases through the analysis of bone—or even soft tissue in those rare instances of excellent preservation. As a result, there is now a growing group of “paleo-epidemiologists” who provide a long-term perspective on the human experience with illnesses ranging from the bubonic plague to smallpox.

Although societies have always been afflicted with illness, paleo-epidemiologists argue that the human race has gone through three distinctive surges of disease in history, known

as epidemiological transitions. The first transition was related to the so-called Neolithic Revolution, when the adoption of agriculture and the growth of early towns lead to population increases and concentrations of people that promoted the spread of infectious diseases. The second transition was instigated by the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, with the rapid growth of major cities along with the poverty and unhygienic conditions associated with early factory life and slums. Finally, many scholars believe we are currently in a third epidemiological transition, marked by outbreaks of new (and scary) “emergent” diseases such as Ebola Fever, and “re-emergent” diseases such as new strains of tuberculosis that are resistant to traditional antibiotics and other standard treatments.

Dr. Zuckerman will be organizing a conference entitled “Moving the Middle to the Forefront: Re-Visiting the Second Epidemiological Transition Through Skeletal Remains.” An international set of invited scholars will present innovative research that addresses the causes and consequences of the second transition through an interdisciplinary integration of skeletal,

archaeological, biochemical, and historical evidence. These presentations will then be published as chapters in an edited book that will be published by USC Press.

Our previous post-doctoral conferences have emphasized topics in archaeology that mesh with research strengths for which the University of South Carolina is widely known. Dr. Jodi Barnes organized a conference on the African diaspora in 2009, a specialty of esteemed scholars in the Department of History and in the African American Studies program. Earlier this year, Dr. David Goldstein held a conference on historical ecology, which tied in nicely with the broad environmental studies emphasis on our campus. The University of South Carolina also has outstanding medical and public health schools, and we hope this year’s focus on paleo-epidemiology can provide a new perspective on campus as to how human societies have coped with disease for thousands of years.

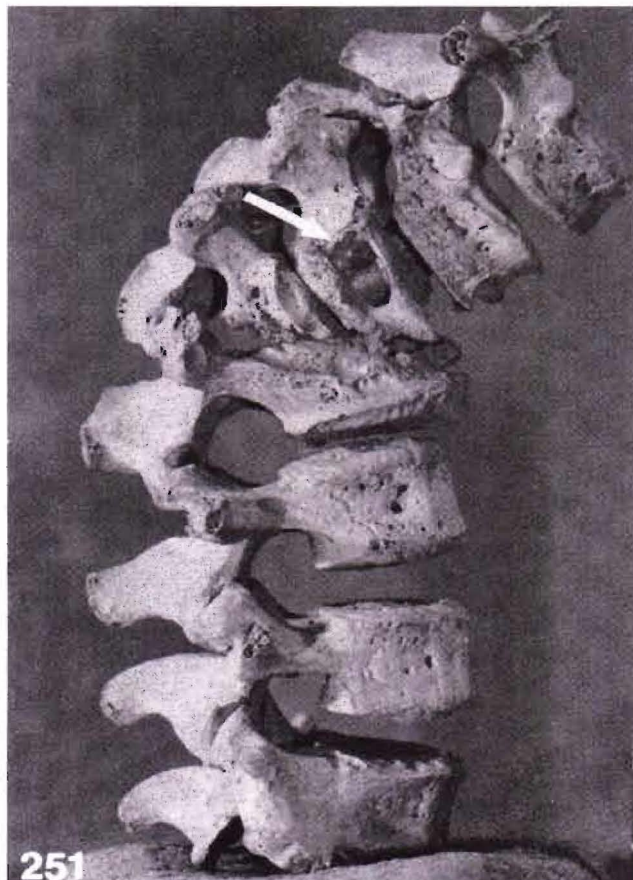


Fig. 2: Example of human spinal column deformed by tuberculosis. (SCIAA photo)

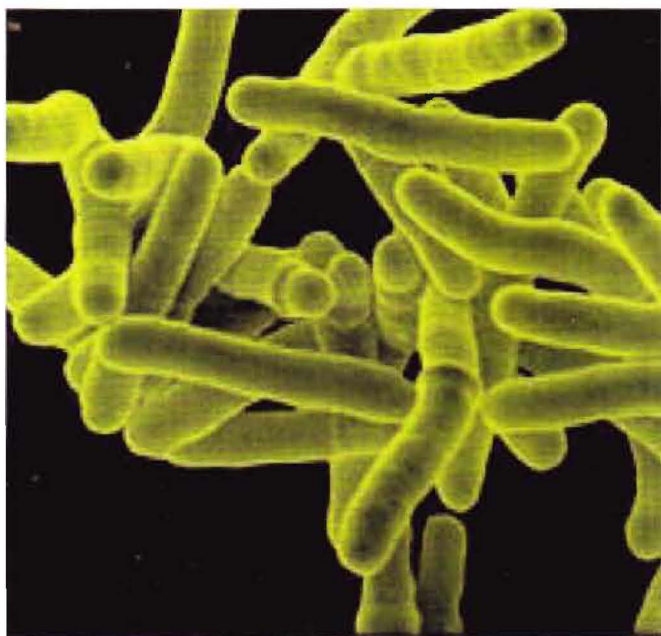


Fig. 1: Tuberculosis bacilli. (SCIAA photo)