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Urban warfare in the Crusades: Weapon injuries in 13th century mass grave deposits at the fortified town of Sidon (Lebanon)

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The Crusades to the Levant have been subject to rigorous academic study from historical and archaeological perspectives. Yet there have been remarkably few investigations of the physical remains of participants during this turbulent period, considering skeletal remains represent the most direct evidence for the events and processes that took place.

Between 2009 and 2010, two closely associated burial contexts containing a combination of partially articulated individuals, articulated body parts and disarticulated remains, were excavated at College Site, Sidon, Lebanon. Associated artefacts and radiocarbon dating of bones place the deposits firmly within the crusader period (AD 1097 – 1291).

Macroscopic analyses yielded an MNI of 25 for the two deposits. All remains for which age could be estimated fell within a range between 14 and 50 years. Almost all remains for which sex could be determined exhibited male characteristics.

The remains exhibited multiple perimortem sharp force trauma to both cranial and postcranial elements, alongside perimortem blunt force trauma, with multiple injuries evident to at least two individuals. The distribution of observed injuries, coupled with the specific demographic profile, suggests the individuals died in battle rather than as victims of a massacre or formal execution. Results will be discussed in the bioarchaeological context of medieval conflict with consideration of potential links to documented historical events.

These mass graves provide the largest and most significant evidence for a crusader period battle in the Holy Land. Our analysis has great significance for the understanding of wounds sustained in battle in the medieval Middle East.