

Sonoma State University
Plagues, Poxes, and Pandemics: Health and Disease in the Past
Osher Lifelong Learning
Fall 2026

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Class Days/Time:	Thursdays, 1:30-3:30 pm
Classroom:	Wine Business 1001

Course Description

This course focuses on human health and disease in the past, from the origins of agriculture to the mid-20th century. Evidence for health and disease processes in the past comes from human remains, artifacts, written texts, and art. As such, this course integrates approaches from bioarchaeology - the study of human remains from archaeological sites - with those from medical anthropology, epidemiology, and history. We will learn about the spread of syphilis between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, cholera in Victorian-era London, bubonic plague in early 20th century San Francisco, among others. The goal is to understand how human health and disease are shaped by cultural traditions, social organization, and biological traits, both in the past and the present.

Course Resources

These are the two books that I assign when I teach this course to my SSU students. They inspired me to design the course as I have, and they cover content and themes that will reappear every week. Of course, reading them is totally optional:

- Johnson, Steven. 2006. *The Ghost Map*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Skloot, Rebecca. 2010. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. New York: Random House.

Topics and Optional Readings by Week

Sept. 17: Week 1: Introduction to paleopathology and epidemiology

- Buzon, Michele R. 2012. "[The Bioarchaeological Approach to Paleopathology](#)." In *A Companion to Paleopathology*, edited by Anne L. Grauer, 58-75. Chichester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Gutiérrez, Gerardo, and Catherine Cameron. 2021. "[Archaeological Perspectives on the Study of Outbreaks During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Coevolution, emergence, and](#)

[resurgence of pathogens through history.](#)" *The SAA Archaeological Record* March 2021: 5-12.

Sept. 24: Week 2: Infectious diseases: tuberculosis, malaria, etc.

- Brown, Peter J. 2015. "[Cultural Adaptations to Endemic Malaria in Sardinia.](#)" In *Understanding and Applying Medical Anthropology*, edited by Peter J. Brown and Svea Closser, 73-84. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Roberts, Charlotte. 2011. "[The Bioarchaeology of Leprosy and Tuberculosis: A Comparative Study of Perceptions, Stigma, Diagnosis, and Treatment.](#)" In *Social Bioarchaeology*, edited by Sabrina C. Agarwal, and Bonnie A. Glencross, pp. 252-281. Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester.

Oct. 1: Week 3: Diet, nutritional stress, and metabolic diseases

- Boutin, Alexis T. 2011. "[Crafting a Bioarchaeology of Personhood: Osteobiographical Narratives from Alalakh.](#)" In *Breathing New Life Into the Evidence of Death: Contemporary Approaches to Bioarchaeology*, edited by Aubrey Baadsgaard, Alexis T. Boutin, and Jane E. Buikstra, pp. 109-133. School for Advanced Research Press, Santa Fe.
- Geber, Jonny. 2014. "[Skeletal Manifestations of Stress in Child Victims of the Great Irish Famine \(1845-1852\): Prevalence of Enamel Hypoplasia, Harris Lines, and Growth Retardation.](#)" *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 155:149-161.

Oct. 8: Week 4: Plague Day!

- Van Schaik, Katherine D., and Sharon N. DeWitte. 2020. "[COVID-19 and the Black Death: Nutrition, frailty, inequity, and mortality.](#)" *Journal of Health and Social Sciences* 5 (4): 471-484.
- Deverell, W. 2004. "[Chapter 5: Ethnic Quarantine](#)" from *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past*, pp. 184-213. University of California Press, Berkeley. Links to an external site.

Oct. 15: Week 5: Syphilis Day!

- Junod, Tom. 2000. "[Deadly Medicine.](#)" In *Tuskegee's Truths: Rethinking the Tuskegee Syphilis Study*, edited by Susan M. Reverby, 509-524. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Zuckerman, Molly K. 2017. "[The "Poxed" and the "Pure": A Bioarchaeological Investigation of Community and Marginalization Relative to Infection with Acquired Syphilis in Post-Medieval London.](#)" In *The Bioarchaeology of Community*, edited by Sara L. Juengst and Sara K. Becker, 91-103. Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association.

Oct. 22: Week 6: Epidemics and pandemics of the 20th and 21st centuries

- Battles, Heather T., and Rebecca J. Gilmour. 2022. "[Beyond Mortality: Survivors of Epidemic Infections and the Bioarchaeology of Impairment and Disability.](#)" *Bioarchaeology International* 6 (1-2). <https://doi.org/10.5744/bi.2021.0003>.
- [The Next Pandemic: Last Week Tonight](#) (2021)
 - From HBO/YouTube: "As COVID-19 continues to spread, John Oliver discusses what could cause the next pandemic, what we can do to avoid it, and why you shouldn't kiss pigs."