

Vilhelm Møller-Christensen, M.D.

1903–1988



Vilhelm Møller-Christensen died at the age of 85 in his hometown of Roskilde, Denmark, on 15 November 1988. As a general practitioner with a special interest in medical history and paleo-

pathology, and having already excavated the burial ground of a medieval Augustinian abbey in Aebelholt, North Sealand, he undertook a search for one of the 30 St. Jorgen's (St. George's) hospitals which were thought to have housed leprosy sufferers in the Middle Ages. Hearing that some human bones had been unearthed near Naestved, about 40 miles south of Copenhagen, in the region where a St. Jorgen's hospital had existed, he began a systematic search for the site. Traveling from farm to farm and making inquiries, he reached a dairy farm where the owner admitted having found human bones when digging a drain in the farmyard. So, in 1948 he began exhumations at this site, aided by the Naestved Museum and the National Museum of Copenhagen, and funded by the Carlsberg Foundation. Further work revealed that he had found a St. Jorgen's hospital which had existed between 1250 and 1550, thus establishing that leprosy was a health problem in northwestern Europe in the Middle Ages. The last exhumations were carried out in the summer of 1968, enabling him to complete his meticulous studies of about 650 well-preserved skeletons, bringing to light some previously unknown changes of leprosy, particularly those in the rhinomaxillary region of the

skull which he named *facies leprosa*. He recorded his observations in a number of papers and books, the last being *Leprosy Changes of the Skull* (1978).

During these years he studied clinical leprosy in Malaya and Thailand, and visited leprologists and paleopathologists in various capitals of Europe, accompanied by his inseparable traveling companions in the form of a selection of bones and skulls from Naestved. When I spent a week with him in 1963, looking for evidence of *facies leprosa* in the skulls of the Catacombs in Paris, I remember marveling at the unconcerned way in which he walked through the streets carrying skulls in a string bag, oblivious of the sidelong glances of passers-by!

In 1964 Vilhelm Møller-Christensen was appointed Professor of Medical History at the University of Copenhagen, later becoming Professor Emeritus, and in the same year he was appointed Director of the University Medical History Institute and Museum. In the latter capacity he spent much time and care in establishing within the museum a leprosy section containing the best osseous material from Naestved. He was President of the Danish Society of the History of Medicine from 1964 to 1974, and Director of the World Health Organization Institute for the History of Leprology in 1973. Honors conferred on him included that of Knight of the Order of Dannebrog (1954) and Commander of the Papal Order of St. Silvester (1973).

The name of Vilhelm Møller-Christensen now occupies a permanent place in the annals of medical history, leprology, and paleopathology.

—W. H. Jopling