

## GIRL POWER!

First of all, never believe everything you read in the press! Recent finds over the last two years have added to our knowledge of Roman London but, in a way, the discoveries have raised more questions than answers, and in the process press imagination ran riot. While archaeologists have been busy recovering the buildings of Roman London, finding a hoard of gold coins and excavating mosaic floors, it is now the specialist archaeologist and forensic scientist who flesh out the bare bones of Roman Londoners themselves.

Roman cemeteries were, by law, situated outside the town, and evidence for Roman Londoners is found in the cemeteries sited along the main roads that led out of town, beyond the city gates of Aldgate, Bishopsgate, Aldersgate, Newgate and Ludgate on the landward side of the town, and south beyond the settlement in Southwark. Roman burial practices found in London are well paralleled elsewhere, and bodies were either cremated or buried.

In total we know of over 1100 burials from Roman London, but many must also have gone unrecognised in the past. Excavations in recent years have revealed several extensive cemetery areas, including 80 burials at Spitalfields in the northern cemetery and 25 burials from Great Dover Street in the southern cemetery. These particular excavations included two female burials that took the press by storm!

The discovery of a limestone sarcophagus with an inner lead coffin at Spitalfields in 1999 came as a surprise to the archaeologists excavating the site. They knew that they were likely to find evidence of both a Roman and medieval cemetery, but a combined coffin burial is very rare - there had only ever been two other examples from Roman London, both found by workmen in the 19th century. The Spitalfields sarcophagus had survived intact because it had been buried, hidden from later grave-robbers. In the Museum, conservators found that the lid of the lead coffin was decorated with a scallop-shell design. It is not uncommon for Roman coffins found in the Thames valley area to have designs that included scallop shells. It is thought that they allude to the journey of the dead to the underworld or Isles of the Blessed. There is no evidence that the scallop shell was associated with Christianity during the Roman period, but it was later adopted as a pilgrim symbol for the shrine of St James of Compostella in Spain.

Human bones may bear the marks of bad health, bad hygiene and poor nutrition. The bones of Roman Londoners indicated that most people had access to an adequate diet for healthy life - protein from fish, meat, dairy produce and pulses, Vitamin C from fresh fruit and vegetables, Vitamin D from fish oils, liver, eggs and exposure to sunlight. An even smaller proportion may have had access to an excessively rich or plentiful diet. When the lid of the coffin was removed, the skeleton of a woman in her early twenties was revealed, lying in a layer of wet mud. Her bones and teeth indicated that she had eaten a reasonable diet during her lifetime; that she was taller than average due to a better diet (164cm or 5'4~"); that her teeth were not greatly worn down and that she had decay in only one tooth, caused by a slightly sweeter than average diet. There was no evidence, however, to indicate her cause of death, and it is quite likely that she died from an infectious disease that did not leave any trace on the bones.

But what can the introduction of new techniques and chemical analyses of bones now begin to tell us? The successful extraction of DNA from ancient bones and teeth, for example, is paving the way for genetic studies in colonisation of continents, close family relationships, ancient diseases and the possible origins of modern diseases. In Pompeii, for instance, seventy skeletons from the Sarno Baths were tested for DNA. As expected, most were of common European types, but there may also have been individuals of African origin in Pompeii - hardly surprising, as trade would have brought people from Africa and Asia to Italy and elsewhere in the Empire.

This science is beginning to advance our knowledge of Roman Londoners, and in particular the Spitalfields woman. A sample of human DNA was extracted from a molar tooth for comparison with a modern database representing the world distribution of people, in order to

demonstrate whether she was native or foreign. Her DNA sequence confirmed that she was of a European type, the closest modern parallel being the Basque region of Spain.

A second molar tooth was analysed for carbon, nitrogen and oxygen. Oxygen isotope analysis varies with the climate and rainfall that an individual experiences during life, and the isotopes, affected by the dietary drinking water, become recorded in the teeth and remain after death. It is therefore possible to differentiate between a person who had always lived in Roman London from one who had migrated from the Mediterranean. Results showed that she had spent her early life in a country warmer than Britain and had migrated from the western Mediterranean, somewhere like southern France, Spain or Italy.

Finally, samples for lead and strontium isotope analysis were taken to try and identify her place of birth from tiny traces of lead in her teeth. Lead becomes incorporated in local plants and animals, passing into the diet of the inhabitants. Once ingested, small quantities of lead are laid down in the bones and teeth. The dental enamel of the Spitalfields woman had a composition significantly different from someone brought up in Roman London. She had ingested lead during her childhood in a continental environment as the lead did not conform with any known British source.

Bodies were likely to have been clothed for burial, but until the Spitalfields excavation there had been no evidence of dress, excepting jewellery or leather shoes. Small fragments of surviving textile showed that the deceased had been wearing purple silk damask, a conspicuous display of wealth. The silk yarn had been imported from China, and Syria was the main centre for damask production. There were also small remains of woven gold thread which may have come from a larger garment. The thread had been spirally-spun in such a way to suggest that it may have been made in the western Empire. Fragments of woollen cloth may have been part of a cover around a cushion of bay leaves that had been placed under her head. Bay would have been a fragrant accompaniment for the deceased's journey to the underworld.

The sarcophagus had been lowered into an open grave and a number of artefacts, consisting of an unusually fine group of late 4th-century jet and glass, had been placed beside the sarcophagus. A long tubular glass phial with trailed glass decoration may have held expensive perfumed oils and, possibly associated with the phial, there was a jet spatula and stopper. Two jet hair decorations and a unique small circular box of jet-like material had also been carefully placed beside the burial. Another very thin-walled glass flask was found wedged between the walls of the coffin and sarcophagus and, as with similar ones found in nearby burials, must also have been used for perfumed oils, perhaps for anointing the deceased prior to burial.

It is clear that chemical microanalysis and forensic science will become an adjunct to human osteology in the future. Eventually all these tests will become routine and therefore, hopefully, cheaper. The tests on the Spitalfields woman would not have been possible without the input of BBC TV's *Meet the Ancestors*, and this raises the possibility of fleshing out the bare bones ~. Are we producing a true likeness -who can say? It is the best we can do for the present, but the possibilities for the future are very promising and very exciting.

Osteoarchaeologists and forensic scientists have greatly helped in the identification of one Roman Londoner, and another excavation was greatly helped by the work of environmental archaeologists who study the remains of flora and fauna. Excavations in 1996 at Great Dover Street in Southwark resulted in the discovery of a late 1st- and 2nd- century walled cemetery where a number of cremation and inhumation burials had been performed inside and outside the walls. One cremation burial provided specialists with a tempting spectacle. The cremation was that of a female in her early twenties, buried beyond the boundary of that cemetery. The body had been cremated on a pyre over the pit in which the ashes and remains were found. This is an unusual form of burial in Roman Britain. In addition, an important collection of grave goods had been placed in the pit after the cremation had taken place.

In the pit were the remains of the charred funeral feast. Environmental archaeologists have identified hundreds of unopened stone pine; a virtually complete date (the first example from Roman London); figs, an almond and a mixture of cereal grains. They also recorded bones from at least four chickens and a dove. All the fruits and stone pine are high-status imported foods, suggesting that this was a person of some affluence and standing. Such large quantities of burnt pinecones indicated that they may have been burnt to give off a strong perfume, and the use of stone pine, in particular, may have been a significant part of the religious ceremony.

An impressive group of ceramic vessels had been carefully placed in the burial after the cremation had taken place. The grave goods consisted of eight unused lamps and eight open vessels (tazze), possibly used as incense burners. The open vessels had all been made in the St Albans area and are not uncommon finds in cemeteries. Some were scorched on the inside surface, indicating perhaps that they had been burning during the funeral ceremony.

The lamps, on the other hand, had all been imported from central Gaul. Four of the lamps were plain, but the other four had depictions that may have been deliberately chosen for their symbolism. One lamp shows a fallen Samnite gladiator in a seated position, holding his sword in his right hand while his left arm shields his face. The subject may symbolise death, as gladiatorial combat originated from republican funeral games. Perhaps the choice of items placed with the cremation denoted the symbolic imagery of the deceased overcoming death.

The other three lamps show the standing figure of the jackal-headed god, Anubis, rare finds for Roman Britain. As Egyptian god of judgement, Anubis controlled entry to the underworld of the dead and, as the nephew of the goddess Isis, he became her guardian and guide during the search for her dead partner Osiris. The cult of Isis became particularly popular with women, and there is epigraphic evidence of the presence of a temple of Isis in London. The deceased, therefore, may possibly have been an influential follower of Isis.

However, when assimilated into the Roman religion, Anubis was also equated with the Roman god Mercury, who was closely connected with gladiatorial combats. Slaves dressed as Mercury dragged away the fallen bodies from the amphitheatre arena. The depiction of the fallen gladiator and Anubis, therefore, might possibly indicate the deceased's profession. The cremated remains were female and the deceased must have been held in high regard, given the nature of the burial and accompanying grave goods, but the burial lay outside the walled cemetery, indicating someone who might have been beyond the laws of normal society. The final possibility, therefore, was that she was either a gladiator or someone closely connected with gladiators.

So ignore some of those amazing newspaper headings! We do not have a 'Roman princess', nor do we have 'Jet' or 'Spice Girl with serious attitude', but we do have two very interesting burials: one of a young woman from a wealthy family of late Roman London, contrasted with a second young woman of early Roman London whose persona is still the subject of much discussion!

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