

A Long Way from Home: Diaspora Communities in Roman Britain

Investigators:

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This project has used an innovative combination of a wide range of scientific archaeological techniques to address the question of diaspora communities in the Roman province of Britain. This is the first large-scale application of migration isotope analysis to the Roman period in Britain (increasing the published data set from 24 to 150 samples), and the first time that such an analysis has been combined with osteological/forensic ancestry assessment and dietary analysis. This interdisciplinary project has involved the collaboration of five archaeologists (1 Roman specialist, 2 osteologists and 2 isotope specialists).

This project has contributed to the programme by providing a historical perspective, examining how diasporic identities were created nearly two thousand years ago. The project has generated new scientific data, making an empirical contribution to the study of migration in the past. For example, initial results appear to indicate that up to a third of the sampled urban populations were not 'local' (not from within a 30km radius of the respective towns). It could also be shown that women and children migrated; this has implications for theoretical (gender) archaeology, and is in contrast to the popular perception that it is mainly adult males (soldiers and administrators) who moved across the Roman Empire.

Our collaborative work has resulted in both theoretical and methodological results that will help develop further studies. As an example of methodological advances, we found that the analysis of dietary isotopes can be used to identify non-UK individuals, when used in combination with migration isotopes. Our large data set will further comparison with prehistoric and early medieval skeletons from Britain, and contribute to the empire-wide study of Roman human remains.

In addition to the academic outputs, we have engaged in an active outreach programme to promote our findings of a multi-cultural Roman Britain, working with a children's author and an archaeological illustrator. We have also had initial contact with a producer about a possible TV programme. Popular perception still sees Roman Britain as homogenous, and any immigrants essentially as Italian. Our work shows the much greater diversity of Romano-British urban populations, and we have been fortunate in developing good links with the Yorkshire Museum. York is one of our key case studies, and the Museum will use our children's stories in educational activities, and at least one of the reconstructed images in its new galleries.

The results of this project will be published in ten academic papers in international peer-reviewed journals; one has already been accepted, four more have been submitted; the remainder are in draft form. We held a

national workshop on 'Roman Diasporas' in September 2008, drawing together scholars from across the country, and plan a further international academic session as part of the Roman Archaeology Conference at Oxford in 2010.

We feel that participation in the programme has enriched our understanding of diaspora theory, and that we have been able to apply some of these theoretical insights to Roman archaeology and archaeological science. We hope that our findings will result in a more sophisticated and complex picture of the Roman province of Britain, both in academic discourse and in public perception.