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A Long Way from Home - Diaspora Communities in Roman Britain

This project will explore the cultural and biological experience of immigrant communities in Roman Britain. We wish to challenge popular assumptions of an essentially homogenous Romano-British population by examining the diversity of cultural identities in this remote province. Evidence for diaspora communities will be analysed through an innovative combination of material culture, skeletal and isotope research. In addition to the proposed academic publications, we will develop outputs accessible to the wider public through a creative collaboration with an established author of children's books.

Research Questions

How did diaspora communities create identities that were distinct from the host society, and maintain ideological links with their homeland? Can we identify incomers, and do they differ from the host population in their health and diet? How was material culture in Romano-British burial used by migrants to express and contest their identities? Did forced migration of individuals and/or family groups impact on their health? Was the consumption or rejection of certain foods used by diaspora groups to integrate with or distinguish themselves from their host societies? Such questions resonate with key issues concerning diaspora communities in modern day societies.

Research Context

Britain under Rome was truly multi-cultural, with historical and epigraphic evidence recording the voluntary and forced migration of Gaulish, Germanic, and North African individuals (cf. Lilley 2004; 2006). Merchants and administrators chose to come to Britain, and men joined the army voluntarily (often remaining in 'ethnically' defined units such as the Batavians on Hadrian's Wall), but there is also evidence for imposed migration, for example, of troops raised by force (e.g. Sarmatians), and slavery (Thompson 2003). We will focus on the second to fourth century, an under-researched period preceding Germanic migrations. In our analysis of Romano-British communities, we are influenced by recent theoretical work within American historical archaeology (Blakey 2001; Clark 2005; Webster 2005), which also deals with the lived experience of diverse diaspora communities within a colonial and imperial context.

Until very recently, isotope research for reconstructing mobility has focused on periods where population movement is historically attested (e.g. the Anglo Saxons: Montgomery et al. 2005) or suggested (Beaker people: Price et al. 2001). Initial work on fourth century Roman Britain (Lankhills, Winchester: Evans et al. 2006) has demonstrated the complexity of the relationship between material culture, burial rite and geographical origin. Our project will, therefore, apply systematic scientific analysis to an under-utilised body of material. This research will contribute to a growing interest in the diversity of the Roman Empire rather than its uniformity, and this will be of interest not just to Roman archaeologists, but also social archaeologists and historians.

Research Methods

We have selected three Romano-British cemeteries where preliminary assessments of the archaeological and osteological evidence predict the best possible return for investment, focusing on inhumation burials from North Yorkshire and Dorset. Sites were selected from settlements of differing status and function including military, civil, and urbanised. The skeletons selected date from the 2nd – 4th century AD.

Skeletal remains will be studied to identify immigrants through ancestral traits, and through oxygen and strontium analysis. We will then employ further osteological research and isotopic analysis to explore the biological and cultural experience of these diaspora communities. The examination of foodways through carbon and nitrogen analysis of bone collagen will form a crucial aspect of this work, and integrate current research on the importance of traditional diets and “nutrition transition” in immigrant communities. Migration can have a considerable impact on the health of first and second-generation diaspora populations, including women and children. We will ask whether it is possible to identify specific diseases and trauma among diaspora communities in Roman Britain. What can the archaeological analysis of the burial rite and material culture of these groups contribute to debates about the religious and cultural life of diaspora communities?