

Roman era York may have been more diverse than today

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A computerised reconstruction of how the Ivory Bangle Lady could have looked.
Image credit: Dr Hella Eckardt/University of Reading

(PhysOrg.com) -- A new archaeological study in Britain has shown that its multi-cultural nature is not a new phenomenon, but that even in Roman times there was a strong African influence, with North Africans moving in high social circles.

The study, led by Dr Hella Eckardt of the Department of Archaeology at Reading University, used pioneering forensic techniques to study fourth century artifacts and bones in the Yorkshire Museum's collections in York. The researchers used isotope analysis and forensic ancestry assessment to analyze the items, which included the "Ivory Bangle Lady" skeleton and goods buried with her.

The Ivory Bangle Lady remains were found in August 1901 in a stone

coffin unearthed in Bootham, where a group of graves were found. The grave has been dated to the latter half of the fourth century. Items buried with the Lady included expensive luxury items such African elephant ivory bracelets, beads, pendants and other jewelry, a blue glass jug, a glass mirror, and Yorkshire jet. A rectangular bone mount, possibly for a wooden coffin, was also found in the grave. An inscription on the bone, “Hail sister, may you live in God,” suggests the woman held religious beliefs and may have been Christian. She is believed to have been one of the richest inhabitants of the city.

The researchers analyzed and measured the Lady’s skull and [facial features](#), and looked at the chemical signatures of her diet. They also examined the burial site to build a picture of her social status and ancestry.

Dr Eckardt said the results showed the Ivory Bangle Lady was of mixed ancestry, and the isotope analysis suggested she may have migrated to Britain from a warmer climate. This evidence, along with the goods found in the ground, and the fact the burial rite was unusual, all point to the her having been of North African descent, arriving in Britain possibly via the Mediterranean, and she was of high social status.



The analysis of the Lady and other skeletons and artifacts contradicts the popular assumption about Britain in Roman times that African immigrants were usually males, of low status, and most were slaves, and shows that high status women from Africa were also present in the society. Dr Eckardt said the research on the Lady and other skeletons suggest the society was as diverse, and possibly more diverse than it is today.

The Roman Empire extended into the Near and Middle East, North Africa, and included Europe, and there were great movements of people throughout the Empire, both voluntary and involuntary. York (or Eboracum, as it was then known) was an important city of the period and eventually was named capital of “Britannia Inferior.” Emperor Septimius Severus, who was born in North Africa, was one of two Roman Emperors who visited Eboracum, and died there.

The paper is published in this month’s edition of the journal *Antiquity*. The skeleton and artifacts will be displayed in August as part of the Yorkshire Museum’s exhibition: Roman York — Meet the People of the Empire.



More information: A Lady of York: migration, ethnicity and identity in Roman Britain, *Antiquity*, Volume: 84 Number: 323 Page: 131-145.
antiquity.ac.uk/ant/084/ant0840131.htm

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