

BBC History Cold Case team solve mystery of Norwich bodies in the well

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History Cold Case is returning for a second series on BBC TWO. In the third episode of this new series on Thursday, 14th July, 2011 at 9pm, investigators reveal the extraordinary possible reason that 17 skeletons were discovered in a well in Norwich.

The discovery of the remains of 17 people in a well in the centre of Norwich was made in 2004 when the Chapelfield Shopping Centre was being built. Archaeologist Giles Emery was called in and his team excavated the remains of the bodies which were discovered several metres down a well - the only burial of its kind to have been discovered in the UK.

The reason for such a burial has remained a mystery but world-renowned anthropologist Professor Sue Black and her cold case team use a mix of 21st-century forensic science techniques and historical detective work, to conclude that the bodies were most likely the result of mass murder or suicide to escape genocide.

Using carbon dating, bone [isotopic analysis](#), facial reconstruction and historical information, the cold case unit from the Center for Anatomy and Human Identification at the University of Dundee piece together what happened.

Death through disease was the obvious place to start but it was quickly ruled out after analysis of the remains confirmed there was no evidence of any such illness.

Then historical investigation confirmed that the bodies would not have been discarded in such a manner for either communities who lived around the well at the time - Christians or Jewish people. Both communities would have been much more respectful in their [burials](#).

The team referred to Dr. Ian Barnes to analysis the DNA of some of the bones. He discovered essential facts which gave the team a breakthrough - five of the people had DNA consistent with Jewish communities, were family members and trace chemicals found in the bones, through tests known as [stable isotope analysis](#), also revealed they had lived in the local area for many years.

Professor Sue Black said: "Out of the five of them where DNA was retrievable good information what we have is a situation where the mitochondrial DNA which is the DNA which is transferred down the maternal line, effectively matches. We have family members. That was really important but what was more important was that the DNA told us that the most likely ethnic group to which these individuals belong are Jewish."

These scientific findings were in line with historical facts that Norwich was home to a thriving Jewish community since 1135 who lived just a few hundred yards from the well.

In addition Jewish historian, Professor Miri Rubin confirmed to Dr. Xanthe that the 13th Century was a time of religious persecution for the Jewish community: "In the late 12th and 13th Century as Europe becomes more Christian there was a real deepening of this sense of Jewish evil, so it is a picture of worsening and ultimately the age of expulsions."

These historical facts together with: natural death ruled out; the confirmation that the bodies being most likely of a Jewish family; the

fact that neither Jewish or Christian communities would have treated members of their communities in such a disrespectful way at burial, leads Professor Sue Black to reach the conclusion that foul play of some kind was involved - either a mass murder or self inflicted death is likely.

When the cold case team presented the results to the local community, Sophie Cabot, an expert in Norwich's Jewish history, said: "We don't know everything about this community but what we do know or what we thought we knew is changed by this."

Provided by University of Dundee

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