

Family footwear find shows new side to Roman military

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Classics professor Elizabeth Greene has looked at shoes found at the Roman fort at Vindolanda on Hadrian's Wall in Northern England, where more than 4,000 have been excavated.

(Phys.org)—By looking at someone's shoes, you can tell a lot about the person wearing them. That old adage certainly rings true when looking at children's shoes from ancient Rome. Just ask Elizabeth Greene, a Classics professor, who, at the 2013 Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America this month, presented research showing children of Roman military families wore footwear that reflected their social status.

"For a really long time, until the 1990s, really, no one thought about or studied families in the [Roman army](#) because soldiers weren't legally allowed to marry," Greene said.

"It was a bastion of [masculinity](#) – this masculine, male-dominated environment and no one placed women and children there. But when you look at the material and historical record, there's a lot of evidence of women and children there. One piece of evidence is these children's shoes, and we have shoes from the very beginning," she said.

In her research, Greene has looked at shoes found at the Roman fort at Vindolanda on Hadrian's Wall in [Northern England](#), where more than 4,000 have been excavated. She noticed shoes from high-status, elite [households](#) were much nicer than the more basic, shoes found in the barracks.

And that's to be expected, she said.

So, why does the difference in style of children's shoes matter?

By their sheer existence, kid's shoes trump the view children were not part of Roman military life. What's more, and what's more important, their stylistic differences indicate children of high officials were treated and dressed as such, and were not only present, but also in the public eye, in a venue technically forbidden to them.

"Shoes are very important in the Roman world. One of the things about the Roman world is that sartorial symbols mean everything. They indicate to everyone who you are and what you are. So, what I find very interesting is that even a tiny infant shoe replicates an adult male's shoe to a T," Greene said.

"Going back to the military, it is very hierarchical and it would most

definitely be the kind of place where status mattered – and everything about status mattered. The fact we can see (evidence of) this, and you could visually show that status when even an infant boot of 10 cm mimics the adult shoe, shows that children were being held to sartorial expectations of class, and that doesn't mean anything unless they played a public role, unless these infants were out on parade," she explained.

"In a lot of ancient societies, a human being isn't really part of society until he is over the age of 2, and a 10 cm boot suggests this individual is very much a part of society. So, the family is very important in the social structure of the fort. No one has talked about this. We need to figure out what they were doing there, and what role they played in social structure."

Greene continues to work at the Vindolanda field site through the Vindolanda Field School, co-directed by her husband, Alexander Meyer, out of the Department of Classical Studies at Western. Eight students participated at the site in the summer of 2012 and more will return this year.

Greene's paper, "If the shoe fits: Style and status in the assemblage of children's [shoes](#) from Vindolanda," part of a larger project still, is set for publication this year in an edited volume of papers on archaeology in Roman Britain.

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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