

Unearthed Late Roman well may have modern-day significance

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(Phys.org) —Archaeologists from the University of York say a virtually intact Late Roman well discovered near Heslington, on the outskirts of the city, may have had significance in contemporary local agricultural cycles and fertility practices.

The well, which is thought to have been in use for several decades in the late 4th and early 5th centuries, was unearthed during [archaeological excavations](#) on the site of the University's campus expansion at Heslington East.

From at least the Early Bronze Age, a range of methods were used here

to access natural springs, including watering holes and primitive wells. In contrast, this Late Roman feature was carefully engineered, positioned high on a hillside and used newly acquired, good-quality masonry.

The research published in the latest issue of *Internet Archaeology* says that the well's main structure featured facing stones of newly quarried, roughly squared, oolitic limestone blocks, probably from a source near Malton, 30km to the north-east. Curved on their outer surface, the stones were set in carefully defined, regular courses. The base of the well was dish-shaped and composed of triangular limestone slabs set directly on natural clay. The engineering employed suggests an intimate understanding of the subsoil. The masonry lining did however incorporate a former roof finial, the only element from any earlier structure to be reused. The [excavation team](#) from the Department of Archaeology at York say its recycling is best interpreted as symbolic rather than opportunistic.

The well contained more than a 1000 pieces of Romano-British pottery, including two almost complete Huntcliff-type jars, and a similar number of animal bone fragments. These featured sheep, cattle, horse, deer and even a young dog. A high proportion of the bones showed signs of being butchered but were not highly fragmented, in contrast to the domestic waste encountered on the rest of the site.

Steve Roskams, Senior Lecturer, said: "It is striking that all of the material found in our well would have been familiar to those inhabiting this landscape. Its construction incorporates a finial which, we argue, probably came from the dismantling of a nearby, good-quality structure. The jars circulated here widely, the Huntcliff-type probably being connected directly to water usage. The other pottery and the animal bones also comprise well-understood 'mundane' elements that were available locally.

"At the same time, there is sufficient evidence to indicate that some of this fairly ordinary material was deliberately placed in the well as symbolic performance. When interpreting such practices, archaeologists often concern themselves with whether they belong to 'Roman' or 'Iron Age' traditions. However, if we are to understand these forms of routine ritual fully, we would do better to look to local agricultural cycles and fertility practices, whether annual, generational or longer-term transitions. The economic pressures and social tensions, which came to fore at such points, were of far greater significance to these communities as they sought to establish and reinforce their own, immediate identities."

To find out more about the excavations at Heslington visit [www.york.ac.uk/media/archaeolo ... hourfeet_heseast.pdf](http://www.york.ac.uk/media/archaeolo...hourfeet_heseast.pdf)

More information: Roskams, S. et al. A Late Roman Well at Heslington East, York: ritual or routine practices? *Internet Archaeology* 34. [dx.doi.org/10.11141/ia.34.5](https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.34.5)

Provided by University of York

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