

# Discovery of shackled skeleton in a ditch: Slavery in Roman Britain

June 11 2021, by Richard Alston

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Roman burial shackles found on the skeleton in Great Casterton. Credit: MOLA

A body found buried in a ditch by construction workers in the village of

Great Casterton, in the east Midlands of England, has shed new light on Roman slavery in Britain. A [new analysis](#) of the skeleton and the burial has revealed that the male body was probably that of slave from third century.

Although there is no obvious cause of death, the skeleton showed evidence of traumatic injuries from which the man it belonged to had recovered. There was no coffin or grave goods (items buried alongside the body). The grave was shallow and dug in a ditch. The body was not carefully laid out, as is the norm in Roman burials. And there were manacles on the man's ankles (so whoever dumped him could not be bothered to remove them). All this evidence suggests the man was a slave.

Common narratives tend to stress the perceived benefits of the Roman empire to civilisation: the roads, cities and villas. While it's true that Roman rule transformed the landscape of Britain, it also brought with it a new economy—and with that the imposition of Roman systems of exploitation, including slave labor.

## **Slave labor in Britain**

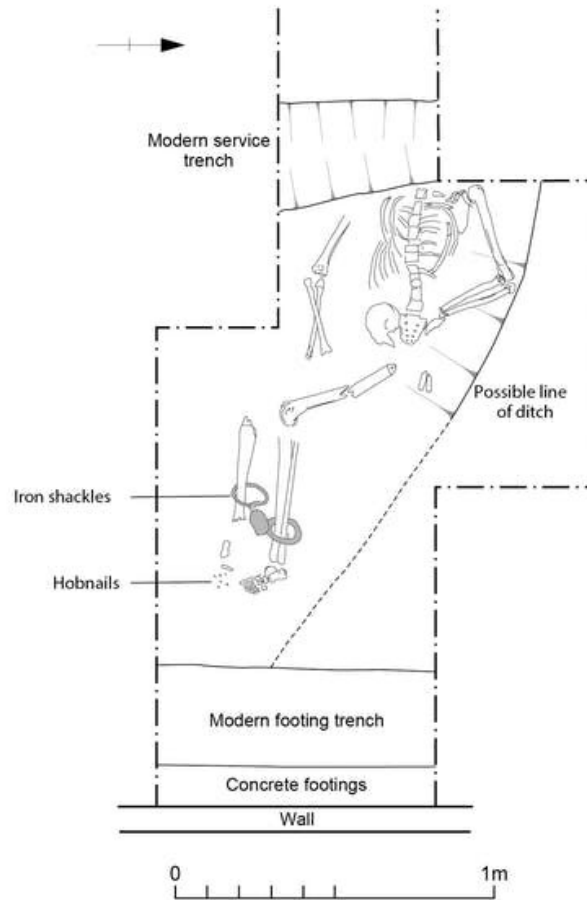
It seems likely that the first Roman slaves in Britain came with the Roman invasion in 43AD. Richer soldiers had slaves to attend to them. Officers brought domestic slaves who worked not just as household servants but also as administrative personnel. As the province grew, merchants arrived bringing with them slaves to manage households and businesses.

The Great Casterton slave is unlikely to have come from this ranking of the enslaved population. The shackles he was found wearing and the punishment his body had suffered suggest the skeleton belonged to a manual laborer. The Romans chained at least some of their agricultural

slaves so this man was probably a farm worker, employed in the fields of one of the large estates that were developing in southern Britain during the third century.

Historians have [associated](#) mass slavery in Rome with the period of imperial expansion, from roughly 200BC to AD100. People were a significant element of the wealth the Romans extracted from the conquered territories. The abundance of slave labor and its cheapness permitted their development of large slave-worked estates and slaves became ubiquitous in Roman Italy.

The Great Casterton slave, however, falls outside that time period and comes from the fringes of the Roman empire. Evidently, his presence was not the result of a campaign of conquest, but of an economic system that depended upon slave labor and consequently maintained a slave trade.



A diagram of the Great Casterton shackled burial. Credit: MOLA

## Comparisons to the Atlantic slave trade

As with Atlantic slavery, Rome's slave trade grew from a nexus of commercial opportunity, a demand for labor and a willingness to employ the violence of enslavement. Profits were generated from the commercial exploitation of the slave's labor. The Romans could and did use wage labor on commercial estates. But slave labor must have provided economic benefits to the estate owners that undercut free labor.

The use of chained slaves appears to have been limited to certain regions, but fettered slaves are known from Italy and Gaul and now probably from Britain. Large slave-worked estates were features of the economy of the western empire into the fifth century.

We may assume that the system depended on an abundance of cheap slaves whose very disposability allowed extreme exploitation (this was certainly the case with Atlantic slavery). In the 17th and 18th centuries, enslaved people could be pillaged from sub-Saharan Africa in vast numbers and at minimal cost. In the centuries of Roman imperial expansion, whole populations were enslaved and sold on the Mediterranean slave markets such as that at the Greek island of Delos.

Many were transported to Italy and provided the labor for the great estates that developed from the late second century onwards and which were a source of great wealth for Rome's political elite. The sources of slaves in the later Roman period are less obvious. Yet slaves were ubiquitous: census returns from Egypt suggest that more than [10% of the population were slaves](#). One might expect higher proportions for the Roman West.

The demand for slaves in the third century AD required raiders and traders, likely operating both beyond and within the frontiers of Rome. Banditry and piracy were supported by the sale of captives into the Roman slave markets. Mass slavery and slaving were central to the Roman economic system and its much admired civilization.

The slave at Great Casterton attests not only the economics of Rome, but also its cultures of human interaction. As with Atlantic slavery, the "manufacture" of the slave required systemic brutality and an absence of sympathy. Dumped within meters of an established burial ground, this slave was denied dignity in death and now serves as a martyr to a civilisation that beat him, chained him and finally dumped him in ditch.

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