

Themed Section

New Approaches to the Bioarchaeology of Roman Britain

Human skeletal remains are an abundant and rich source of archaeological evidence for understanding past lives, but they are often overlooked in studies of the Roman world. This themed section contains four papers, each designed to showcase for non-specialists the vibrancy and relevance of bioarchaeological approaches to the study of life and death in Roman Britain; this at a time when rapid theoretical and scientific developments within the discipline are providing exciting new insights into our understanding of past populations and Roman lifeways from cradle to grave.

The first article by **Gowland** provides an introductory overview of recent innovations in human skeletal analysis and their application to Romano-British contexts and sets the scene for the other three. It argues for a more theoretically engaged bioarchaeology, in which skeletal remains are properly contextualised within social understandings of the body, as well as the broader economic and political structures pertaining to Roman Britain. It also establishes an agenda for future directions in bioarchaeological analyses of Roman contexts.

The second contribution by **Hodson** focuses on the youngest members of Roman society at the most precarious stage in their life course — infancy. While infant burials from Romano-British sites have been a focus of intense scholarly and media attention in recent years, none has provided a detailed palaeopathological study. Hodson focuses on a sample of infants from the Iron Age/Roman site at Piddington, Northants., where the skeletal remains exhibit unusually high levels of health stress in the form of pathological lesions and evidence for growth disruption. These infants may be considered a proxy for poor maternal health, although why their mothers were quite so unwell remains a matter for speculation.

The third article by **Rohnbogner** likewise focuses on childhood health, by providing a large-scale analysis and synthesis of skeletal data on children from across Roman Britain. Children have often been marginalised in archaeological discourse, but because their bodies are so sensitive to environmental and social stressors during growth, they provide an important measure of overall population well-being. Significantly, differences are noted in the demography and health of children between urban and rural locations, linked perhaps with their social status and life course, including labour in rural environs and migration from country to town.

Finally, **Redfern et al.** take a holistic approach to their analysis of four unusual burials from Roman London which formed a central part of an exhibition at the Museum of London. Detailed osteobiographies were created, utilising a variety of established and novel bioarchaeological techniques, including stable isotope and ancient DNA analysis. The results are integrated with and interpreted alongside funerary and other contextual information in

order to 'bring these individuals to life' for both academic purposes and public engagement. The article also highlights the tensions that may arise between present-day socio-political agendas, the media and archaeological evidence, as the complex, multicultural, hierarchical nature of modern-day London resonates strongly with its Roman past.

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