



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

## Roman Britain

**Duration:** 0:08:52

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Female: Welcome to the Arts and Humanities Research Council podcast.

Interviewer: I'm joined today by Dr Hella Eckhardt from Reading University who's been leading Diasporas, Migration and Identities Programme funded by the AHRC called 'A Long Way from Home: Diaspora Communities in Roman Britain'.

Hella, tell me a little bit of the background to the project.

Hella: We were interested in identity in Roman Britain and we wanted to see whether we could distinguish between locals and incomers in Roman Britain. And, more broadly, what sort of levels of mobility we might expect; how many people really moved across the Roman Empire.

And previous work on this has largely been based on inscriptions. But inscriptions are quite rare, especially in Britain, and they're biased very heavily towards the elite.

So we thought we wanted to look at this question through human remains, through skeletons.

Interviewer: When you talk about the elite having the inscriptions, does that mean that there's more human remains at that time than there are inscriptions at that time, so there's more material to work with for the research?

Hella: Absolutely. And the inscriptions in Roman Britain are very heavily biased towards the military. So it's mainly soldiers and their families who use inscriptions, and so most of the inscriptions are found on Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall and other military sites. And that means it's quite a biased data set.

Interviewer: And, as far as looking at the human remains, what research techniques were you chiefly using?

Hella: The main technique that we used was isotopic analysis, which is basically looking at the chemical signatures in the teeth. And what this does, we record the oxygen and strontium ratios within the teeth and that gives us the characteristic chemical signature of the place where a person grew up in.

And so we can define the local range, for example, for York or Winchester and we can then say "Okay, this number of individuals look like they were born and bred in Winchester and here are some other people whose isotopic signature is different."

Interviewer: So with enough sampling and enough record of people who obviously were from Winchester, you could eventually isolate somebody as being from a specific region of North Africa, perhaps, if you knew the isotopic element that would say "Well, that person spent the first few years of their life eating food and drinking water in North Africa."

Hella: You can't pinpoint specific regions yet at all. So what you can do is you can say "Okay, this individual looks like they are from a warmer or a more coastal climate" and then we can think about where that might be. It could be the Mediterranean, for example. Or another individual might be from somewhere much more continental and much colder.

But you can't definitively say "This is the particular area. This person has come from the Danube area" because similar climate and geological conditions exist in multiple places.

But yes, future work will help us refine these ranges and we desperately need comparative data from other parts of the Empire.

Interviewer: As far as the people who coming into the United Kingdom, because of having a Roman army here obviously, was there a gender split; more men than women? Or have you actually been able to find many remains of women?

Hella: It's really interesting because it's usually thought that the people who move in the Roman period are men. So it would be soldiers and administrators and, perhaps, merchants. But clearly what we're seeing is that on several sites we have women who are not born in the place where they eventually died. So women are moving across the Empire and, of course, it's not necessarily all high-status individuals who are moving.

So there could be people who are camp followers with the military or merchants and also slaves, although the link between slavery and migration is not as marked as perhaps in the early modern period.

Interviewer: And you talked about camp followers. Would it be right to say that for every soldier that was here as part of the Roman military, there were probably two or three more people who were actually here in some way supporting the army? So there's a lot more people who were here as part of the Empire who weren't soldiers as were soldiers, perhaps.

Hella: Yes. It's difficult to quantify that. We looked mainly at urban sites. So we looked at York, Gloucester and Winchester as our key study areas. Obviously in York you have a strong military element; the other two sites not so much for the period that we were looking at. But certainly the military was an important factor, but not the only factor.

Interviewer: Using the techniques that you have done, with the isotopic analysis are you able to say what the diet might have been or the health level of some of the people you've actually investigated?

Hella: We used isotopic analysis also to study food waves, so what people were eating. For that we used carbon and nitrogen isotopes and it allows you to identify, for example, individuals who consumed a lot of fish, which would be a very high status Roman way of eating.

And that is a way of further distinguishing amongst our sample, distinguishing individuals.

And similarly, we might look at the health of the individuals and see whether there are differences in the diseases or the pathologies that these individuals had, that the incomers had as opposed to the locals.

Interviewer: And you talk about incomers and locals, but during the time the Romans were here, obviously Romans might have been here and actually started families here. So would there be second-generation Romans who were actually born and brought up in Britain at the time?

Hella: Absolutely. One of the things we're finding is that we might have certain artefacts, for example forms of jewellery, which indicate to an

archaeologist that something interesting is going on and this person might be an immigrant.

But what we're finding is that in some cases people who are very visible look like foreign grave goods are actually born and bred in Britain. And, conversely, you have people who look very local in their burial rite and their grave goods who clearly cannot have been born and bred within Britain.

So what we're seeing is that people actually negotiate their identity. So they might intermarry or they might use certain forms of material culture to express aspects of their identity, like gender or their age, for example, or their marital status.

And that complicates the picture but also enriches it.

Interviewer: For the outputs of the work, obviously I would imagine there's been a series of academic papers, academic journals and so on, but on a more populous level have you done any other outputs?

Hella: Yes. We've published a series of academic papers, of course, but what we've also done, we've worked very closely with the Yorkshire Museum in York and they are developing an exhibition called 'The People of Roman York'. And our work will feature. Some of the skeletons that we have studied will feature in that exhibition.

And we've worked with an artist, a reconstruction artist called Aaron Watson, who has created images to go with this exhibition.

And finally, Caroline Lawrence, who you may know from the 'Roman Mysteries' series of books; these are children's stories about the Roman World. She wrote some very brief short stories that people can - sort of worksheets, that children, when they come and visit the York Museum, they can actually use and learn about the individuals that we studied.

Interviewer: With 'The People of Roman York' exhibition that Yorkshire Museum is working on at the moment, when is that due to take place?

Hella: The exhibition will open later in 2010, in the autumn of 2010. So people will be able to go and see some of these skeletons and the artwork that goes with it.

Interviewer: As far as the research itself is concerned, you've made more isotopic samples than anyone had previously done, looking at Britain, but what are you hoping the research legacy will be for the project?

Hella: Well, I hope it will stimulate a broader interest in mobility in the Roman world and the forces that drive mobility and the way in which people interact in these different communities.

For our own work, what we would really like to do is perhaps look at some sites in Europe and beyond to get comparative data, to see whether the levels of mobility that we find in Britain, whether they are similar to the levels of mobility we might find in Roman Gaul or Roman Germany, for example.

Interviewer: So really there's still an awful lot more to learn.

Hella: There's a lot more to learn, certainly.

Interviewer: That's lovely. Thank you very much for your time.

Hella: Thank you.

Female: Thank you for listening to the Arts and Humanities Research Council podcast. To find out more, please go to [www.ahrc.ac.uk](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk)

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