



Going south of the river: A multidisciplinary analysis of ancestry, mobility and diet in a population from Roman Southwark, London



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 July 2016

Accepted 28 July 2016

Keywords:

Diet

Carbon and nitrogen isotopes

Oxygen isotopes

Lant Street

Londinium

Migration

Ancestry

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the ancestry, childhood residency and diet of 22 individuals buried at an A.D. 2nd and 4th century cemetery at Lant Street, in the southern burial area of Roman London. The possible presence of migrants was investigated using macromorphoscopies to assess ancestry, carbon and nitrogen isotopes to study diet, and oxygen isotopes to examine migration. Diets were found to be primarily C₃-based with limited input of aquatic resources, in contrast to some other populations in Roman Britain and proximity to the River Thames. The skeletal morphology showed the likely African ancestry of four individuals, and Asian ancestry of two individuals, with oxygen isotopes indicating a circum-Mediterranean origin for five individuals. Our data suggests that the population of the southern suburb had an ongoing connection with immigrants, especially those from the southern Mediterranean.

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1. Introduction

The expansion of the Roman Empire across most of western Europe and the Mediterranean, led to the assimilation and movement of many ethnically and geographically diverse communities. Its power and wealth meant that it also had trade connections for raw materials and products (i.e. silk) throughout Europe, Africa and also to the east, including India and China (Young, 2001; Elton, 1996; Scheidel, 2010; Thorley, 1969).

These connections are attested historically but also through their material culture and the physical remains of the people. Many people travelled, often vast distances, for trade or because of their occupation (e.g., military) or social status (e.g., enslaved). For many years, scholars have relied on written evidence and material culture, such as dress accessories, to examine free and enslaved

population mobility. Taken as a whole, these sources are biased towards Mediterranean communities, free status groups, and inorganic materials such as metalwork (Eckardt et al., 2010; George, 2012). More recently, skeletal and stable isotope methods have been applied to investigate human migration in Roman Britain, and have revealed a diverse population primarily drawn from north-west provinces and Mediterranean (Chenery et al., 2010a; Eckardt, 2010; Müldner et al., 2011). When these data are combined with artefactual and funerary studies, the work of Eckardt and colleagues has shown that identity was carefully constructed in this period, reflecting familial or ancestral connections (Eckardt et al., 2009), status (Leach et al., 2010) and occupation (Eckardt et al., 2015). Crucially, these findings has provided bioarchaeological data to support research in ancient history and classics about perceptions of the body, ethnicity and race which have proven, unlike in other times in the past, differences did not prevent people from being economically and socially mobile (McCosky, 2012); although proto-racism is attested in many of the primary sources (Isaac, 2006).

Previous studies on population diversity in Roman Britain by Leach and colleagues (2009) assessed skeletal ancestry using FORDISC, a forensic method based on metrical data that relies on individuals having a complete or partially complete skull. As with

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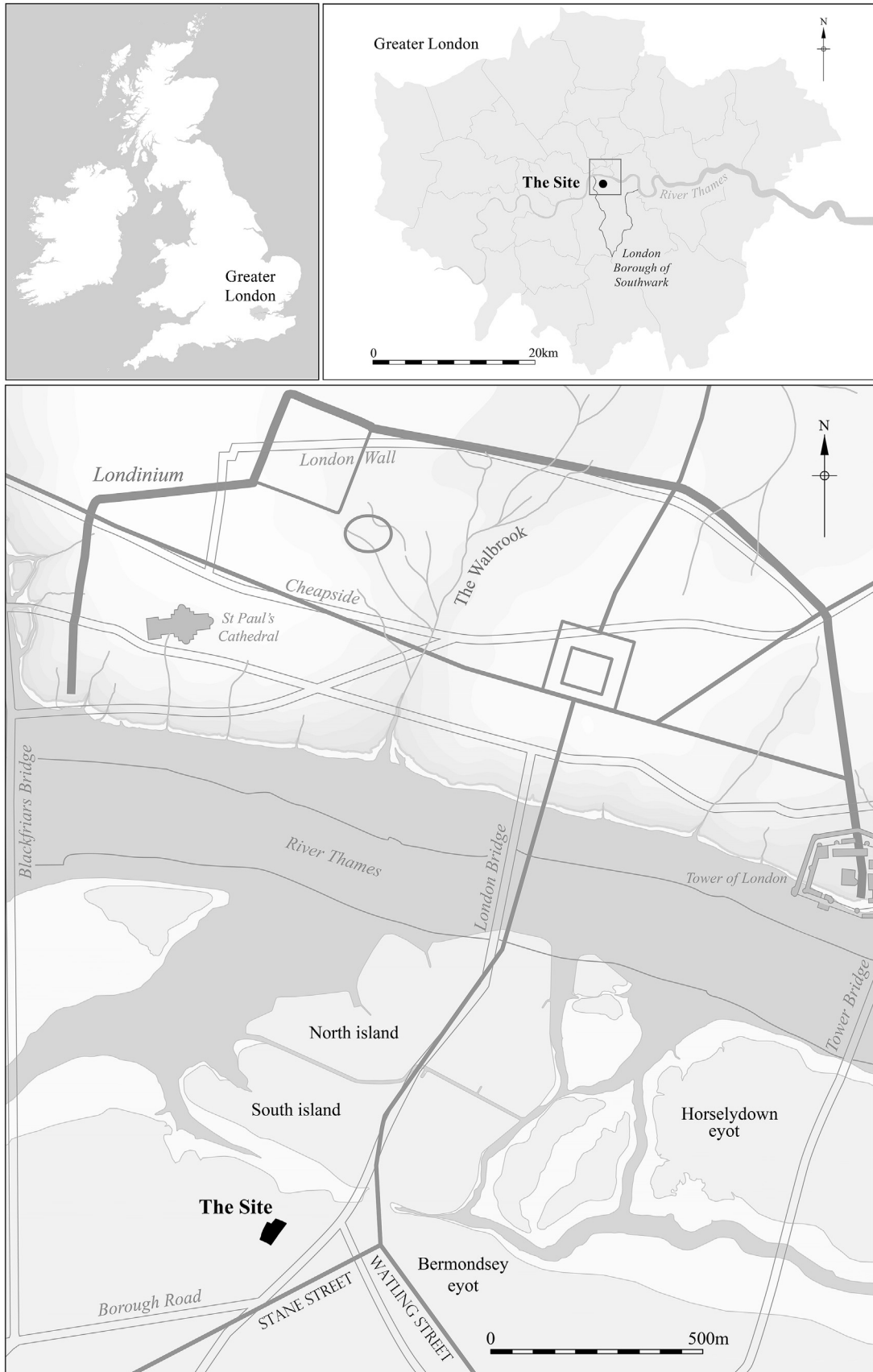


Fig. 1. Composite maps showing the location of London, the Lant Street cemetery and Roman London © Pre-Construct Archaeology.

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