How diverse was Roman Britain and where did migrants to Roman Britain come from? The ‘A long way from home – diaspora communities in Roman Britain’ (2007-2009) research project, led by Dr Hella Eckardt, Dr Mary Lewis and Dr Gundula Müldner at the University of Reading, attempted to address these questions through an innovative combination of scientific archaeological techniques.

This research analysed 155 skeletons from four key Roman sites in Britain, and identified a significant number of migrants, with up to a third of the individuals sampled classed as non-local. A smaller number could possibly have come from outside the United Kingdom. Contrary to popular perception, women and children were found to be amongst these migrants, and immigrants came from both warmer and colder climates.

It became clear that these results have significance for the way in which the Roman period is taught in British schools, where ‘The Romans’ have generally been portrayed as Italian men. The findings of the research at the University of Reading and children’s author Caroline Lawrence.

This article briefly outlines the key findings of the research at the University of Reading and discusses the aims and content of the website.

Findings of the research

Our project was part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) programme on ‘Diasporas, migration and identities’. It aimed to explore the cultural and biological experiences of migrant communities in Roman Britain through a combination of scientific archaeological techniques. For the project, 155 skeletons were subjected to isotopic analysis, from the sites of York, Catterick, Gloucester, and Winchester (Lankhills), dating between the second and fourth centuries AD. At York, a site known for its ‘African’ connections, forensic ancestry assessment was also applied. These techniques were combined with archaeological evidence to examine diversity and the historic perceptions and expressions of ‘otherness’ in an explicitly interdisciplinary approach (Eckardt et al., 2010).

The forensic ancestry assessment conducted at York suggested some considerable cranial variation amongst the skeletons analysed, and combined with the isotope data from 49 skulls also suggested the possible presence of second-generation immigrants. One skeleton at York was of particular interest: the ‘Ivory Bangle Lady’ was found in 1901 in a stone coffin with rich grave goods including African ivory and local jet bracelets, and an openwork bone mount with a Christian message (Figure 1). Ancestry assessment suggested this individual was not from York but may have been from the south/west of Britain or perhaps a similar environment in western Europe and the Mediterranean region. The close examination of this individual provides an excellent opportunity for outreach, and she forms a key part of the www.romansrevealed.com website (see below). She demonstrates the likely mobility of high-status women within the Roman world (Eckardt et al., 2010).

Analysis at York also included that of 18 males from an unusual all-male cemetery with a large number of decapitated individuals. These individuals showed considerable isotopic diversity, including migrants from within the UK and long-distance migrants from ‘warmer’ and ‘colder’ regions (Eckardt et al., 2010).

Examination of skeletons from Catterick, to the north of York,
indicated a relatively homogenous population and despite this being an important military site, fewer long-distance migrants. On-going research on the nearby site at Scorton is now showing that many of the immigrants were buried in a separate cemetery there, explaining this slightly unusual pattern. The isotope analysis from Winchester (Lankhills) shows a considerable diversity of origins. Alongside individuals likely to have come from the area of Winchester were a number of individuals that may have come from warmer regions outside of Britain, from areas that could have included southern Europe, North Africa or the Mediterranean. One individual may have come from a cooler climate outside of Britain, possibly in central Europe. Interestingly, these findings did not appear to correlate with the indications of ‘local’ or ‘other’ given by the burial rites or mortuary treatment. Archaeologists had long thought that individuals buried wearing grave goods such as brooches or bracelets were incomers, while those buried with the objects placed in the grave were thought to be locals. Our work shows that the relationship between geographic origin and burial rite is more complicated, and this may suggest that ethnicity amongst the population was fluid rather than fixed. Burial practice was apparently determined by factors other than origin, perhaps kinship, intermarriage or cultural or political choices (Eckardt et al., 2010).

The research found that at all sites examined, around half the population were ‘local’. Long-distance migration was attested at all sites, ranging between 9% at Catterick to 34% at Winchester (Lankhills). It was noted in the research that immigrants to Britain frequently appear to have been high-status. It is also extremely interesting to note that the isotope analysis revealed the role of women and children within the migrant population of Roman Britain. This runs contra to the presumption that it was predominantly men who migrated into Roman Britain, as a result of connections to the military (Eckardt et al., 2010).

This research suggests a need for a more sophisticated understanding of the complexities of diversity and migration in the Roman world. It is also important to note the potential modern political implications of this research, particularly in highlighting the suggestion from the research that diverse and ‘multi-cultural’ communities are not simply a modern phenomenon (Eckardt et al., 2010).

Aims and content of www.romansrevealed.com

The new www.romansrevealed.com website aims: to make the scientific findings of the research accessible for school pupils, teachers and parents, nationwide and potentially internationally; to address the gap between academic perceptions of mobility and migration in the Roman world and current primary and secondary school teaching; and to develop innovative educational material to counter the portrayal of Roman Britain as homogenous, and of immigrants as essentially Italian men. A free, interactive and downloadable teaching resource, to be used in conjunction with the website, was also developed. This contains worksheets, suggestions for structured activities, colouring in images, and crosswords and quizzes.
The website allows users to explore migration into Roman Britain by different ethnic groups through detailed engagement with four Romano-British individuals based on four real skeletons: Brucco and Savariana from Winchester, and Julia Tertia (the ‘Iron Bangle Lady’) and Piscarius from York. Beginning with the website’s homepage (Figure 2), users can choose to follow the stories of those individuals or to go to the ‘dig site’ for each individual. The former option enables users to explore ideas of migration and the reasons why people might have travelled within the Roman world, through excellent stories written by Caroline Lawrence, author of the famous ‘Roman Mysteries’ series of children’s books. Alternatively, users can virtually ‘dig’ each skeleton to find out more about the individual, what they were buried with and the evidence their skeletons provide. Through either route, users may link back into the other option for each individual, offering a flexible and interactive method for learning.

The website also features links to find out more about what life was like in Roman Britain, through a wide range of topics relevant to the research, including: The Roman Empire, Conquest of Britain, Roman Winchester, Roman York, The People of Roman Britain, The Economy, Politics, Religion, Culture, Food and Drink, and the End of the Roman Empire. Under each heading, children can find out ‘how we know’, so that they can begin to make links between the stories they encounter and the research processes by which this knowledge is gained.

Users of the website also have the opportunity to learn about the people involved in the project, what they do and how they work, including archaeologists, scientists, illustrators and authors. They can hear from the experts through audio-visual links and clips. The website therefore offers a fun, interactive and multi-media educational experience, in which children can not only learn about the Romano-British characters themselves, but can also learn more about how we come to know about and understand the past. Crucially, the website allows for fast, free access to the accompanying teaching resource pack and additional, differentiated educational material as .pdf files.

A brief research study conducted at the University of Reading in 2012-2013 (Ottosdottir, 2013), provided an opportunity to examine how children’s perceptions of the Romans might be developed through use of the website. Two KS2 groups, in Reading and London, were questioned about what they thought about Roman Britain before they used the website, and again after they had used it. The report noted that the website successfully challenged children’s perceptions of ‘The Romans’, and increased their awareness of Roman Britain as more socially and culturally diverse, populated by immigrants that were both male and female and included children. The report also noted that teachers might be willing to use the website as a teaching resource specifically because it portrays aspects of life and experiences in Roman Britain that children can relate to and identify with from their own experiences (Ottosdottir, 2013).

The website www.romansrevealed.com therefore offers an exciting educational resource that enables KS2 pupils in particular to explore and examine diversity in Roman Britain, challenging perceptions of ‘The Romans’ as essentially Italian men. It also has potential relevance for the teaching of history, migration and diversity at KS3, through curriculum subjects that include History and Citizenship, and may be of interest from KS4 upwards in subjects such as Classical Civilisation and Ancient History. For further information please visit www.romansrevealed.com.

References
