

An amazing Roman/Anglo-Saxon burial (5th century AD)

Teachers Notes

The Burial and its location

The grave was found in 1980 when Canterbury Archaeological Trust were excavating at the junction of Beer Cart Lane and Stour Street in advance of redevelopment. The site lay behind the property currently occupied by Kent Social Services. To this day, we cannot say with any certainty who these people were and what happened to bring about their deaths (not forgetting the dog!) and we will probably never know. This sense of mystery makes the whole discovery very appealing. I am still fascinated by it 20 years later!

We are quite confident that the burial was made around the 5th century AD, possibly near the beginning. This is based on 2 types of evidence:

1. The grave was found in the 'black soil' layers. These are found on sites all over Canterbury and we know from the artefactual and stratigraphic evidence that these represent a time at the very end of the Roman period when the town became practically deserted. This period of abandonment probably lasted throughout the 5th century and well into the 6th. Eventually the invading Anglo-Saxon peoples gained control and re-settled the area.

See Roman and Anglo-Saxon Canterbury Reconstructed

<http://www.canterburytrust.co.uk/catpress/learning/resources/randascr/>

2. The dating of the artefacts found in the grave, in particular the amber beads. A combination of archaeological and historical evidence indicates that the very end of the Roman era must have been a time of great turmoil and instability for Romano-British people living in the south-east of Britain. Waves of Anglo-Saxon coastal attacks combined with opportunist invasions from Picts and Scots from the north of Britain plus withdrawal of Roman troops must have made life unbearable. National and personal defence would become a priority, with civic administration taking a back seat. Local people who would normally be occupied in daily maintenance of the town's buildings and services may well have been forced into taking up arms to protect families and the community. This grave found within the town walls is an indicator of civic breakdown. We might try to imagine what it was like by looking at troubled places in the world from our own time; Bosnia for example.

Excavating Human Remains

A good deal can be learned about general health, diet, longevity and lifestyle by examining the skeletons of our ancestors. Children are usually fascinated by them but this can also be a sensitive subject. They should be told that archaeologists must apply to the Home Office for permission to exhume human remains. This is given once the authorities are satisfied that the remains will be dealt with in a professional manner. In due course, skeletons are re-buried, although not in their original graves.

Identifying Skeletons

Sex and Age Skeletons can be identified to some degree by comparing them for example with modern ones of known age and sex. It is possible to determine gender in adult skeletons. The two main indicators are the pelvis and the skull. The adult female pelvis is shaped to allow childbirth. The male skull tends to have a ridge of bone above the eyebrow line. In pre-pubescent individuals it is virtually impossible to identify gender as these two areas are not yet fully developed. The older of the two children here has been cautiously identified as female on the skeletal remains. The child was also apparently wearing jewellery. The gender of the younger child could not be identified by the skeleton alone. At the moment it is thought to be female, based on the jewellery alone. But one should be careful in making such interpretations which may be based on 20th century cultural behaviour.

It is possible to estimate the age of a young individual when he/she died by looking at how many and which teeth have erupted. We think that the older child was about 11 years old and the younger about 8 years old. In mature adults, tooth development plays a part (although to a lesser extent). Wear on teeth and changes in the growth of long bones in the arms and legs are the usual indicators of age. Our adult male was probably between 30 and 40 when he died and the adult female between 35 and 45 years old.

Cause of death?

There were no clues to cause of death on any of the skeletons. This is not surprising as poisonous substances and many diseases tend to attack parts of the body other than the skeleton (for example, soft tissue, organs) leaving the bone unmarked. Similarly if an individual met a violent end (as a result of a fatal weapon injury for example) the bones would not necessarily be hit or cut.



DNA analysis

DNA has the potential for identifying familial relationships, geographical origins, gender and cause of death in individuals. Investigations are currently being undertaken by the Department of BioSciences at Kent University where Dr Peter Nicholls has taken tooth samples from the human skeletons with the hope of extracting preserved DNA. We have our own theories about this burial and so these developments are really exciting!

National Curriculum applications

History Key Stages 1 and 2

At KS 1, be selective with the material and use it when looking at evidence for what happened in the past and in the context of a time beyond living memory. At KS 2 you can include it in work on the Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings in Britain or in a local area study. Use the material to help develop skills while using a range of sources: observation, identification, interpretation, recording and communicating ideas and results. Who can come up with the most convincing interpretation about what happened here 1500 years ago? We will probably never know for sure. But it's fun and stimulating trying to find out – and children will come up with a number of theories!

Across the curriculum

You could bring in elements of other subjects, for example Geography (location of site), Science (the human body, survival and decay of materials) and in particular English.

Literacy Hour

This burial is an image which can fire children's imaginations! Use it to encourage them to express their ideas both verbally and in writing. In working out their theories they will need to order their work in a systematic way, record various types of data. and then present their results. New vocabulary and descriptive work will come as part of the process. It is important that children realise there is no 'correct answer' to this mystery. They may well come up with several valid interpretations for what happened.

Having done the analysis, take things a step further. The burial is also a wonderful vehicle for creative writing!

Year 5 pupils at Wingham CP School set about recreating the events behind this snapshot of the past. See how they did it – and won themselves a handsome prize!
<http://www.canterburytrust.co.uk/catpress/learning/resources/amazing-burial/wingham/>