# Antiquity Podcast transcript – March 2010

In the late 4th century AD a wealthy woman walked the paved streets of Roman York. She was 5' 1'' tall, willowy, exquisitely turned out, and almost certainly of African origin. Sadly she died young, at no more than 23 years old, of unknown causes and she was buried, so her grave goods indicate, with great honour and affection. She had earrings, pendants and beads and bangles of Yorkshire jet and African ivory, and with her was a blue glass cosmetic jug and a glass mirror. And there was a bone plaque - probably from a commemorative casket, forming letters that read S[OR]OR AVE VIVAS IN DEO, or "Hail, sister, may you live in God". She was, it seems, rich, Christian and black.

How do we know all this? Is it a legitimate image? Her remains were found in a stone coffin discovered near Sycamore Terrace, Bootham southwest of York's legionary fortress in August 1901. A century later Carole Chenery and colleagues from the Reading archaeology department and the NERC isotope laboratory, revisited the grave goods and the skeletal remains. They analysed the bone, measured the skull, and compared the oxygen and strontium isotopes in her teeth with that in modern ground water. And this is what they say: "A re-assessment of ST60 (her archaeological name) showed that the skeleton is that of a young female, aged between 18-23 years. Her height was calculated by means of regression formulae based on the maximum length of the femur (414mm). This makes her only slightly shorter than the average female from Roman Britain, where the average stature has been estimated at 5'2". The skeleton was gracile and did not exhibit pronounced muscle markings that would have suggested a strenuous lifestyle….. The oxygen and strontium isotope evidence suggests that ST60 spent her childhood either in the west of Britain or, perhaps more likely, coastal areas of western Europe or the Mediterranean. The results of the craniometric multivariate analysis of ST60 suggest greatest affinity with two reference populations of African-American females"

Well, this is as emotional as we get at Antiquity, but it is never going to suppress the image of a glamorous mixed race beauty sashaying down Stonegate. She wasn't the only one. Women and children, as well as soldiers, made their way to Britannia from all corners of the Roman Empire.

When the Lady of York was disinterred 1400 years after she died, it was by citizens of a successor empire, improbably based in Britain. This was a bigger empire still with even more mobility – but was it one of equal opportunity? Perhaps not, given that the most travelled people of the 18$^{th}$ and 19$^{th}$ century were not citizens, but slaves. Another paper in the latest Antiquity explores the relationship of slavery and property-owning in the Caribbean and comes to some surprising conclusions. Doug Armstrong of Syracuse University New York has investigated realities from the islands of the West Indies and finds a big variety of economic situations and opportunities for self determination, from almost nil to the exercise of near autonomy – what he calls 'degrees of freedom'.

Although the majority of black persons in the Danish West Indies were enslaved, a community on St John's, the so-called East Enders, had managed to use their knowledge of seafaring and boat building, combined with a cottage industry making clothing to live the free life. They owned land, built their own school and educated their children in literature as well as crafts and trades. "They were not bound as chattel to the lands of others" says Doug Armstrong, "nor compelled to sell their labours for low wage jobs".

The paradox is that although some East Enders maintained they had always been free, some did not gain their formal manumission until 1800, and well into the nineteenth century some 12 persons (in a community of 135 in 1835) were still enslaved. Ironically, these were held in bondage by other black people on communally-owned family land. The majority, nine, were owned by one individual who himself was an African born ex-slave who by the second quarter of the nineteenth century had become head of a

household, master boat builder, and a respected elder.

Thus a flourishing community barely known from documents, is brought to life. Follow-up GIS studies have shown that this settlement was simply the first of what was to become a common pattern of black ownership of property on the island in the years leading up to and following emancipation. Reflecting on his degrees of freedom, Doug Armstrong notes that the American Declaration of Independence originally championed the right to life, liberty and **property.** "When I first saw the word "property" stricken out and replaced in a draft of the *Declaration of Independence* on a visit to Jefferson's study in Philadelphia", he comments, "I was moved by the humanity represented by replacing the materialistic value of "property" with the humanistic value of "happiness". I now see the shift from property to happiness as a mask behind which the core freedoms of ownership of self and property remained in bondage. In fact, greater expressions of freedom are found where people own their lands and labours, even in times when slavery was sanctioned". But it was happiness, incidentally, that was to be codified globally in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1848).

Britons never never never shall be slaves, they sing, but of course they were, during the second world war, both in the east and in the west and even although it is little known, on British soil itself. Gillian Carr of the University of Cambridge pioneers an 'archaeology of occupation' in her study of the Channel Islands. The Channel Islands were invaded in 1940 and under the martial law imposed by the third Reich, the islanders began 6 years of resistance, collaboration and compromise. An undercover material culture flourished, some of it brought on by necessity, such as parsnip coffee, blackberry leaf tea, carrageen seaweed blancmange and the dreaded 'occupation loaf'. After the wheat ran out, loaves were made from potato flour made with a specially designed grater. After the fuel ran out, cooking was by means of the biscuit tin hay box. After the leather ran out shoes were re-soled with layers of wood, carpet and old tyres.

Other aspects of the archaeology were more symbolic and aggressive: the crystal radio sets hidden inside light switches and books, and the numerous graffiti – the letter V or its equivalent in sound: the morse code, *der der der doo.*

Carr also shows the long tail of monumentality, caused by the mixed feelings and bad dreams of those that experienced the occupation and their descendents: monuments were not erected until 40 years had passed, and the first body was repatriated from the continent in 1997. Not until 2005 were the sites of the concentration camp and the three forced labour camps on Alderney marked out, and the material culture of the occupation then started to become heritage.

There is plenty of news in this quarter's Antiquity from the more distant past – diversity of occupation in Neolithic Norway, the relations between climate and society in the Polynesian Marquesas, the mapping of prehistoric stone rings in the Rocky Mountains. These are all about people too, lived lives, human experiences, anxiety and defiance.

Our message is simple: archaeology doesn't just find stuff – it digs deeper than that – picking out things that matter to us today, just as they mattered, and mattered greatly to the people we try to bring back to life.