

Introduction

Archaeological research into Roman Britain has mainly focussed on the architectural grandeur of the large towns and high status *villa* settlements, and means of quantifying the ‘Roman-ness’ of said sites (e.g. Wachter 1974; Burnham and Wachter 1990; Mattingly 1997, 2006; Parkins 1997; Millett 1999, 2001, 2005; Burnham et al. 2001; James 2001; White and Gaffney 2003; Pitts and Perring 2006; Pearce 2008; Holbrook 2015). However, the archaeology of general rural settlements, such as villages and farmsteads, and their inhabitants is now receiving much needed academic attention, and is pivotal in obtaining a more holistic view of Britain under Roman rule (e.g. Millett 2001, 2005; Mattingly 2004; 2006; Taylor 2007; McCarthy 2013; Breeze 2014; Fulford and Holbrook 2014, also see ‘The Rural Settlement in Roman Britain’ project at the University of Reading available online via the Archaeology Data Service <http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/romangl/> and its associated publications by Smith et al. 2016; 2018 and Allen et al. 2017). The lifeways of the Romano-British population are yet to be fully explored, especially the life histories of those living in the countryside, and belonging to social strata other than the elite. New insights into what it was like to live in Roman Britain have raised opposing views on the urban-rural dichotomy, and it is of interest to explore these further (Mattingly 2006). Contrary to the long-held belief in the detrimental effects of the urban environment on its inhabitants, bioarchaeological research by Pitts and Griffin (2012) on health in urban and rural settlements throughout Roman Britain, and Redfern et al. (2015) in Dorset, has demonstrated that living in the countryside also negatively affected its residents. It is therefore necessary to evaluate the extent to which the late Romano-British *villa* economy affected the peasantry, and whether the urban environment was in fact as taxing on health as previously believed.

Palaeopathological studies of the adults who lived and died in Roman Britain have provided a direct insight into health, diet and the lifeways of the Romano-British population, albeit with a bias towards those recovered from urban cemeteries (Roberts and Cox 2003). Most importantly, what is still lacking is a comprehensive picture of what it was like to grow up in Roman Britain (Gowland 2014). Child health is a very powerful indicator of overall population health and dynamics, as children are dependent on others. A range of cultural, social, environmental and political factors can negatively impact and disrupt children’s growth and development. Hence, children and their skeletons will reflect adverse environmental conditions more readily than their parents (Mensforth et al. 1978; Lewis 2007; Mays et al. 2017; Hodson 2019; 2021).

Awareness of children as independent social agents in the past, and recognition of their material culture and the spaces they inhabited is now enabling us to ‘see’ children more clearly in the archaeological record (Scott 1992; Baker 1997; Gowland 2001; Baxter 2005, 2006a; Kamp 2006; Kraus 2006). However, children’s spaces and their material culture aside, the only unambiguous record of a child in the past is the skeleton. Roman archaeology is no different from other branches of the discipline in its research concerns, and Romano-British childhood has only evolved as a dedicated subject in Roman scholarship over the past two decades.

There is a wealth of information on childhood in Rome itself, by means of consulting the Classical literature, and epigraphic or iconographic references (e.g. Rawson 1966, 1986, 1991, 2003a,b; McWilliam 2001; Harlow and Laurence 2002; Revell 2005; Harlow et al. 2007; Laes 2004, 2007; Crummy 2010; Mander 2013). This approach is weakened by the somewhat anecdotal undertones particularly in the written sources (Pearce 2001a; Laes 2007, 25). The vast majority of these texts stem from elite men of the Republican or early Imperial period, often retired and pursuing a philosophical recital of matters relevant to their own sphere of being (Ireland 1986, 3-4). By supporting the study of childhood solely via Classical sources, research is purely based on individual accounts of a privileged minority. This may represent the truth for only a fraction of society or simply be a philosophical metaphor of idealised daily conduct (Garnsey and Saller 1987, 108-115; Garnsey 1991). It is therefore very difficult to pinpoint the everyday realities for a child in Rome, let alone at the northwestern fringes of the Empire several centuries later. An additional caveat is that the majority of the population, i.e. the working class, the rural workers, the disenfranchised and unfree, and the urban and rural poor found themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy and hence received very little to no mention within these texts (Bradley 1984, 77-79; Garnsey and Saller 1987, 114-120; Mouritsen 2011, 129).

Particularly in Roman Britain, inscriptions and imagery of children are scarce and cannot fully communicate life histories of children from all orders of society in both town and country (Burn 1970; McWilliam 2001; Tomlin 2003; Revell 2005; Laes 2007). Yet, we have to be aware of the life course of children from Rome itself, as certain aspects such as the uptake of weaning and other child care practices may be detectable in the palaeopathology of Romano-British children (Gowland 2014).

Important insights into child health in Roman Britain have been provided by a number of palaeopathological studies

by Redfern (2007), Lewis (2010, 2011, 2012) and Redfern et al. (2012). These studies have highlighted a decline in child health from the Iron Age through to the Roman period in Dorset. It is of note that the Poundbury Camp cemetery is unusual in Roman Dorset and wider Roman Britain, with significantly elevated pathology rates and a demographic profile characterised by higher non-adult mortality and fewer older adults (Hamlin 2007; Redfern et al. 2015). Lewis (2010) likened some of the disease patterns observed in the Poundbury Camp cemetery to those seen in post-medieval children. The compromised health observed in these children has been interpreted as an indicator for the uptake of certain aspects of Roman weaning and early childhood feeding practices. This observation has also been confirmed isotopically in the children from the Queensford Farm/Mill cemetery at Roman Dorchester-on-Thames (Fuller et al. 2006a; Nehlich et al. 2011), children from Roman Dorset (Redfern et al. 2012), and from Roman London (Powell et al. 2014). However, these studies have a regional and urban focus, and fail to provide a holistic picture of life in Roman Britain or to enable a comparison between urban and rural health to be made. The lifestyles and everyday realities of children (defined as non-adults aged 0-17 years) throughout *Britannia* need to be explored by evaluating patterns of ill-health in both urban and rural settlements spread across England.

The structure of this volume takes the reader from an introduction to the archaeology of childhood, to a review of childhood health in Roman Britain before presenting the design and results of this project. Chapter 2 gives a vital background into the development of non-adult bioarchaeology before introducing the various applications of the discipline. The theory and practice of working with non-adult skeletal remains originally emerged due to the inception of childhood theory in social archaeology. Progressively, more attention shifted to children in the burial record, which in turn increasingly promoted the value of skeletal analysis of not just adults in the past, but also individuals we might label as children. Childhood health in Roman Britain is discussed in chapter 3. Key themes are past insights from bioarchaeological studies that pre-date the completion of this project in 2015, and the childhood experience according to Classical sources from Rome. Materials and methods are presented in chapter 4. The results of this study are presented in a somewhat unusual way. While chapter 5 contains the results of the statistical analysis, these are not discussed until chapter 7. Chapter 6 is a brief exploration of a synthesis of the palaeopathological data with the burial archaeology of the study sample. The discussion in chapter 7 is tying the findings together, delving into a wide range of bio-cultural themes and demonstrating the value of non-adult palaeopathology to our understanding of the past. The volume is concluded by final thoughts and closing remarks on the main findings in chapter 8.

Readers who would like to obtain any of the raw data used in this book are encouraged to get in touch with myself and I would be happy to share materials.