

## Lady from Lant Street

This burial was discovered in 2003 during the excavation of a Roman cemetery in Southwark, and dates to the late Roman period – the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.

The grave contained the skeleton of a woman who had been buried in a wooden coffin – we know this because the iron nails which were used to make the coffin survived in the ground. By the left-side of her body, her mourners had placed a coin. The bottom of the coffin had been covered with a thin layer of chalk or lime. This practice has been recorded in other burials from this cemetery, as well as from elsewhere in London and Britain, but it is unusual. Although scientific analysis didn't find evidence in this burial, when this substance has been studied, traces of perfumed resins have been identified, suggesting that the person's body had been embalmed, which may well have been the case with this woman. Outside of the coffin but within the grave, were placed 4 pottery vessels, two either side of her head which had a black-slip decoration not previously recorded before, and a bowl had been placed in the each corner at the foot of the grave.

The woman's skeleton's is very complete and well preserved, which allowed us to do a wide-range of scientific analyses. By looking at the surface of the joint in her pelvis where the sacrum articulates, I could establish that she was between 36-45 years old, but there is no evidence for how she died. Using a forensic technique, we also looked at the morphology or shape of her head and face, and this showed that she had African ancestry. Unlike, some people with African ancestry in London and Britain, analysis of the chemicals in her teeth showed that she had spent her early childhood in the southern Mediterranean. By measuring her one of her leg bones, it was possible to calculate that she was approximately 154cm or 5 foot tall, which is slightly shorter than the average Roman woman in Britain. When I studied her skeleton, I could also see that she had several diseases commonly seen in Roman populations: osteoarthritic changes to her spine, new bone formation on her legs and also to the inner surface of her ribs – this is an indicator of pollution, as people burnt oil for lighting, heated rooms using braziers, and also cooked on hearths indoors. Like many women and urban dwellers in Roman

Britain, she had evidence for dental decay and plaque – dental diseases increase in the Roman period which we believe reflects changes in food and cooking practices after the Roman conquest.

Her skeleton also had evidence for things which are not often seen in Roman London. Firstly, several bones of the spine and the base of her skull were asymmetrical, and two of her toe-bones formed as one bone. These changes happen during development, so when she was in the womb, but are unlikely to have been noticeable or affected her everyday life. The second is the healed fracture to her left elbow joint – which you can see as a line going across the joint. This affected the head of the ulna, the bit that hinges from the upper arm bone or humerus, has been broken-off. This usually happens when a person falls onto their elbow. Today, this fracture would require surgery. In the Roman period, they were good at setting bones and there is no reason to suggest that she did not receive treatment. The bones which articulate with the ulna – the humerus and radius have evidence for osteoarthritic changes, showing that she recovered from this injury and continued to use the joint. But because it had changed shape, it meant that it didn't work normally, so caused her to develop osteoarthritis.