

The Woman with the Ivory Bangles:  
Elite Burials and Ethnic Diversity in Northern England at the End of the Roman Occupation

Chad M. White

12 December 2021

## SOROR AVE VIVAS IN DEO

"Hail sister, may you live in God"

The discovery of a 2,000-year-old grave of a young Roman woman in York, England in 1901 went largely unremarked for over a century.<sup>1</sup> Uncovered during the expansion of a residential roadway, her remains were cataloged and stored away. However, it wasn't until 2010 that her burial was examined by archeologists. What was revealed were brief but interesting fragments of what might have been an interesting and well-traveled life for one so young.<sup>2</sup> The discoveries were widely publicized when it was determined that through scientific analysis she was originally of North African descent.<sup>3</sup> Her grave was well furnished with valuable objects, and her remains showed no signs of malnutrition or trauma, her cause of death undeterminable.<sup>4</sup> This woman of color, as we might categorize her today, wasn't a slave, but a wealthy and elite citizen, a high-class woman in the diverse Roman Empire, and possibly far from home. But her death came close to the period when Rome withdrew its governance and its protection from the British Islands. Neither her grave and nor her grave goods provide a name for this woman, and we know her today only as the "Ivory Bangle Lady." For the modern historian the Ivory Bangle Lady is further proof of the multicultural community living in Northern England and the mobility of people and material wealth in the Roman Period. The questions that remain are who was this

---

<sup>1</sup> "Roman York: Burials," in *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in City of York, Volume 1, Eboracum, Roman York*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1962), 67-110. *British History Online*, accessed December 12, 2021, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/rchme/york/vol1/>. 67-110.

<sup>2</sup> S. Leach et al., "A Lady of York: Migration, Ethnicity and Identity in Roman Britain," *Antiquity* 84, no. 323 (January 2010): pp. 131-145, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003598x00099816>.

<sup>3</sup> Hella Eckardt, "Ivory Bangle Lady," *Our Migration Story* (Runny Meade Trust), accessed December 12, 2021, <https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/roman-britain-the-ivory-bangle-lady>.

<sup>4</sup> Leach et al., "A Lady of York," 135.

young woman who lived in one the northernmost regions of the Roman Empire, and what must her life had been like in Roman York, a place more military garrison than it was city? What was her place in that society? Lastly, how can her remains and the artefacts found with her burial be interpreted?

This paper examines the remains of the woman and some of the grave goods that were interred with her and will use that evidence to reinforce the existence of multicultural Roman elites at the top tier of Romano-British society in York between 350 and 410 CE. This paper will look at the manner of her burial and how her grave goods might be used to interpret her religious beliefs and those of her community. Finally, this paper will touch briefly on the concept of race in both the Roman world and the modern reception of her possible North African descent.

York was founded in what is today northern England, at the conflux of two rivers, the Ouse and the Foss by Roman legionaries of the Ninth Legion in the first century CE. York was an important city on the frontier of the Empire in its time. It was easily accessible via the Humber estuary and up the River Ouse for hundreds of miles, York has served as a gateway and an inland port for generations by many people, first the Romans, and later the English, Danes, and Normans into the Modern Era. It was in York that three Roman emperors made their home for a time. Two of them would die here and one would be raised up by his father's troops, whereupon he would unite the fractured empire one final time and establish a new imperial capital thousands of kilometers away. Thus, York was an important military and urban center for Rome in Northern England.

Most of what we know about Roman York comes down to us through archeological sources. Over the last few hundred years the layers of York's history have been slowly uncovered, by the curious, the antiquarians, and (finally) the professional archeologists in the

modern era. The medieval city walls, some of the last remaining in all of England, lie atop the original Roman walls that defended the military fortress just to the northeast and northwest of the current St Peter's Cathedral, also known as the York Minster. Little of Roman York remains above ground. On average the Roman remains are five meters below the modern street level.

The pursuit of York's Roman past has been a colorful one. In 1587 William Camden, a royal historian and geographer for the Tudors, published *Britannia* as part of a survey of England's historical sites, in which he took note of several Roman-era artifacts in York.<sup>5</sup> Following in his footsteps have been Martin Lister who wrote *Eboracum* in 1736, William Hargrove with his *History of York* in 1818, the Reverend Charles Wellbeloved with his *Eburacum* in 1842<sup>6</sup>. It would not be until the 1920s that Stuart Miller of Glasgow University would conduct the first systematic excavations of Roman York. After World War II a series of rescue archeology excavations did (and continue to) take place. The York Minster was damaged from bombing during the war and the emphasis was to secure the cathedral before the eighteen-story tall tower collapsed.<sup>7</sup> During the rescue work, scholars recognized the importance of the Roman remains of the legionary fortress and barracks that lay beneath the church foundations and, thankfully, preserved them.

The city saw tremendous growth in the industrial era and as it grew rapidly, much of the medieval, Viking, and Roman remains were destroyed. The Reverend James Raine, curator of antiquities of the Yorkshire Museum in 1873, recounted the large Roman cemetery that was plowed under during the building of the present-day rail station, causing massive damage to any remains.<sup>8</sup> In the decades since archeology became a dedicated and formalized science, most of

---

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Ottaway, *Roman York* (Stroud, UK: Tempus, 2004), 15.

<sup>6</sup> Ottaway, *Roman York*, 15-17.

<sup>7</sup> Ottaway, *Roman York*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Ottaway, *Roman York*, 17.

the archeological work in the city has been on a small scale, as sites become available due to the demolition of obsolete buildings and the construction of new ones. This rescue archeology is often limited in scope and time because even if what is discovered is deemed valuable, the city is a living one, and often the archeologists are given less time than they would like to perform their work. York Archeological Trust, an evolution of the earlier York Philosophical Society, has become internationally recognized by archeological and academic institutions for its excellence in the development of techniques for the treatment of waterlogged wood from archeological sites, a prominent feature of archeology in York. The University of York developed the Environmental Archeology Unit to study organic matter from the archeological record such as the plant remains, animal bones, and micro-organisms such as those found in coprolites and other items from cesspits.<sup>9</sup> Today, real estate developers are required by law to make an archeological evaluation of the proposed site on which they wish to build. They must impose minimal damage during construction.<sup>10</sup> This has proved to be a double-edged sword because, for the most part, new construction is built upon thin pylons driven into the earth to avoid undertaking any large-scale excavations. If there are items beneath the soil, they remain there mostly unknown.

In this long and changeable history of archeological work in York, it will be well to keep in mind that the Ivory Bangle Lady was excavated from her grave in the very early days of scientific archeology and prior to many of the formal processes used today. Our young Roman woman has been designated with the somewhat unwieldy but descriptive moniker of *Ivory Bangle Lady*. This is due to several her bracelets being carved of elephant ivory, an exotic material for Roman Britain. The IBL (as she will be referred to for the remainder of this paper for the sake of brevity) is currently on display in the Yorkshire Museum on the grounds of the

---

<sup>9</sup> Ottaway, *Roman York*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Ottaway, *Roman York*, 20-22.

former Saint Mary's Abbey just outside of the city walls. This location is only a few hundred meters from the location in which she was originally discovered in Sycamore Terrace. Roman cemeteries tended to be located outside of the walls of their cities and lining to the roadways entering or leaving the area. The IBL was buried alongside the main road that a Romano Brit would take en route to or from Londinium, the southern provincial capital.

The IBL was discovered still inside her stone sarcophagus, surrounded by her burial goods. The lid of her stone coffin was already broken into three pieces it was uncovered by workmen extending the roadway. Inside was the skeleton of a woman approximately 154 - 163 centimeters tall and lying prone on her back. Interred with her inside the coffin was a dark blue glass flagon with applied threads on the neck, an openwork inscription in animal bone that read *SOROR AVE VIVAS IN DEO*, two jet bangles made from local gemstone, a bracelet of faceted blue glass beads, the fragments of five intricately worked elephant ivory bracelets, one silver and one bronze locket, two earrings made of yellow glass, two marbled glass beads, and a small round glass mirror. The position of the items as they were interred with her was unfortunately never recorded. Her body was oriented with her head towards the north in an almost north-south configuration, and her skeleton was in a good state of preservation. The objects have been reliably dated to the second half of the fourth century.<sup>11</sup>

## **The Grave Goods**

### ***Jet***

In contrast to many other burials uncovered from the same period, the IBL's grave was lavishly furnished, marking her as a wealthy woman of high social status.<sup>12</sup> Scholars have

---

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Woods, "Celebrating Ivory Bangle Lady," York Museums Trust, September 14, 2021, <https://www.yorkmuseumstrust.org.uk/blog/celebrating-ivory-bangle-lady/>.

<sup>12</sup> Woods, "Celebrating Ivory Bangle Lady"

confirmed that her jet bracelets, black in color with a high gloss, were produced locally out of materials sourced from Whitby in Yorkshire. There is no evidence of jet actually being worked in Whitby, but instead it appears the material, which was gathered by beachcombing rather than quarrying in the period, was transferred south to Eboracum, where evidence exists that the gemstone was worked to produce rings, bracelets, beads, necklaces, pendants, and hairpins.<sup>13</sup> Jet is a mineraloid derived from wood that has been transformed by enormous pressure over centuries.<sup>14</sup> It is easily worked, but can prove delicate, subject to breaking. Jet may also produce an electrostatic charge under friction, such as rubbing<sup>15</sup>. In the third century jet jewelry was briefly popular amongst the Romano Brits, as well as with Romans on the continent.<sup>16</sup> It is also thought that jet jewelry found from the Roman era in the Rhineland, was likely imported from York due to stylistic similarities and the lack of evidence of jet production locally.<sup>17</sup> The Romans may have believed that jet had magical properties, likely due to its ability to produce electric charges. It was used as protection against the evil eye, to drive off snakes, or even to ensure conception.<sup>18</sup> Jet was associated with the cult of Bacchus and with Christianity as well.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Ivory***

Her elephant ivory bangles, intricately carved, are now broken. Ivory was far rarer and more exotic item than her locally made jet bracelets. Mostly broken now, the creamy white bangles were incised with delicate designs. Produced from elephant ivory likely from North

---

<sup>13</sup> Lindsay Allason-Jones, *Roman Jet in the Yorkshire Museum* (York, UK: The Yorkshire Museum, 1996), 8-11.

<sup>14</sup> Helen Muller, *Jet* (London: Butterworths, 1987), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Muller, *Jet*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Ottaway, *Roman York*, 107.

<sup>17</sup> Helen Muller and Katy Muller, *Whitby Jet* (Oxford, UK: Shire, 2009), 8-9.

<sup>18</sup> Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History of Pliny*, trans. John Bostock and Henry T. Riley (London, UK: Bohn, 1855), Chapter 36.

<sup>19</sup> Lindsay Allason-Jones, *Roman Jet in the Yorkshire Museum*, 8-11.

Africa, these items would be much harder to procure in the northern markets in Britain. We can only speculate where and how she acquired them, through trade, travel, or inheritance perhaps.

The combination of her seven bracelets of contrasting black jet and white ivory must have made an impressive display of wealth on the young woman in life. If worn all together, they would have been a conspicuous display of both her wealth and possibly her ability to travel freely about the world. One aspect of appearance that is rarely discussed is the sound a person made as he or she moved about. A woman whose wrists are adorned with multiple stone and ivory bracelets might make a distinctive jingling sound. This would serve to announce her entrance as she entered a space. The sound of her material goods would also draw attention to her wealth and the precious jewelry she possessed. Similarly, the elaborate metallic belts worn by military men and administrators who adopt the military fashions included dangling parts and strap ends that would crash against each other with movement. In a sense the volume in the sound a person made with their clothing and accessories may have served as an announcement of their presence, whether intentional or not.<sup>20</sup>

***Blue Glass jug and necklace, and yellow glass earrings.***

The blue jug in her grave was another prized imported item, this time from the Roman provinces in Germany.<sup>21</sup> At 123 mm (4.8 inches) tall it could have been a container for wine, discarded during a funeral feast at the graveside, or used for cosmetic oil, or perfume of some kind.<sup>22</sup> The fragile and delicate glass bottle from the Rhineland indicates either an international goods market existing in York or the economic means to procure more exotic items.

---

<sup>20</sup> Lindsay Allason-Jones, *Daily Life in Roman Britain* (Oxford, UK: Greenwood World, 2008), 142.

<sup>21</sup> Woods, "Celebrating Ivory Bangle Lady."

<sup>22</sup> "Roman York: Burials," in *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in City of York, Roman York*, 67-110.

The string of blue glass beads (some smooth and some faceted) have previously been suspected to be a beaded bracelet but are now believed to have been worn as a choker-style necklace. A pair of earrings made of yellow glasswork were also found with the remains. The contrasting blue and yellow jewelry would have been a distinctive and striking display.

### ***Mirror***

A palm-sized convex piece of glass in the form of a disc is all that is left of what might have been a small hand mirror.<sup>23</sup> The glass could have had a wooden case or frame as other similar mirrors in Rome have been discovered to have that has not survived the centuries. Mirrors such as this would have been polished to a high sheen and the reflective ability would have been achieved by applying a thin coat of material such as lead on the concave side of the glass.<sup>24</sup> Roman women would have used mirrors like this for applying cosmetics and adjusting their personal appearance. Perhaps this item was left in the woman's grave because it was a treasured possession. It may indicate that she took great care with her appearance when we look at it alongside her striking and carefully chosen personal adornments, or that she was considered beautiful.

### ***Plaque***

The openwork inscription on the bone plaque may have once been attached to either a small box, possibly a jewelry box, or even a wooden coffin inside the stone sarcophagus, neither of which has survived the record.<sup>25</sup> There was no note of iron nails found in the grave, usually a sure sign of a coffin or any wood construction. But what is most important is the message the

---

<sup>23</sup> "Roman York: Burials," in *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in City of York, Roman York*, 67-110.

<sup>24</sup> Cecilia Rossi et al., "A Lead-Framed Glass Mirror from a Roman Woman's Grave in Padua/Patavium (North-Eastern Italy) – Investigating Its Function and Production with a Multidisciplinary Approach," *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 38 (2019): 94-105, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.culher.2018.11.012>.

<sup>25</sup> Woods, "Celebrating Ivory Bangle Lady."

plaque carries. It signifies one thing for certain and another as a possible explanation. We know that Christianity had spread to Britannia. The Latin inscription *SOROR AVE VIVAS IN DEO*, translated to "Hail sister, may you live in God" has been interpreted that either the IBL herself was Christian or that those that buried her might have been members of a Christian community in York.

### **Evidence of Faith**

Constantine I issued the Edict of Toleration at Milan in 313 CE to allow open and unmolested practice of Christianity in his empire.<sup>26</sup> In the following year three bishops from Britain attended the Council of Arles.<sup>27</sup> This was the first representative meeting of Christian bishops in the Western Roman Empire.<sup>28</sup> Convened by Constantine in southern Gaul, the three men were called Eborius, bishop of York, Restitutus, bishop of London, and Adelphius of Lincoln.<sup>29</sup> The name 'Eborius,' clearly deriving from Ebroacum, could indicate that the bishop who hailed from York was either a local man or that the name was simply fabricated for him by the copyist creating the attendance roles. With the bishops, two other Romano-British men attended the Council, a *presbyter* (priest) named Sacerdus and a deacon called Arminius.<sup>30</sup> To attend this council in far-away Gaul, these men must have been important senior members of the British church. Each of them hailed from large urban centers in Britain. This lends to the belief of the existence of an interconnected Christian community in Britain in this period.

It has been considered that the alignment of the IBL's grave in a north-south rather than east-west strongly suggests that the Ivory Bangle Lady was pagan in her beliefs rather than

---

<sup>26</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 137.

<sup>27</sup> D. M. Palliser, *Medieval York* (Oxford, UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), 13.

<sup>28</sup> de la Bédoyère, *Real Lives of Roman Britain*, 161.

<sup>29</sup> de la Bédoyère, *Real Lives of Roman Britain*, 161.

<sup>30</sup> de la Bédoyère, *Real Lives of Roman Britain*, 161.

Christian.<sup>31</sup> This was based largely on the pervading belief (until quite recently) that Christian burials are always east-west facing, rather than north-south, and that grave goods interred with a body were anathema to the Church. While most of the goods seen with the IBL are of personal adornment, objects like the blue glass jug stand out as unusual in a Christian burial.

Bonnie Effros has suggested that the prohibition against burial goods in Christian funerary rites has less to do with forbidding pagan practices and belief in a pagan afterlife, and more to do with the preservation of the body for the coming Christian resurrection and Judgement Day. Writing on the Christian burials during the Merovingian era (476-750 CE) in post-Roman Gaul, she says, “Christian burial inscriptions of the Merovingian period focused less often on punishment of grave violations than on the anticipated resurrection of the faithful at the grave site.”<sup>32</sup> The interment of inherently valuable items with the deceased could serve as an invitation to grave robbers after the wealth. In turn, the body could then be disturbed or otherwise made unacceptable for Judgment Day. While the IBL’s inhumation likely occurs at the very least a century before the Merovingian period, early Christian doctrine and practices were still being codified during her lifetime. If the IBL was Christian, or in any way associated with the nascent Christian community in Eboracum, her grave might be considered a transitional one that represents both early Christian and older pagan practices.

## **Race and Ethnicity**

---

<sup>31</sup> Mawer, C. F. *Evidence for Christianity in Roman Britain: The Small Finds*. BAR British Series 243. Tempus Reparatum. p. 86.

<sup>32</sup> Bonnie Effros, *Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology and the Making of the Early Middle Ages* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 71.

The University of Reading's Department of Archaeology analyzed her facial features, the chemical signature of the food and drink she consumed, and the evidence from the burial site.

The research concluded that this high-status woman was partially of North African descent.

“The skull exhibited a low, wide and broad nasal ridge and wide inter-orbital breadth suggestive of ‘black’ ancestry, while the nasal spine and nasal border demonstrated ‘white’ characteristics. The shape of the nasal aperture was inconclusive. Although some post-mortem damage had occurred, the cranium was complete enough to perform a craniometric analysis, which quantifies the characteristics on an objective scale in an attempt to further define the ancestral identity of an individual.”<sup>33</sup>

This determination was made using an interactive discriminant functions program known as FORDISC and is used widely by forensic anthropologists in the construction of biological profiles of human remains in cases where partial remains of a cranium are available for study.<sup>34</sup>

The program compares measurements and other readings to other profiles in a worldwide database of human skeletal remains. The program can provide data on sex, ancestry, and even the height of a decedent human.<sup>35</sup> The program is considered accurate enough to be admissible in forensic investigations by the FBI and other law enforcement agencies.<sup>36</sup> Controversy occurs however when using the program on archeological remains. The software suffers from limitations due to the database which remains are measured against are classifications based on 20<sup>th</sup> century human measurements. The inclusion of data gathered by Dr. W. W. Howell, the late president of the American Anthropological Association and professor at Harvard University, which include 2500 crania from 28 different worldwide populations going as far back as the late

---

<sup>33</sup> Leach et al., “A Lady of York,” 135.

<sup>34</sup> Dennis C. Dirkmaat and Luis L. Cabo, “Forensic Anthropology: Embracing the New Paradigm,” *A Companion to Forensic Anthropology*, 2012, 1-40, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118255377.ch1>.

<sup>35</sup> Dirkmaat and Cabo, “Forensic Anthropology,” 1-40.

<sup>36</sup> Douglas H. Ubelaker, Ann H. Ross, and Sally M. Graver, “Application of Forensic Discriminant Functions to a Spanish Cranial Sample,” *Forensic Science Communications* 4, no. 3 (July 2002).

Holocene Period, has allowed some researchers to attempt to classify archaeological remains.<sup>37</sup> But, when FORDISC encounters remains that do not match the parameters for known groups, it will classify the individual into the closest group that is included in its database.<sup>38</sup> In 2009 Marina Elliot and Mark Collard, writing for The Royal Society cautioned the use of FORDISC by bioarcheologists and forensic anthropologists saying that even given favorable circumstances in regard to the remains, FORDISC can only be “expected to classify no more than one percent of specimens with confidence.”<sup>39</sup>

Further analyses of the human remains determined that the Ivory Bangle Lady did not grow up in Northern Britain, but instead came from somewhere warmer, and near the sea coast. Strontium, an alkaline earth metal that occurs naturally, is absorbed into the human bone structure through consumption of drinking water.<sup>40</sup> It does not pose a significant threat to the health of the individual, but it reacts differently in its absorption depending on the age of the individual.<sup>41</sup> In children strontium can replace calcium in bones, whereas in adults strontium is more likely to attach to the surface of bones only<sup>42</sup>. By measuring the level and ratios of strontium isotopes in her skeletal remains and comparing those to the ground water throughout the Roman Empire it has been speculated that the IBL could have grown up from anywhere from Southern Britain or a coastal region on the European continent.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> William White Howells, *Who's Who in Skulls: Ethnic Identification of Crania from Measurements* (Cambridge Mass., MA: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology Harvard University, 1995), 108.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Ousley and Richard Jantz, “FORDISC Help File, Version 1.35.,” FORDISC (Mercyhurst Archaeological Institute.), accessed December 12, 2021, [http://math.mercyhurst.edu/~sousley/Fordisc/Help/Fordisc3\\_Help.pdf](http://math.mercyhurst.edu/~sousley/Fordisc/Help/Fordisc3_Help.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> Marina Elliott and Mark Collard, “FORDISC and the Determination of Ancestry from Cranial Measurements,” *Biology Letters* 5, no. 6 (August 2009): pp. 849-852, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2009.0462>, 849.

<sup>40</sup> Karl K. Turekian and Karl Hans Wedepohl, “Distribution of the Elements in Some Major Units of the Earth's Crust,” *Geological Society of America Bulletin* 72, no. 2 (1961): pp. 175-192, [https://doi.org/10.1130/0016-7606\(1961\)72\[175:doteis\]2.0.co;2](https://doi.org/10.1130/0016-7606(1961)72[175:doteis]2.0.co;2).

<sup>41</sup> John Emsley, *Nature's Building Blocks: An A-Z Guide to the Elements* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 507.

<sup>42</sup> “Public Health Statements,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, February 10, 2021), <https://wwwn.cdc.gov/TSP/PHS/PHSLanding.aspx?id=654&tid=120>.

<sup>43</sup> Leach et al., “A Lady of York,” 140.

The revelation of the Ivory Bangle Lady was, in modern terms, a Person of Color, or someone of mixed ‘white’ and ‘black’ ancestry (as such things are understood today) caused quite a bit of consternation in the news. Some people rejoiced at exploring the diversity of the Roman Empire in Britain while other rejected the notion that someone could have traveled that far to live in York. This is directly contradicted by the fact that Constantine the Great who had spent many years in York would later in his life travel the width and breadth of the Empire and establish his capital in Byzantium, some 2,646 miles (as the crow flies). Why then would it be unreasonable for our Ivory Bangle Lady to travel a similar distance? Her evident wealth based upon her grave goods indicate a woman of means. In the past (as now), money provides mobility—both figurative and literal. A wealthy person could undertake a journey with a great deal of confidence that a poor person could not and likely would not attempt without assistance.

Using ORBIS, a mapping program developed by Stanford University that calculates distance and travel times between Roman locations in the ancient world, a journey from Carthage in Northern Africa to York on the fastest route would take a traveler a minimum of 34 days at a distance of 3,403 kilometers.<sup>44</sup> A similar trip between Constantinople and York (5, 938 km) would take 53 days. This is calculated under the assumption of good weather and without stopping except to sleep and traveling by foot. A wealthy young woman traveling by horse, carriage, or ship, would travel much faster.<sup>45</sup>

It has been widely accepted that while the Romans may have been at times xenophobic, they were not racist (as we use that term in the modern era). That is to say, that the Romans didn’t systematically discriminate based on skin color. Scholarship has even been put forth that

---

<sup>44</sup> <https://orbis.stanford.edu/>

<sup>45</sup> Helpfully ORBIS calculates the cost between Eboracum to Constantinopolis in this manner to be at 2,830.08 denari per passenger.

Septimus Severus (r. 193-211) might have been a black-skinned African who became Roman Emperor in the second century.<sup>46</sup> While he was certainly born in Northern Africa to a prominent local family in the Roman city of Leptis Magna (present day Al-Khums, Libya), classifying him as ‘black’ is problematic at best. Anthropologists today agree that modern racial classifications lack scientific backing and are social constructs. There is also the pervading and false idea that dark-skinned people never inhabited northern Africa, remaining south of the Sahara desert, effectively categorizing North Africa as ‘white’ and sub-Saharan Africa as ‘black’ in a false binary.<sup>47</sup> Septimius’ mother was part of the gens Fulvia, a prominent and ancient Italian Roman family that had originated in the Tusculum region very close to Rome itself.<sup>48</sup> His father was likely descended from a mix of the Phoenicians that settled in Libya in the centuries before and the local Amazigh populations.<sup>49</sup> Roman Era North Africa was known to include freely mixed populations with ancestry in Phoenician, Berber, general Mediterranean populations and “are therefore more likely to display mixed rather than strongly Sub-Saharan features.”<sup>50</sup> In the many available portraits of Septimus, including the Severan Tondo held in the Altes Museum in Berlin, Germany, which is a color painting on a panel, Septimus lack the features that modern people would consider to be associated with sub-Saharan Africans.<sup>51</sup> His skin-tone is depicted as a deeper shade than those of his wife and children in the same portrait, but if that is an indicator of skin color, condition, or an artistic choice we do not know. Even if scholars cannot agree on the ‘race’ of Septimius Severus, we do know that people of various skin colors lived throughout the Roman Empire, at all tiers of society.

---

<sup>46</sup> Molefi Kete Asante and Shaza Ismail, “Rediscovering the ‘Lost’ Roman Caesar,” *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 4 (2008): pp. 606-618, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934708314380>.

<sup>47</sup> Asante and Ismail, “Rediscovering the ‘Lost’ Roman Caesar,” 615.

<sup>48</sup> Anthony Birley, *Septimius Severus: The African Emperor* (London, UK: Routledge, 2015), 1.

<sup>49</sup> Asante and Ismail, “Rediscovering the ‘Lost’ Roman Caesar,” 615.

<sup>50</sup> Leach et al., “A Lady of York,” 137.

<sup>51</sup> Severan Tondo, Altes Museum, Berlin, Germany (Egypt, n.d.).

Dark-skinned African soldiers appear in a tale connected to Septimius while he was living in Eboracum. In *Historia Augusta*, in the section “The Life of Septimius Severus” a tale is recounted where Septimius, having returned from inspecting a rampart, was approached by a soldier carrying a garland of cypress. The soldier is described as “an Ethiopian from a military unit, who was famous among buffoons and always a notable joker.”<sup>52</sup> Septimius, a superstitious man took the man’s dark skin as an omen of ill luck and ordered he be removed from his sight. While the *Historia Augusta* is not best regarded today as reliable in regard to factual events, we can take from this tale that encountering a black legionnaire in Northern Britain was certainly a possibility, if not a common occurrence.

There certainly were Romans who lived in the Empire that we would today classify as dark-skinned Africans. In Athens the philosopher Herodes Attikos (b. 101 – d. 177 CE) raised an adopted son named Memnon.<sup>53</sup> A realistic marble bust of Memnon was discovered in the remains of Herodes villa in central Peloponnesus in Greece that clearly show features of a man that we today would classify as dark-skinned African. Memnon came from the Ethiopian region and Roman artisans were more than capable of creating realistic likeness of all people.

Evidence of other far-traveled Romans residing in Britain also exists. Commanding officers of military outposts and garrisons were often chosen from an “empire-wide aristocracy of service.”<sup>54</sup> Recorded in the *Notitia Dignitatum*, a document from the end of the Roman occupation in Britain detailing the administrative organization of both the Eastern and Western Roman Empires, the Roman fort located 130 km north of York in present day South Shields was

---

<sup>52</sup> *Historia Augusta*, The Life of Septimius Severus, 22.4. “*Aethiops quidam e numero militari, clarae inter scurras famae et celebratorum semper iocorum...*”

<sup>53</sup> Hans Rupprecht Goette, “9. The Portraits of Herodes Atticus and His Circle,” in *Handbook of Greek Sculpture*, ed. Olga Palagia, vol. 1 (Berlin, GER: De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 225-258.

<sup>54</sup> Robin Fleming, *The Material Fall of Roman Britain, 300-525 CE* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 28.

garrisoned with men from the Tigris River Valley in present-day Iraq.<sup>55</sup> The fort even bore the name “Arbeia,” or Fort of the Arabs.<sup>56</sup> The same fort housed a squadron of Spanish cavalry, called the First Asturian.<sup>57</sup> This is attested by a gravestone dedicated to ‘Victor the Moor,’ who was once a slave, and having been freed, died at the age of twenty and was buried by the man who provided him manumission, Numerianus, a trooper in the First Cavalry Wing of Asturians.<sup>58</sup> Although born a slave, Victor’s ornate tombstone, which depicts him lounging on a dining sofa, is of high quality and may speak to his relationship to the man who freed him. Guy de la Bédoyère suggest that Victor and Numerianus may have been involved in an intimate homosexual relationship.<sup>59</sup>

While the evidence is clear the Roman Britain was home to a diverse multicultural population during the occupation, how those people considered their how ethnicity is not as clear. Guy Halsall discusses the concept of ethnicity as a matter of belief. “People who crossed the North Sea to Roman Britain in the third century and served in the Roman army adopted Roman culture and ethnicity. Any of their fifth-century relatives who did the same proclaimed their non-Roman identity and may even have made different choices of which ethnicities based around their place of origin (Frisian, Angle, Saxon, Jute) they did stress.<sup>60</sup> If the IBL displayed physical characteristic associated with ‘blackness’ we cannot assume either that the more ‘white’ Romans exhibited prejudice toward her or not based upon the evidence. Shelley Haley states “It is too simplistic to assume that the Romans had no skin color prejudice” in the first chapter of

---

<sup>55</sup> “Notitia Dignitatum,” Internet history sourcebooks project, accessed December 13, 2021, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/notitiadignitatum.asp>.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Hallowell, *The House That Jack Built: The True Story behind the Marsden Grotto Inn & the Search for Roman Treasure* (Stroud, UK: Amberley, 2008), Chapter 5.

<sup>57</sup> de la Bédoyère, *Real Lives of Roman Britain*, 131.

<sup>58</sup> de la Bédoyère, *Real Lives of Roman Britain*, 131.

<sup>59</sup> de la Bédoyère, *Real Lives of Roman Britain*, 131-132.

<sup>60</sup> Guy Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376-568* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 38.

“Be Not Afraid of the Dark: Critical Race Theory and Classical Studies” in *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings*.<sup>61</sup> “The Romans were more keenly aware of different cultural practices—especially those of African societies—than we have previously recognized.”<sup>62</sup> Roman society during the time of the IBL was complex, multilayered, and multicultural.

## Conclusion

The advancement of scientific technology as an aid in how we understand our past marches on. Since the team at the University of Reading first published their findings on the IBL in 2010, strontium isotope research has advanced under new computational models and methodological considerations.<sup>63</sup> These analyses can provide better genetic data and pertinent information in archeological samples, such as sex, diet, and health. Integrated approaches with strontium isotope studies, DNA, archeology, and history provide the best opportunities to examine the movements of people and individuals in the historic landscape. The original article that identified the IBL as of mixed race and North African heritage acknowledged that the reference collection used to conduct the analysis of the skull was comprised of only early modern populations.<sup>64</sup> The reactionary, largely anti-immigration and racist factions of the public responding to the ‘non-whiteness’ of the Ivory Bangle Lady only serves to highlight the value in better understanding such studies, as well as help to dispel myths of racial sameness or cultural homogeneity in past European populations.

It is also important to consider that the dead do not bury themselves. Lacking any epigraphic evidence save for the Christian-style plaque, the identity of the IBL and insights to

---

<sup>61</sup> Shelley P. Haley, “Be Not Afraid of the Dark: Critical Race Theory and Classical Studies.” *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings* (Fortress Press, 2009), 49.

<sup>62</sup> Haley, “Be Not Afraid of the Dark,” 49.

<sup>63</sup> Kate Britton et al., “Silver Linings at the Dawn of a ‘Golden Age,’” *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution* 9 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fevo.2021.748938>.

<sup>64</sup> Leach et al., “A Lady of York,” 135-136.

her lifestyle can only be hypothesized based on the evidence we have. In her studies of graves in Gaul, Bonnie Effros concludes that those members of the family or community who leave grave goods with the deceased often do so in an attempt to commemorate the dead, either publicly or privately, by the means they had access to, and that it might not necessarily reflect the economic status of the person in life.<sup>65</sup> A funeral can be just as much a conspicuous display of wealth as any other, more so in that often precious commodities are being buried, discarded below the ground where they will not be seen again. The analysis of the IBL's physical health, the lack of evidence of poor nutrition and/or trauma, combined with the expensive grave goods and stone sarcophagus lend weight to the argument that she was of high status in her community.

By the fourth century, many of the soldiers garrisoned in the north of Britain were likely made of up of a mixture of both immigrant Romans and locally recruited Britain, with the likelihood that the latter was by far the larger of the number.<sup>66</sup> While still referred to officially by unit designators such as the Fourth Cohort of Gauls or First Cohort of Batavians, many of these troops had either grown up in the military communities on the frontier, like York, Vindolanda, and Carrawburgh, and been Romanized Britains or even the children and descendants of the immigrant Roman legionnaires. Buildings in frontier towns often saw repurposing, an indicator perhaps of garrisons and peoples becoming more self-sufficient and not having to supply, or be supplied by, the empire. At Birdoswald the granaries were transformed into a number of times into buildings for habitation, or to public buildings that have been interpreted as feasting halls.<sup>67</sup> This occurred into the fifth century and possibly beyond. Grave goods have been discovered in sites such as the one in Corbridge near the Wall that indicated the Anglo-Saxons had settled in

---

<sup>65</sup> Effros, *Merovingian Mortuary*, 94.

<sup>66</sup> Rob Collins and Barbara Birley, *Living on the Edge of Empire: The Objects and People of Hadrian's Wall* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword Archaeology, 2020), 141.

<sup>67</sup> Collins and Birley, *Living on the Edge of Empire.*, 142.

this area as soon as the early Fifth and Sixth Centuries. Here glass beads in an Anglo-Saxon style were discovered. Outside of the Roman fort at Benwell, a cruciform brooch may indicate that an Anglo-Saxon settlement had taken possession of the Roman Fort.<sup>68</sup>

Cities such as York were often attractive places for soldiers to settle if they survived long enough to retire after their mandatory twenty-five years of service to the Empire. Many of these men now in their early forties would now be permitted to marry. While certainly many men would have fathered children or had illegitimate families during their service, for the retired warrior, a young wife who could bare him children were preferred. One tombstone in York records the death of a woman and her two young children, neither yet two years old.<sup>69</sup> They were the family of Gaius Aereius Saenus, an old soldier who had settled down in the *vic* outside of the York stronghold. Was our Ivory Bangle Lady the young wife of an older well-to-do retired legionnaire, or perhaps the daughter of one?

A further examination of graves contemporary with the IBL would perhaps answer remaining questions about her life and the lives of those Romano-Brits who lived in York during the last days of the Empire. As we can see how richly her grave was furnished, does that indicate a general status of prosperity for the city? If she was an immigrant to York, was she one of the last to do so before Rome withdrew its administration over the province, or did such movement between the Empire and the island continue in any significant fashion?

Gildas, writing his *De Excidio* in the fifth century, describes Britain as being at the end of the world. “The island of Britain is situated in almost the furthest limit of the world, towards the north-west and west, poised in the so-called divine balance which holds the whole earth”<sup>70</sup> He

---

<sup>68</sup> Collins and Birley, *Living on the Edge of Empire.*, 145.

<sup>69</sup> Lindsay Allason-Jones, *Daily Life in Roman Britain* (Oxford, UK: Greenwood World, 2008), 46.

<sup>70</sup> Gildas, *De Excidio Britanniae: Or, the Ruin of Britain*, trans. Hugh Williams (Burnham-on-Sea, Somerset, UK: Llanerch Press, 2006), 5.

also speaks about the many great cities, strongholds, and beautiful architecture that still existed in his time.<sup>71</sup> By fully examining the grave of the Ivory Bangle Lady, a young Roman woman, we can see that the province where she spent her final years was a cosmopolitan place, an important city in the Roman territory, and an important center for trade. Many of the leadership positions appear to be filled by Roman administrators and military members from all over the Empire. With them, these men they could have brought their households, wives, children, slaves, etc. Is it possible that the Ivory Bangle Lady was a wife or daughter of such a senior official of the Roman administration of Eboracum and Britannia Secunda? The claims of her North African heritage might be tenuous at times but are far from impossible and more than probable given the evidence of cultural variety in both her own grave and in northern Britain as a whole.

---

<sup>71</sup> Gildas, *De Excidio*, 5.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

BOYNTON, T. 1902. Archaeology: report of the Council of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society, February 10th, 1902. Yorkshire Philosophical Society Annual Reports 1894-1903 Volume 9.

Stone sarcophagus with lid broken into three pieces

Human skeleton, female, 154 - 163 centimeters tall

Bracelets, jet, count of two

Bracelets, ivory, fragments, count of five

Glass jug, blue in color, 123 mm tall

Blue beads

Silver Locket

Gold Locket

Glass earrings, yellow in color, count of two

Epigraphic plaque, bone

Marbled glass beads, count of two

Round convex glass mirror

Collins, Rob, and Barbara Birley. *Living on the Edge of Empire: The Objects and People of Hadrian's Wall*. Barnsley, South Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword Archaeology, 2020.

Pliny the Elder. *The Natural History of Pliny*. Translated by John Bostock and Henry T. Riley. London, UK: Bohn, 1855.

Tranquillus, C. Suetonius. "Divus Vespasianus." Translated by Alexander Thomson. C. Suetonius Tranquillus, Divus Vespasianus, chapter 4. Accessed November 23, 2021. <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi1348.abo020.perseus-eng1:4>.

"Damnatio Memoriae: the Severan Tondo." Roman style portrait of Septimius Severus and his family, n.d.. Altes Museum Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Egypt.

"The Life of Septimius Severus." *Historia Augusta*, Loeb Classical Library, 1921. Accessed December 13, 2021. [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia\\_Augusta/Septimius\\_Severus\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia_Augusta/Septimius_Severus*.html).

"Notitia Dignitatum." Internet history sourcebooks project. Accessed December 13, 2021. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/notitiadignitatum.asp>.

## Secondary Sources

Allason-Jones, Lindsay. *Daily Life in Roman Britain*. Oxford, UK: Greenwood World, 2008.

Allason-Jones, Lindsay. *Roman Jet in the Yorkshire Museum*. York, UK: The Yorkshire Museum, 1996.

Allen, Joel. *Imperial Identities in the Roman World*. 1st ed. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2016.

Asante, Molefi Kete, and Shaza Ismail. "Rediscovering the 'Lost' Roman Caesar." *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 4 (2008): 606–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934708314380>.

Birley, Anthony. *Septimius Severus: The African Emperor*. London, UK: Routledge, 2015.

Collins, Rob, and Barbara Birley. *Living on the Edge of Empire: The Objects and People of Hadrian's Wall*. Barnsley, South Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword Archaeology, 2020.

Dark, K. R. *Civitas to Kingdom: British Political Continuity 300 - 800*. London, UK: Leicester Univ. Press, 1999.

de la Bédoyère, Guy. *Real Lives of Roman Britain*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016.

Dirkmaat, Dennis C., and Luis L. Cabo. "Forensic Anthropology: Embracing the New Paradigm." *A Companion to Forensic Anthropology*, 2012, 1–40. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118255377.ch1>.

Eckardt, Hella. "Ivory Bangle Lady." Our Migration Story. Runny Meade Trust. Accessed December 12, 2021. <https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/roman-britain-the-ivory-bangle-lady>.

Effros, Bonnie. *Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology and the Making of the Early Middle Ages*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003.

Elliott, Marina, and Mark Collard. "FORDISC and the Determination of Ancestry from Cranial Measurements." *Biology Letters* 5, no. 6 (2009): 849–52. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2009.0462>.

Emsley, John. *Nature's Building Blocks: An A-Z Guide to the Elements*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011.

- Fleming, Robin. *The Material Fall of Roman Britain, 300-525 CE*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021.
- Frend, W. H. C. *The Early Church*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991.
- Goette, Hans Rupprecht. "9. The Portraits of Herodes Atticus and His Circle." Essay. In *Handbook of Greek Sculpture 1*, edited by Olga Palagia, 1:225–58. Berlin, GER: De Gruyter, 2019.
- Haley, Shelley P., "Be Not Afraid of the Dark: Critical Race Theory and Classical Studies." *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings*. Fortress Press, 2009.
- Hallowell, Michael. *The House That Jack Built: The True Story behind the Marsden Grotto Inn & the Search for Roman Treasure*. Stroud, UK: Amberley, 2008.
- Halsall, Guy. *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376-568*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Howells, William White. *Who's Who in Skulls: Ethnic Identification of Crania from Measurements*. Cambridge Mass., MA: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology Harvard University, 1995.
- Leach, S., H. Eckardt, C. Chenery, G. Müldner, and M. Lewis. "A Lady of York: Migration, Ethnicity and Identity in Roman Britain." *Antiquity* 84, no. 323 (2010): 131–45. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003598x00099816>.
- Muller, Helen, and Katy Muller. *Whitby Jet*. Oxford, UK: Shire, 2009.
- Muller, Helen. *Jet*. London: Butterworths, 1987.
- Ottaway, Patrick. *Roman York*. Stroud, UK: Tempus, 2004.
- Ousley, Stephen, and Richard Jantz. "FORDISC Help File, Version 1.35." FORDISC. Mercyhurst Archaeological Institute. Accessed December 12, 2021. [http://math.mercyhurst.edu/~sousley/Fordisc/Help/Fordisc3\\_Help.pdf](http://math.mercyhurst.edu/~sousley/Fordisc/Help/Fordisc3_Help.pdf).
- Palliser, D. M. *Medieval York*. Oxford, UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014.
- "Public Health Statements." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, February 10, 2021. <https://wwwn.cdc.gov/TSP/PHS/PHSLanding.aspx?id=654&tid=120>.
- Rossi, Cecilia, Elena Pettenò, Sara Emanuele, Emanuela Faresin, Giuseppe Salemi, Mosè Mariotti, and Gianmario Molin. "A Lead-Framed Glass Mirror from a Roman Woman's Grave in Padua/Patavium (North-Eastern Italy) – Investigating Its Function and Production

with a Multidisciplinary Approach.” *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 38 (2019): 94–105.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.culher.2018.11.012>.

Spall, Cecily A, and Nicola J Toop. “Before Eoforwic: New Light on York in the 6th–7th Centuries.” *Medieval Archaeology* 52, no. 1 (2008): 1–25.  
<https://doi.org/10.1179/174581708x335422>.

Turekian, Karl K. and Karl Hans Wedepohl. “Distribution of the Elements in Some Major Units of the Earth's Crust.” *Geological Society of America Bulletin* 72, no. 2 (1961): 175–92.  
[https://doi.org/10.1130/0016-7606\(1961\)72\[175:doteis\]2.0.co;2](https://doi.org/10.1130/0016-7606(1961)72[175:doteis]2.0.co;2).

Woods, Andrew. “Celebrating Ivory Bangle Lady .” York Museums Trust, September 14, 2021.  
<https://www.yorkmuseumstrust.org.uk/blog/celebrating-ivory-bangle-lady/>.