

***Large Stone Sarcophagus and Gypsum,  
to take away, please!***

**Excavations at York Coroner's Office, 1997**

In 1997 York Archaeological Trust was called by the York Coroner's Officer to inspect a stone sarcophagus discovered whilst machine excavating at the Fulford A19/A64 interchange road improvement scheme. The find spot lay just to the west of the A19 and south of the A64 in what was formerly agricultural land north-east of Naburn Hospital. A roughly carved Roman stone coffin was revealed which contained a fragmentary and fragile burial, partly surrounded by gypsum.

Prior to its discovery, little was known archaeologically from the site. Only a small quantity of Roman pottery was found close to the A19 whilst fieldwalking, during the construction of the A64 in 1973-4. Eboracum (York) is the nearest Roman settlement c. 4.5 km NNW, however excavations at Lingcroft Farm 0.75 km SSE of the find spot, and more recently to the north-east at Germany Beck, Fulford, have revealed evidence for a villa landscape dateable from the 1st-4th century AD. To date the villa(s) have remained elusive.

On arrival at the site, decisions were taken purely from a rescue operational basis and it was clear that the burial and coffin should be excavated and removed as quickly as possible due to its close proximity to the slip road for the A64. Clearly the remains had been heavily disturbed, the sarcophagus only being recognised at a late stage when it had been machined out of its original position and inverted on the spoil heap.

Upon excavation the sarcophagus was found to be made of two large pieces of quarried gritstone, both appearing to have been roughly cut with tool marks still visible on the surface. The base, housing the burial was hollowed out to form a rectangular shape with rounded corners and the chamber thus formed was sealed by a ridged lid. The complete coffin would have stood to a height of 0.74 m, and was 2.15 m long, 0.62 m wide at the bottom and 0.75 m wide at the top. Internally the burial chamber was found to be 1.85 m long, 0.38 m wide and 0.38 m high.

The skeletal remains held within the coffin were very fragile, and of a fragmentary nature. Only the upper torso of the skeleton survived in a semi-articulated state, consisting of the left arm, part of the rib cage, the upper spine and skull. The body's left side appeared to be encased by white gypsum, which followed the contours of the body, probably being poured into the coffin after interment. This was examined for evidence of fabric or skin impressions, but unfortunately none were found.

Assigning a precise date to the burial was difficult as no stratified finds were recovered from the excavation but certain other characteristics of the burial seemed dateable. Large stone coffins, although they are known throughout the Roman period in Britain, become more common in the 4th-century, and the inhumation rite associated with this particular burial was introduced to Britain from the mid 2nd-century. The burial of a body encased in gypsum (Calcium Sulphate), known as plaster burial, however, is distinctly diagnostic of the late Roman period. Over 50 have been recorded in the York area, 17 of which are of certain 4th-century date. Gypsum or plaster is highly water retentive and would have functioned as both a liquid absorber during decomposition of the body, and a preventative ensuring that no water enters the coffin from outside. The use of plaster within burials is therefore normally interpreted as an attempt to preserve the body. Plaster burial appears to have been a largely urban phenomenon at towns such as Dorchester, London, and Colchester, but Yorkshire appears to have been an exception where the rite spread into the hinterland. The earliest securely dated examples of the rite are from the early 3rd-century.

The rite originated in North Africa before the Christian era but by the 3rd and 4th-centuries AD it was common here in Christian cemeteries. It has been suggested that it was introduced to Britain in the late 2nd or more likely the 3rd century, either by immigrants from North Africa or from Italy or the Rhineland, (some of whom may have been Christian), where the rite was adopted from traditional African practices. York's selection as the centre of imperial government in the early 3rd century by Septimus Severus, the African emperor, may have stimulated, if not actually initiated the rite's popularity, some of the officials and entourage sent at this time perhaps being familiar with the practice. The rite seems to have then become increasingly fashionable and

popular with the wealthy and higher echelons of Romano-British society in the early 4th century. In York the rite may have been imitated from Roman officials leading to its adoption by powerful local families and eventually gaining a broader popular appeal amongst a wider social spectrum of the population.

The stone coffins presence gives us an idea of the social status of this particular individual. Characteristically they are identified with the wealthy, being associated with walled urban towns or high-status rural villas. It is likely that the individual found was of some social standing within the community, having considerable wealth to spend on their funeral arrangements. The rural context does not necessarily suggest that the person was a local land owner, they may have been a York resident who wished for his/her tomb to be seen as travellers approached York. A Roman road from York to the Fulford area is as yet unknown, possibly it lay closer to the river, or may even have been on the line of the modern A19. This was a characteristic of other areas of York, such as cemeteries on the Mount and at Dringhouses, where the largest and wealthiest burials clustered in the most prominent positions close to the road.

The Fulford burial can therefore be placed within a chronological framework from the early 3rd- to 4th centuries AD from the burial rites associated with the inhumation. The individual was probably wealthy and possibly of high status within the community either resident in York, or a land owner who resided nearby. Located close to the A19, the burial raises a plethora of questions about Roman transportation routes, land ownership, and burial practices in late Roman York and Yorkshire, especially within the context of intense Romano-British land use and occupation in the heart of a villa landscape. The find is extremely important and will further our understanding of Roman occupation in the area.

*Neil Macnab.*