

Conquest By Cattle?

Just before Christmas, Rob, the Palace Curator, was talking to colleagues from Portsmouth University about a potential project that would investigate how the Romans at the Palace managed their cattle.

The importance of cattle to the Romans cannot be understated – the word “Italy” does, after all, derive from the Greek for “Land of cattle”. It is notable that, after AD43 the average size of cattle in Britain increased, and so did their relative numbers and age at death. The cultural impact of the Roman invasion extended beyond changes in government and economy – some have even described it as “conquest by cattle”. Clearly cows were important to the Roman invaders and perhaps they represented more than just food, but instead the embodiment of their culture in some way (maybe like the bulldog is to the British?).

Rob, with the help of Portsmouth DNA labs, was interested to find out whether cows after the invasion were genetically different to the “native” iron age population of cows. Or can the size change we have observed be due to new breed being imported, or did the newly arrived Romans selectively breed larger animals from the existing local population? Of course, any project like this would have to involve our tame DNA specialists, Naomi Sykes (Exeter University) and Greger Larson (Oxford University), who together led on last year’s discovery of our Roman rabbit.

So, a meeting between Exeter, Oxford and Portsmouth universities was arranged here at the Palace. Never being accused of missing an opportunity, we took advantage of the meeting to share results of other projects, and to train a selection of Exeter students in collections management and sampling. Before we knew it, representatives from the South Downs National Park was invited, to discuss future collaboration, and the Cambridge Latin Course visited to see how this new research could inform their future publications. In all there were around 20 specialists in the Collections Discovery Centre, over two days! It was more a “festival of research” than a meeting! It was a hugely successful event, with many contacts and friendships being made, as well as plans for future projects. None of this would have been possible without the enthusiasm of all involved, but also the flexibility of Palace staff who tolerated this minor invasion, not least Stewart our custodian, who coped admirably with having 10 comparative strangers camping in the Collections Discovery Centre for the night!

Rob Symmons

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