

Reconstructing population size in a Romano-British *colonia*: the case of *Eboracum*

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The field of demography addresses the composition of human populations, their size, structure and development.¹ The sources with which to conduct demographic analysis in archaeology can incorporate proxy data from areas of settlements, historical or ethnographic sources such as census data or parish burial registers, radiocarbon date densities, or human skeletal remains.² The present study aims to use data from human skeletal remains to address questions relating to the size of the population of Roman York.

Several attempts have been made to estimate the size of *Eboracum*'s population. R. Warwick's estimations, based on skeletal evidence from Trentholme Drive, placed the average population at 2,000-3,000 individuals.³ This estimation is based on hypothetical population size estimates with average life span set at 40 years and on the assumption that the total cemetery area round York was approximately 10 times the (then) total excavated area at Trentholme Drive, and that this total cemetery area contained no more than 10,000-15,000 individuals.⁴ In 1984, R. F. J. Jones estimated that the initial military population responsible for the establishment of the fortress must have numbered somewhere between 5,000 and 6,000 men, with an average overall fortress population of 4,000 to 6,000 individuals over the three centuries that it was occupied.⁵ Jones' estimate amended Warwick's figures to take into account more recent excavation data, as well as the assumption that the Trentholme Drive excavation represented a much smaller proportion of the city's total area used for burial, to put the total expected number of dead at 30,000-45,000.⁶ In 1989, P. V. Addyman agreed with Jones' estimate of an initial population of c.5,600 military personnel.⁷ Although Addyman did not state where this figure is taken from, it is likely to be based on a statement surviving in a fragment of Suetonius⁸ where he refers to there being 5,600 men in a legion in residence, at least for the 1st c. A.D. and presumably prior to the forming of *Eboracum*'s civilian settlement.⁹ Recently, P. Ottaway has suggested that it would be unlikely, based on the size of the settlement and its probable density, that the civilian settlement comprised more than 3,000 individuals, with the result that the total (military + civilian) population would be in the range of 7,000-10,000.¹⁰

Estimates for other Romano-British urban settlements are equally imprecise. In 1974, J. S. Wacher estimated the population of Leicester (*Ratae Coritanorum*) at 3,000-4,000,¹¹ but

1 R. S. Bagnall and B. W. Frier, *The demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge 1994) 31.

2 Ibid.; F. A. Hassan, "Demographic archaeology," in M. B. Schiffer (ed.), *Advances in archaeological method and theory*, vol. 1 (London 1978) 51.

3 L. P. Wenham, *The Romano-British cemetery at Trentholme Drive, York* (London 1968) 148.

4 Ibid.

5 R. F. J. Jones, "The cemeteries of Roman York," in P. V. Addyman and V. E. Black (edd.), *Archaeological papers from York presented to M. W. Barley* (York 1984) 41.

6 Ibid.

7 P. V. Addyman, "The archaeology of public health at York, England," *World Arch.* 21 (1989) 246.

8 A. Reifferscheid and F. Ritschel, *C. Svetoni Tranquilli praeter Caesarum libros reliquiae* (Lipsiae 1860) 278.

9 Ibid.

10 P. Ottaway, *Roman York* (London 2004) 128.

11 J. S. Wacher, *The towns of Roman Britain* (London 1974) 48.