

Unearthing the mystery of the Trimontium dog skulls

Trimontium International volunteer Thania M. Flores discusses the 'mystery of the Trimontium dogs'...

When James Curle excavated Trimontium Roman fort at Newstead between 1905-1910, the skulls of several dogs were found among many other artefacts.

Why were these pups put in the pits? What were they doing at Trimontium? What was a day in the life of a Trimontium dog like?

We know that the Romans held dogs in high esteem and dogs from Roman Britain were particularly valued. Bone remains, depictions on tombstones, art and ceramics are a testament to their presence across the territory. Particularly charming are the numerous paw prints found on Roman tiles pertaining to both cats and dogs. Acting like a 'time machine' of sorts, they can carry our imagination through the ages.

What kind of dogs were those at Trimontium? Curle described them as "large jawed hounds as well as small terriers". Indeed, the skulls found in seven out of the more than 117 pits at the site pertained to dogs of various breeds. Luckily for us, most of them are very well preserved and, sadly perhaps, they all seem to have belonged to young animals, one of them being under 12 months old.

R.G Linton, from the Royal Veterinary College in Edinburgh, wrote a comprehensive description of the skulls. According to him: "Five skulls bear a resemblance of a cross between a greyhound and a bullterrier, young animals with large but worn-down teeth. A group of two skulls belonged to dogs similar to the modern spaniel, Scott, Irish and Fox terriers. Two oth-

ers seem to have belonged to dogs akin to the retriever. With considerably muscular jaws, another two resemble the modern bull terrier. The last one, a broken skull, reveals a particularly small breed. With a sharp and narrow face, it appears close to the fox terrier and to the English black and tan terrier."

Now that we know, roughly, how they looked, we may ask what was their function in the fort? Were these dogs beloved pets, brave companions in war, guardians of the camps, cattle keepers or skilled hunters? Who did they belong to? In all likelihood they may have served all these purposes and may have belonged to the auxiliaries occupying the fort in the 2nd century.

The ever-practical Romans held dogs for a variety of purposes in diverse aspects of their lives. They wrote treatises concerning breeding, training and general care. A good dog was a beloved companion and trusted guardian, hunter and fighter, tracker and warrior.

Dogs featured prominently in Roman religion and beliefs as well. They were linked to healing, the underworld and several deities were depicted with dogs. They were offered in sacrifice to the gods and they feature as beloved companions in several tombstones.

The swift and strong dogs from the British Isles, particularly hunting dogs, were a main export from Roman Britain. Described by classical writers Strabo and Tacitus as notably clever, Strabo adds that they Celts used these 'clever hunting-dogs' as war dogs.

They were considered superior to other militarised dogs in the Empire. Popular breeds included the Irish wolfhound, a precursor of the English Mastiff, and the Agassian.

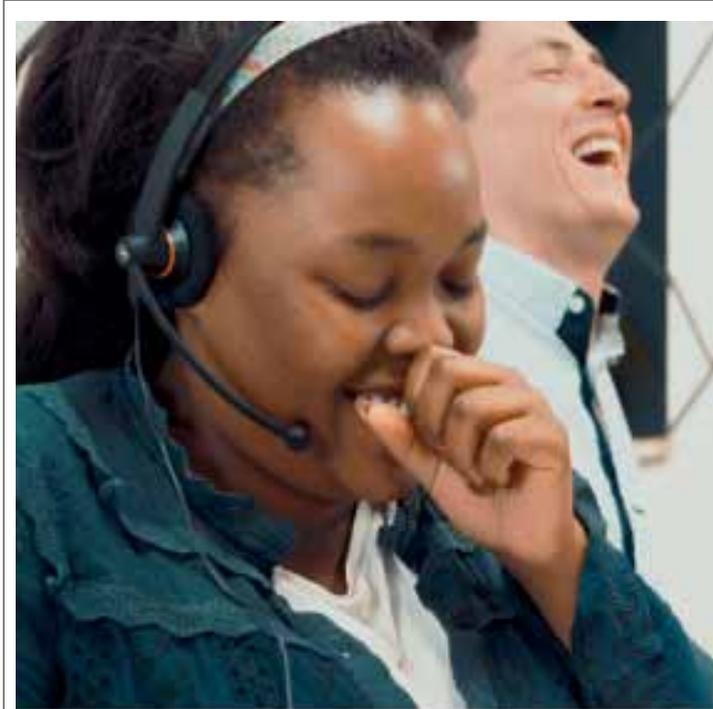
Why were these dogs put in the pits at Trimontium remains a mystery. We can imagine them



Trimontium dog skulls, currently being prepared for display in Melrose

patrolling the fort, being petted and receiving treats from the soldiers or, a more sombre thought, being offered in sacrifice in search for the favor of a particular deity. In any case, due to the Romans' fondness for dogs as loyal servants and trusted companions, we can, almost, be certain that they were cared for in their short doggy lives.

To find out more pay a visit the new Trimontium Museum in Melrose later this summer and say hello to these canines who, like the dogs of mythology guarding the doors of the underworld, may still guard the many secrets that Trimontium has yet to unveil. More information available at www.trimontium.co.uk



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Pavilion Cinema is 'pleasantly surprised' by number of visits

BORDERS cinema-goers have been thanked for supporting the Pavilion since it reopened (John Hislop writes).

The Galashiels venue was allowed to start screening films again on Monday, May 17, following the easing of coronavirus restrictions.

And management have been "pleasantly surprised" at the numbers passing through the doors.

Director Neil Poole told us: "It was a big relief to reopen on May 17 and we've been fairly busy since then. We were all pleasantly surprised at the customer numbers which were higher than when we initially reopened in August last year."

"Peter Rabbit 2: The Runaway



Pavilion Cinema in Galashiels

has already attracted sell-out audiences, but unfortunately due to social distancing we were only allowed 110 people into the hall rather than the maximum 300 that would normally get in. It was mainly families for that film but many of our older cus-

tomers have returned to see the Oscar winner 'Nomadland'.

"Although the Scottish Borders [went] into Level 1 from Saturday morning, the two meter rule will remain in force preventing an increase in capacity at the cinema.

"If it had reduced to one-meter then we could have 150-160 customers inside.

"The good news is that the film companies are now much more confident about releasing new films than they were previously.

"The staff and management of the Pavilion are all very appreciative of the support from our customers and we hope that continues over the coming months."