

Incredible rare Roman statues found in HS2 dig

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Archaeologists in Buckinghamshire working on the HS2 project have uncovered a set of incredible rare Roman statues whilst excavating a Norman Church in Stoke Mandeville.

In the final stages of the excavation at the site of the old St Mary's Norman church in Stoke Mandeville, archaeologists were excavating a circular ditch around what was thought to be the foundations of an Anglo-Saxon tower.

As they dug down, they uncovered three stone busts which are stylistically Roman. Two of the busts comprise of a head and torso which had been split before deposition, and the other just the head. The two complete statues appear to be one female adult and one male adult, with an additional head of a child.

The discovery of these amazing artefacts caused excitement amongst the team working on the site who described it as "uniquely remarkable for us as archaeologists". The work has been carried out by HS2's Enabling Works Contractor, Fusion JV, and their archaeological contactor, L-P Archaeology.

In addition to the statues, an incredibly well-preserved hexagonal glass Roman jug was also discovered.

Despite being in the ground for what is thought to be over 1,000 years, the glass jug had large pieces still intact. Archaeologists working at the site were able to remove what they believe to be almost all of the fragments. The team can only find one comparison for this, a completely intact vessel which is currently on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Other finds include large roof tiles, painted wall plaster, and Roman cremation urns.

Dr Rachel Wood, Lead Archaeologist for Fusion JV, said: "For us to end the dig with these utterly astounding finds is beyond exciting. The statues are exceptionally well preserved, and you really get an impression of the people they depict – literally looking into the faces of the past is a unique experience. Of course, it leads us to wonder what else might be buried beneath England's medieval village churches. This has truly been a once in a lifetime site and we are all looking forward to hearing what more the specialists can tell us about these incredible statues and the history of the site before the construction of the Norman church."

As the dig at Stoke Mandeville comes to an end, the team working there have been able to piece together a more detailed analysis of the historic use of the site. The site appears to be a natural mound, which has then been deliberately covered with soil to create a taller mound. It is possible this may have formed a Bronze Age burial site. It appears this was then replaced by a square building which may have originated in the Roman period.

Archaeologists now believe the square building that pre-dates the Norman church is a Roman mausoleum. Roman materials found in the ditch around are too ornate and not enough in number to suggest the site was a domestic building.

The Roman building appears to have been finally demolished by the Normans when building St Mary's church, after possible reuse during the Saxon period. The walls and demolition rubble of the Roman building are directly beneath the Norman foundations with no soil build up in between. Saxon pottery was also found in a cut of the ditch, as well as a Saxon coin. Further analysis of the data is being undertaken and the team hope to confirm this hypothesis.

Mike Court, Lead Archaeologist at HS2 said: "HS2's unprecedented archaeology programme has given us new insights into Britain's history, providing evidence of where and how our ancestors lived. These extraordinary Roman statues are just some of the incredible artefacts uncovered between London and the West Midlands. As HS2 builds for Britain's future, we are uncovering and learning about the past, leaving a legacy of knowledge and discovery."

The disfiguration of the Roman busts, namely the removal of the head of each, is not entirely unusual as it is common for statues such as these to have been vandalised in some way before being torn down. These are early examples of how statues and historic artefacts have been discarded as society has evolved over time.

The artefacts will now be taken to a specialist laboratory where they will be cleaned and examined. Roman statues were typically painted bright colours, so evidence of pigmentation in the creases of the statue will be examined. The final destination for the Roman finds will be determined in due course.

Photo credit: HS2 Ltd