

Archaeologists discover remains of tiny Roman 'lap dog' in Oxfordshire

An archaeological dig in Oxfordshire, UK, has uncovered the 1,800 year-old remains of a tiny Roman dog.

At just 20 cm (7.8 inches) tall at the shoulder, researchers say that the ancient pooch is one of the five smallest Roman dogs ever discovered in the UK, and that its unusually small size means it is likely to have been a much-loved pet.

The little dog, which is thought to have been female with bowed legs, would probably have had a similar stature to a dachshund, but been closer in size to a chihuahua.

The animal's remains were unearthed during an archaeological dig at the headquarters of environmental charity Earth Trust in Oxfordshire by a team of archaeologists from DigVentures, and later identified by zooarchaeologists examining the bones in the lab.

The excavation took place downslope from one of South Oxfordshire's most iconic landmarks - Wittenham Clumps. Affectionately known locally as 'The Clumps', the site is owned and managed by Earth Trust, and features the ancient hillfort Castle Hill, which is registered as a scheduled ancient monument overlooking the River Thames, approximately 15 miles from Oxford and 50 miles from London. Much-loved by modern day dog owners and walkers near and far, it is the most highly visited free to access greenspace in the region.

During the excavations, archaeologists discovered a large Roman villa, as well as the earlier remains of an earlier Iron Age settlement.

The animal's remains were found within one of the 42 Roman burials associated with the villa, but it's unclear whether the dog was buried with its owner or buried separately, say the researchers.

In total, the remains of at least 15 small-medium sized dogs (including the tiny lapdog) were recovered from the Roman villa, which was occupied for around 150 years between the 3rd and 4th centuries AD.

Among many other discoveries at the villa, archaeologists found domestic items such as cooking utensils including a ladle, colander or strainer, cleaver, and storage jars, as well as personal items like brooches, bracelet, a ring, leather-working tools, hair combs, medical spatula, and even the hobnails from a pair of Roman shoes.

"This site provides a snapshot of domestic life in Roman Britain; it's like peering into someone's home. The villa would have been occupied by a relatively wealthy Roman family, who ran a farm with an assortment of working animals, including hunting or herding dogs – as well as this tiny canine" said Maiya Pina-Dacier from DigVentures.

Archaeologists found that the villa's residents were also keeping chickens, geese, pigs, cattle, sheep or goats, and horses, donkeys or mules for food and farming. But not all animals were kept for practical purposes; several ravens and crows were also discovered

which may have been used in ritual or ceremonial activities rather than for food. In the Iron Age part of the site, the team also discovered the remains of a decapitated dog, similar to a greyhound, buried in a pit along with a cow skull.

While most of us probably think of small dogs as a modern trend associated with a certain kind of luxury lifestyle, discoveries like this make it clear that the companionship of small dogs has been enjoyed in Britain for at least 1,800 years.

The presence of small dogs in Britain first appears with the arrival of the Romans. Until then, archaeologists typically only find medium-large sized dogs, which are generally thought to have been kept by Iron Age for practical purposes like hunting, herding, killed for fur, or sometimes sacrificed. But once the Romans arrive, smaller dogs become increasingly popular.

Once the Romans arrive, archaeologists begin to see at least two types of small dog in Britain, including miniature or toy dogs, which are the same shape as larger dogs but smaller; and dwarf dogs, arising when a puppy is born with chondrodysplasia, which results in short and bowed legs, and are then bred to produce bowed-legged dwarf breeds, like the modern dachshund.

“While it’s possible that this dog was used for hunting, we know that Romans in other parts of the empire had begun to breed and keep small dogs as pets. In the UK, most of the small dogs we find measure between 22 – 37 cm in shoulder height, making this individual particularly small” said Hannah Russ and Sarah Everett, the zooarchaeologists who analysed the animal remains.

“The fact that this dog was so small and had bowed legs suggests that she probably wasn’t bred for hunting. This, along with the fact that she might have even been buried with her owner, makes it far more likely that she was kept as a house dog, lap dog, or pet” they said.

The remains, along with other artefacts from the dig, will be displayed for the very first time in a pop-up exhibition at Earth Trust this August, as part of Clumps Go Ancient – a family-friendly festival that will bring the discoveries to life.

“Earth Trust’s vision is a society where people and nature thrive in balance. In order to achieve that balance, there is so much we can learn from the historic people of the Clumps. We’re delighted that DigVentures’ discoveries uncover the truth about just how special Wittenham Clumps has been to people for thousands of years.

“This summer we’ll be hosting **Clumps Go Ancient**: a family-friendly archaeology festival that will include a pop-up exhibition featuring never-before-seen artefacts from the dig, and use hands-on activities and demonstrations to bring these discoveries about the people of Wittenham Clumps, and their animals, to life.

Humans (past, present and future) are an integral part of the story of nature and green spaces, and these fascinating finds remind us of this relationship. From the Iron Age communities who created the hillfort that is now Castle Hill and the Roman families who

later lived downslope; to the farmers and tenants who manage the land today – this area has been shaped by human use and intervention throughout the ages.” said Anna Wilson, Head of Experience and Engagement

Clumps Go Ancient festival will take place at Earth Trust 5 – 6 August 2023. For one weekend only, this family-friendly festival will bring the archaeological discoveries to life, with a pop-up exhibition displaying key artefacts from the dig, as well as demonstrations from living history, hands-on activities, and more. Tickets are available at earthtrust.org or search online for 'Clumps Go Ancient'.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

Images:

Please credit to DigVentures / Earth Trust unless stated otherwise in the image title.

Images can be downloaded here:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/0uocrm5kw4fh2y84zpz9s/h?rlkey=9rf2tbg8hiyrm0b49wrfk8c8j&dl=0>

Further information

- The excavations were carried out between 2018 and 2020, and covered an area of more than 10,000 m² and recovered more than 15,000 artefacts
- The Roman villa was a winged corridor villa, of which only 33m has been excavated so far
- Analysis and research into the discoveries is ongoing, but some of the key finds will be displayed at Clumps Go Ancient festival in August
- Earth Trust and Dig Ventures will host another event in October 2023 detailing the excavations more fully. More details to follow.
- While the hillfort itself has previously been excavated as part of a Time Team episode, this is the first largescale investigation of the area downslope from the hillfort where it's thought that the people who built, used, and lived around the hillfort would have had their homes
- Roman Britain was known across the empire for its hunting dogs, which were often exported, and were cross-bred by Emperor Vitellius who wanted to create the perfect hound. By contrast, much less is known about the use and breeding of small dogs in Roman Britain.

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About Earth Trust

Earth Trust's purpose is to inspire people to address climate, biodiversity and wellbeing with the power of natural green spaces. Our vision is a society where accessible green spaces enable nature and people to thrive in balance. Earth Trust has been working towards this for 40 years, but it has never been more critical than now. Our mission is to champion access and engagement with green spaces for everyone so that together we take action for people and planet.

Together with our supporters, Earth Trust is guardian of some extremely special and inspiring places full of nature and heritage. We care for 500 hectares of woodland, farmland, wildflower meadows and wetlands – including the iconic Wittenham Clumps, and community reserves in Dicot, Abingdon and Wallingford which receive 200,000 visits a year.

We use these amazing places to engage and inspire people and to demonstrate nature-based solutions to climate, biodiversity and public health crises, that we hope others will take and use elsewhere.

About DigVentures

Founded in 2012, DigVentures is a team of archaeologists who aim to increase public participation in archaeology. From ancient stone circles to industrial ruins, and from archaeological digs to family-friendly festivals, we create opportunities for adults and children to get involved in discovering the past. Find us on social media or visit digventures.com.