

The Drapers Gardens Bear



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The fine Roman bronzes were just the first of the stunning finds from this City site. Enter Kevin Reilly of Pre-Construct Archaeology, pursuing a bear...

This skull was recovered from a late 4th/early 5th century fill of a revetted drain. No other parts of the skeleton were found in this fill, suggesting that it could have been a keepsake or trophy, consisting of either the whole head or just the skull, perhaps with the skin still attached. A tentative military link can perhaps be suggested here, as the legionary and auxiliary infantry standard bearers depicted on Trajan's column in Rome, dated to the early 2nd century, are all wearing bear skins.¹ As no cut marks were observed it cannot be confirmed whether the carcass had been processed i.e. skinned, decapitated or defleshed.

It is almost certainly the skull of a brown bear *Ursus arctos*, which was known to have been present in Europe during the Roman period, although rare in Britain with the exception of the

more northerly areas (see below)². It's from a moderately large adult individual, sex as yet unknown, aged at least six to eight years but less than 20 years.³ This is undoubtedly a rare find, with just two other bear bones recovered from Roman levels in London. Both of these are femurs, representing adult bears in excess of six to eight years, recovered from 3rd/4th century deposits at Courages Brewery and Tabard Square.⁴

It can be supposed that these few bones represent animals that were used for entertainment purposes. Bear-baiting is of some antiquity, while larger scale events featuring wild animals, probably including bears, were staged at Roman amphitheatres from at least the 3rd century BC.⁵ Of particular interest, both concerning the use of bears at these events and the possible origin of these animals, is the account by Martial of the inaugural games at the Coliseum in Rome in AD 80. Within his account he refers to a type of execution, then gaining in popularity, where the victim re-enacts a story from Greek mythology. These spectacles featured 'Orpheus devoured by a bear', 'Daedulus mangled by a bear' and in a rather loose translation of Prometheus and the eagle, a Sicilian brigand was tied to a cross and ripped limb from limb by a 'Caledonian bear'.⁶ Caledonia was the Roman name for Northern Britain and the clear inference is that 'Scottish' bears were being exported to Rome in the latter part of the 1st century AD. The same northern territory could have been used to supply the London amphitheatre, always supposing that similar events were staged at this venue. This theatre, however, went out

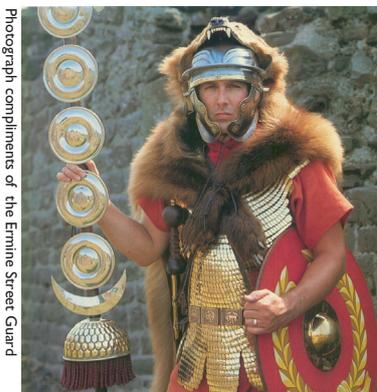


McManus, 1988, sourced from the VRoma Project

of use in the 3rd century, allowing perhaps two out of the three bear bones to be contemporary with its use.⁷ All three bones, or perhaps just the Drapers skull must then represent redeposited or kept items or conversely, point to a small-scale late Roman usage within the city, most probably for bear-baiting.

Notes

1. M.C. Bishop and J.C.N. Coulston, *Roman Military Equipment. From the Punic Wars to the Fall of Rome* (2006), 115.
2. D. Yalden, *The History of the British Mammals* (1999), 111.
3. I. Zachrisson and E. Iregren 'Lappish bear graves in northern Sweden' *Early Norland* 5 (1974) 44-5, 66-71 and 104-113.
4. *ibid.* 67; Pipe in Hammer, K. Rielly and L. Yeomans, *The assessment of the animal bones from Tabard Square, Southwark (LLS02)*. PCA unpub report (2008).
5. K.E. Welch, *The Roman Amphitheatre: From its origins to the Colosseum* (2007), 18.
6. *ibid.* 145-6.
7. N. Bateman, *Gladiators at the Guildhall. The story of London's Roman amphitheatre and medieval Guildhall*, Museum of London Archaeology Service (2000), 24.



Photograph compliments of the Ermine Street Guard
ABOVE: A bearskin bedecked standard bearer, or signifer, of the Ermine Street Guard
TOP RIGHT (and front cover): The Drapers Gardens bear skull
FAR RIGHT: Mosaic from Nennig, Germany, depicting *bestiarii* trying to distract a bear attacking a fallen comrade.