

The Black Lady of North Elmham

There has been talk in recent weeks about Black History and its alleged neglect in British schools, but does it have much to do with mid-Norfolk? In Dereham I have got to know seven or eight people with African or Caribbean background at church, and another couple less well at the gym, but the Afro-Caribbean community is less prominent than say the Portuguese-speaking community.

Black people must have been even rarer here in the past, so it was a surprise that a black African was found amongst the 194 skeletons the 10th-century cemetery of the cathedral at North Elmham. The excavation was led by our recent chairman Peter Wade-Martins, but the analysis of the bones was by a well-known expert, Calvin Wells. In his report in East Anglian Archaeology, Calvin describes the skeletons, and notes their similarity to other Anglo-Saxon graves, but then turns to the “special problem” set by Inhumation 5. The skull’s characteristics “leave little doubt that it comes from a negress* or a woman with predominantly negro* genes”. Who was the black lady of North Elmham?



Fig 1. Trade routes in NW Africa about 1000 AD. The light brown shading indicates the goldfields.

It is well-known that there were Africans in the Roman army, and some of them were probably stationed in Britain, though we don't know if any of them came from south of the Sahara. From Tudor times onwards there was developing trade with West Africa, sometimes through Portuguese or Spanish intermediaries. But Calvin Wells says of the tenth century, “Probably at no time in the past two millennia had England been so isolated from the ebb and flow of Europe and beyond”. However, we all know that Norfolk was always involved in North Sea trade, and it seems that somehow through this, willingly or by compulsion, someone from black Africa settled here.

Calvin quotes from Helen Clayton about the big market at Koumbi, whose ruins are now in the extreme south of Mauritania (Figs 1 and 2). There, local and Arab merchants would be selling luxury goods from the Muslim world and the Byzantine Empire, and especially salt. This was essential for life, and was lacking in the Sahel, but was mined at Taghaza in the Sahara, and further north and west. In return the traders bought slaves at Koumbi, captured on raids on tribes further south, and spices, and gold from the goldfields which would make the area wealthy for hundreds of years. It seems incredible, but the slaves were then transported, presumably on foot, across the desert north to Sijilmasa and the coast, and then into Spain and onward to northern Europe. White slaves, chiefly Slavs from the east, were traded in the other direction, to North Africa. There were also Viking raids on the Atlantic coast of Morocco, including one in 858, when they occupied one coastal city for eight days, and took a “great host” of slaves back to their base in Ireland.



Fig 2. Modern states of NW Africa

So perhaps our black lady, or her parents or grandparents, originated in a village in what is now south Mali or Guinea. We can imagine them captured in a raid, and driven north and sold in Koumbi, and then taken on that terrible journey across the Sahara, and on into Spain. Perhaps a merchant bought her (or her parents) in Cordoba, and eventually she got into the hands of a English merchant who brought her home to North Elmham, a chilly place after Cordoba, let alone West Africa. Or perhaps it was more complicated and she was captured somewhere by Vikings and came to Norfolk in the hands of a Scandinavian settler. It sounds a string of horrific experiences, but we must hope that in North Elmham she had a kind master or mistress, who when she died saw her buried in the cathedral cemetery.

There is a postscript. In 1979, in preparation for redevelopment, a site on the right at the top of Rose Lane in Norwich was excavated, and this found a church and part of its graveyard, which had been destroyed for the building of the castle in the 1070s. One of the bones was a female skull with

"some striking, possibly Negroid, characteristics...It would seem in the Norwich case that the woman concerned may not have been a pure negress*, but rather an admixture..." (Ann Stirland, EAA 28). Survival of such bones, and their excavation are very uncertain, so this is a big coincidence. Did the trading of a black slave to Norfolk happen twice? Or, just possibly, could the black lady of Norwich have had a mother or grandmother in North Elmham? Probably a foolish idea, but you never know.

* The terms "negress" and "negro" are now widely seen as depersonalising and offensive, but it was not the case when these reports were written.

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