

Julia Velva, A Roman Lady from York: Her Life and Times Revealed

By Patrick Ottaway (Pen & Sword 2021)

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Preface and Chapter 1 specially prepared for web access

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Preface

Julia Velva's tombstone has been a part of my life for almost 40 years. It has been my opening image in innumerable lectures on Roman York that I have given around the country. On many occasions I have stood in front of it in the Yorkshire Museum and described its finer points. Julia Velva's tombstone is my favourite object from Roman Britain and is the inspiration for this book. This is because it not only allows us to learn a little about two real, named, people in the past, Julia Velva herself and Aurelius Mercurialis, her heir, but also because it shows them to us in at least a version of their home environment, a rare contemporary representation of Roman daily life. Moreover, as I hope will become clear in the course of this book, Julia Velva's tombstone is a starting point for many different messages from York's Roman past. Finally, although it was found in 1922, nearly 100 years ago, as I write this, I can claim a direct connection with the tombstone's discovery – a sort of apostolic succession - in that an elderly gentleman who attended one of my first evening classes in the early 1980s told me that, as a small boy, he had himself seen the tombstone being raised from the ground.

The popular image of the Romans in York, as in Britain as a whole, has a strong military flavour. Mention the Romans and most people will immediately envisage men in steel body armour, wearing helmets and armed with swords and shields. Although it cannot be denied that the legionaries were a critical component of Roman York, so were families and communities made up of people occupying many different stations in life as craftworkers, labourers, shopkeepers, artists, dancers, musicians, gladiators, fortune tellers and so on. Some of them were, like Julia Velva herself, members of a wealthy elite similar in their outlook and values to elites all over the Roman Empire; others belonged to the humblest and most impoverished levels of society like a girl whose skeleton I found buried face down in a ditch in one of my excavations. She must have been more or less contemporary with Julia Velva but had died aged only about 14 years. We can only speculate about how she met her end and why she was placed with little ceremony in a remote resting place on the edge of a field, but however a short a time she spent on this earth, Julia Velva's York was hers as well.

I have written about Roman York before, but this book adopts a slightly different approach in being concerned largely with the century or so between the mid-second and mid-third centuries which would have encompassed the 50-year life span of Julia Velva. This allows me to consider in a bit more detail some of the archaeological evidence from the city, especially rich for this period, than would be possible in a work which attempted to cover the whole of the Roman era.

I refer extensively to material from the excavations by York Archaeological Trust (YAT), for whom I worked for 25 years, and I am grateful to the Trust and the current Chief Executive, David Jennings, for permission to use a number of illustrations from its publications and archives. Adam Raw Mackenzie and Louis Carter kindly sent those I did not already have in hand. I am also grateful to their supervisor Christine McDonnell, Head of Curatorial Services at YAT. The book benefits from a project – 'Old Collections – New Questions' at the Yorkshire

Museum (part of the York Museums Trust) for which, in 2017, I compiled an overview of its huge and remarkable Roman collections. I am particularly grateful to Emily Tilley and Andrew Woods at the museum for their assistance with this book and to the York Museums Trust for permission to reproduce images of some of the more interesting and exciting objects it holds. For sending me documents and other information about their work or the work of their organisation I am also grateful to Graham Bruce (On Site Archaeology), Malin Holst, Lauren McIntyre, Ian Milsted (York Archaeological Trust) and Paula Ware (MAP). The plans were drawn by Lesley Collett to her usual high standard. Cecily Spall of FAS Heritage kindly supplied three images of burials. Anthony Crawshaw supplied the splendid aerial view of the city in 1.2. Natalie Toy, York Minster, facilitated the use of 3.5 and measured the head. Images not specifically acknowledged are my own copyright. Photographs of items in the Yorkshire Museum collections taken by me are captioned 'Yorkshire Museum'.

Margaret Rogers drew my attention to the relief in her possession, appearing as 5.12. Penny Walton Rogers advised me on matters to do with the Roman loom. Finally, I am enormously grateful to my friend Nick Hodgson of Tyne and Wear Museum Service who gallantly read through the whole text. Nick made many useful comments and saved me from some gross errors of fact and interpretation – those that remain are, of course, entirely my own responsibility.

This is not a book about Roman Britain as a whole; it sticks largely to themes for which York has produced good evidence. Bibliographical references for points made in the text are indicated by superscript numbers which can be cross-referred to the 'notes' section at the end of the book along with a list of all the references. These references are not intended to be exhaustive, but are, I hope, sufficient to allow the reader to at least make a start on further research into any matters which may be of interest.

Patrick Ottaway

1 January 2020, in honour of Janus – looking back and looking forwards.

Dates and periods

All dates are AD unless stated.

The dates of the principal periods referred to are:

Trajanic	98 – 117
Hadrianic	117 – 138
Early Antonine	138 – 161
Late Antonine	161 – 192
Severan	192 - 235

CHAPTER 1

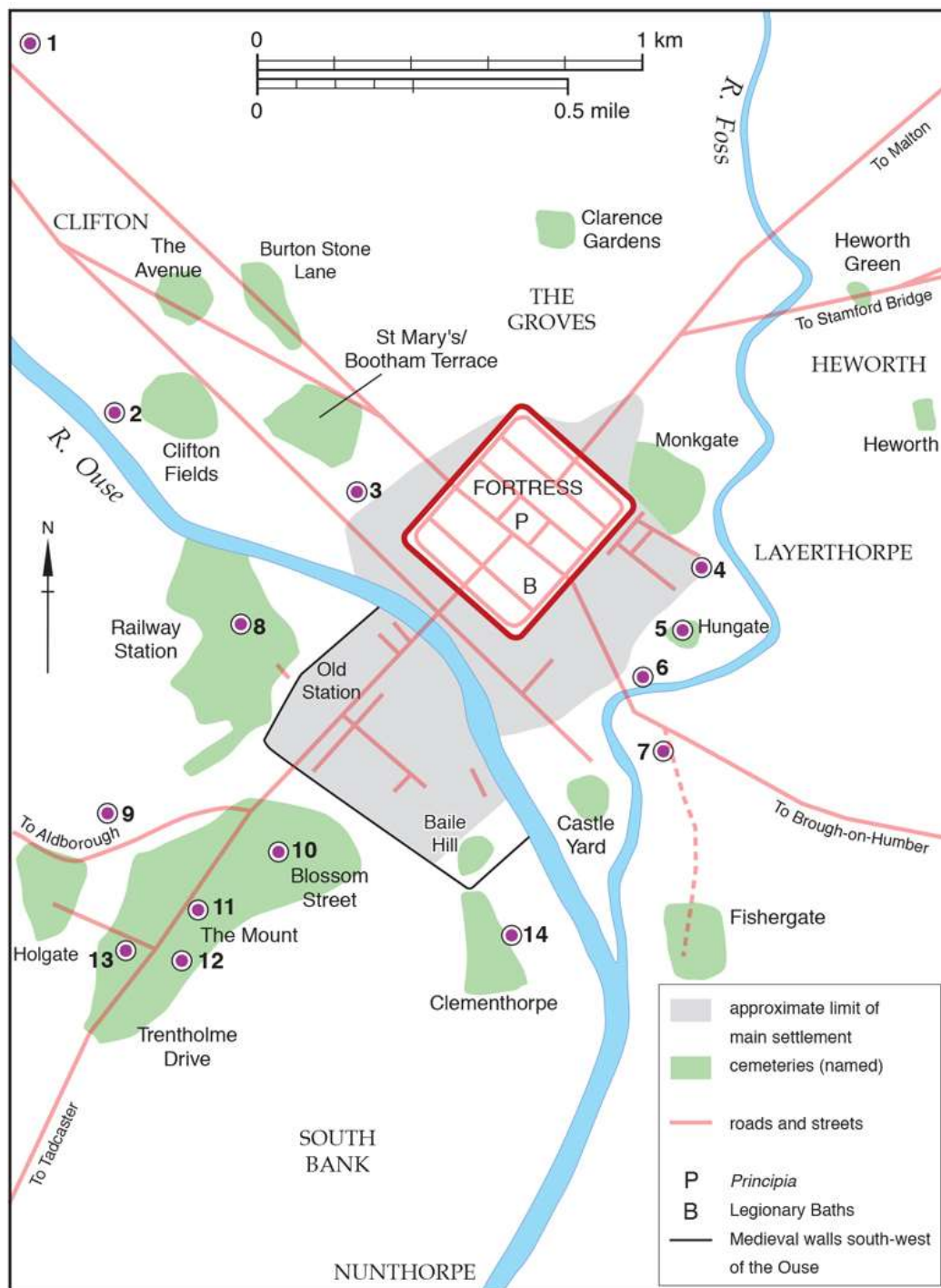
INTRODUCTION

Julia Velva's tombstone

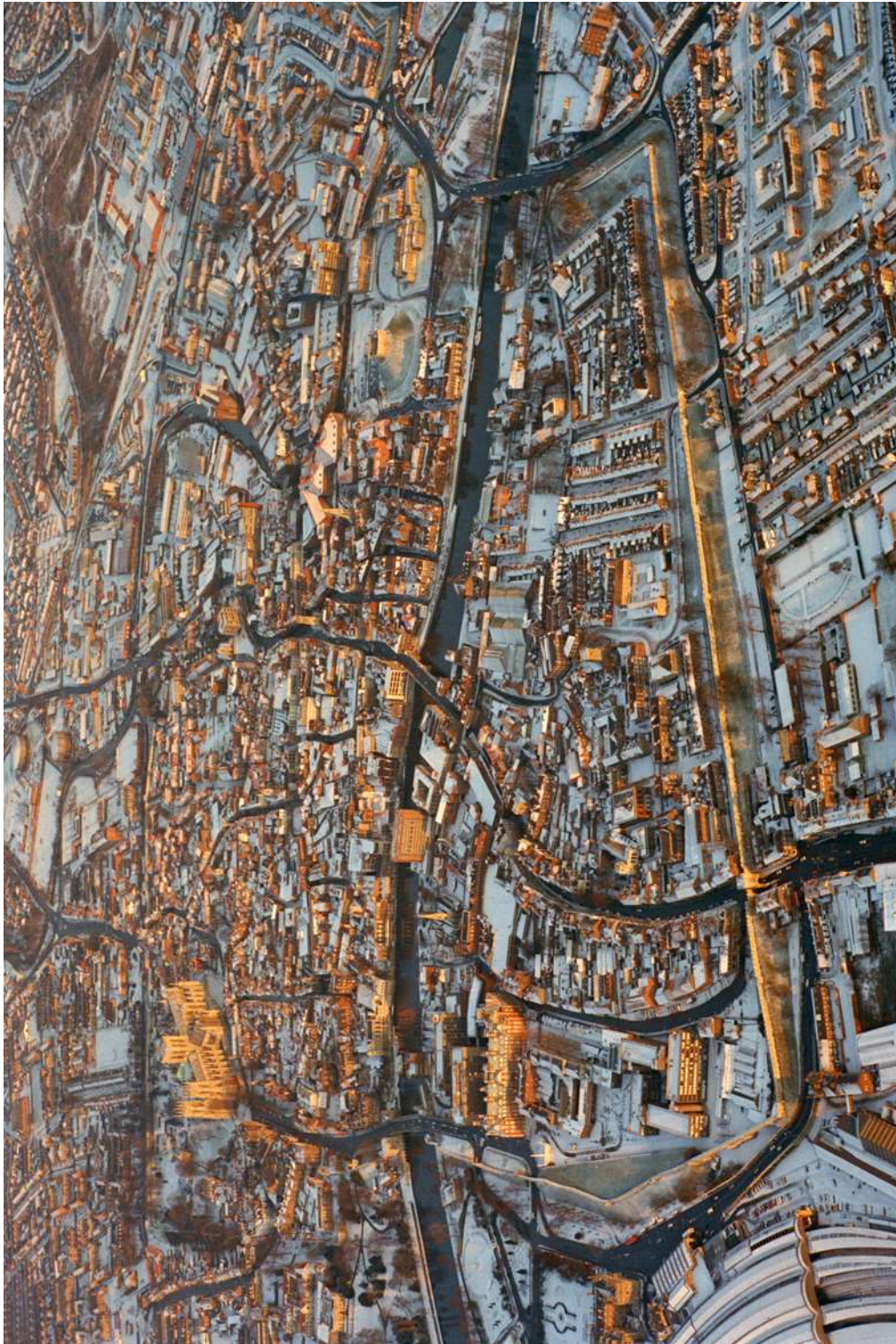
This is a book about Roman York (*Eburacum* or *Eboracum*) which takes as its starting point the tombstone of a lady named Julia Velva, today on display in the Yorkshire Museum.¹ As the site of a legionary fortress and a town which became a provincial capital, as well as being where two emperors passed into the next world, York was one of the most important places not only in Roman Britain but in the western empire. A summary plan of Roman York appears as 1.1, an aerial view of the modern city as 1.2 and, based on it, a reconstruction in the early third century as 1.3.

Julia Velva's tombstone is thought to date from the early third century and we would probably not be too far off the mark in saying that she died somewhere between the years 210 and 240. The inscription on the tombstone tells us that she was aged 50 at death and so she was probably born between the years 160 and 190. We can therefore think of the 'Julia Velva period', as I will call it on occasions, as having a time span of up to about eighty years during which time York underwent many marked changes in both its military and civilian character. From the study of her tombstone, we can say, or infer, a number of things about Julia Velva herself. By using archaeological evidence and contemporary written sources we can also say a lot about the place she lived in, about the people she might have known and about what they thought, did in their work, ate for dinner etc; in other words we can get a good impression of the sort of 'life' Julia Velva might have led and the sort of 'times' she might have experienced.

I am not going to confine myself to the Julia Velva period entirely because to understand what York was like when she was alive, we have to understand its history from the time a Roman army arrived in about the year AD 71 with the intention of conquering the whole of the north of Britain. This is not only of interest for us looking back from York today but also relevant for understanding how Julia Velva and her contemporaries thought about their own times. Just like us, the Romans took a great interest in their history, or what they believed to be their history (although we would call some of it myth) and drew upon its example to shape their future. The works of Livy and Tacitus and other Roman authors who addressed historical subjects may well have been on the bookshelves of *Eboracum*. Important events recorded in them were no doubt commemorated. For example, one can envisage the people of York having their own version of the celebrations in Rome for the 900th anniversary of what was believed to be the foundation date of the city (in our terms 753 BC) which took place in the year AD 148.



1.1 An outline plan of Roman York and its environs showing the principal areas of settlement, recorded cemeteries (named), and roads and streets, known and conjectured. Key to sites: 1, Tomb of Titus Flavius Flavinus; 2, Sycamore Place (ironworking site); 3, Nave of St Mary's Abbey (Roman buildings); 4, Peasholme Green (pot and tile making); 5, Hungate (cemetery); 6, Garden Place (structures); 7, St Denys Church, Walmgate (altar to Arciacus); 8, Royal York Hotel (cemetery); 9, St Paul's Green, Holgate (water pipe) and Holgate Cattle Dock (trackway); 10, 35-41 Blossom Street (cemetery); 11, 104 The Mount (burial vault); 12, Julia Velva's tombstone; 13, Driffeld Terrace (cemetery); 14, Clementhorpe (Roman house)



Aerial view of York from the south-west. The River Ouse runs across the centre of the image from left to right; it is crossed by Lendal Bridge (mid-19th century) on the left and by Ouse Bridge (in origin probably 9th or 10th century) in the centre. The Roman bridge was a little to the right of Lendal Bridge, opposite the Guildhall. York Minster, in the centre of the Roman legionary fortress, is top left. The River Foss can be seen upper right. The medieval city walls south-west of the Ouse can be seen in the lower half of the image and Micklegate Bar (city south-west gate) is lower left approached from the south-west by Blossom Street. © A. Crawshaw



1.3 Conjectural reconstruction of Roman York from the south-west based on the photograph in 1.2. This imagines the town on the south-west bank of the Ouse at the beginning of the third century when defences were under construction and the line of the main road from the south-west had just been moved south-eastwards onto slightly higher ground to run up to the site where Micklegate Bar now stands.

Julia Velva's tombstone was discovered on 11 July 1922 during road widening near the junction of The Mount and Albemarle Road on the south-west side of York (1.1, 12; 1.4). According to the report in the *Yorkshire Philosophical Society Annual Review* it was '15 yards from the present highway, 3 ft 6 ins down, lying face down in two pieces'.² In Roman times this was a very prominent place, close to a local high point, on the south-east side of the main Roman approach road to York from the south-west. At some time in the past, the tombstone was either deliberately pushed over, or had fallen over, fortunately before it could be defaced to any great extent as so many Roman tombstones were, probably by iconoclastic Christians.



1.4 The discovery of Julia Velva's tombstone on The Mount in 1922 (© York Museums Trust)

The tombstone is 1.63m high, of which 0.23m served as a base set into the ground, 0.99m wide and 0.23m thick (1.5). It is made of Millstone Grit, a type of sandstone found to the west of York, which was popular with the Romans for tombstones and other monuments as well as for major buildings.³ Originally Julia Velva's tombstone would have caught the eye even more than it does today because, in line with usual practice, it would have been painted in bright, even gaudy, colours. The display face is divided into two near equal-sized parts; the upper part has a dining scene in relief and the lower part the dedicatory inscription. The dining scene, a popular subject on Roman tombstones, although there are only a few examples in Britain,

may be taken to represent a version of the *silicernium*, a funeral feast given in honour of a deceased person, either at the funeral itself or a few days after it. It is shown taking place in the dining room, or *triclinium*, of a typical Roman elite dwelling - *triclinium* because it would typically have accommodated three couches arranged around a semi-circular or rectangular space. The *triclinium* shown here is framed by an arch supported on either side by half columns. In an adjoining anteroom food and drink, brought from the kitchen, would have been prepared by the slaves to take into the diners. While the hosts and their guests ate and drank, musicians and dancers might have performed for their entertainment.



1.5 Julia Velva's tombstone (height 1.63m) (© York Museums Trust)

Julia Velva is shown, as one did in polite Roman society, reclining to dine, leaning on her left elbow. This can also be a pose expressing mourning and it may be compared with that of the god Attis on a funerary monument from York⁴ and other monuments from Gaul and the Rhineland.⁵ Attis was the consort of the goddess Cybele – *Magna Mater* (the great mother) – but by the second century AD he appears to have acquired an independent role as a protector and comforter of the dead. The pinecones at the top of the tombstone allude to Attis as he was turned into a pine tree after betraying the goddess. The sculptor has taken trouble with Julia Velva's head and shoulders (1.6), but her lower body has been omitted. She has rather large eyes – 'windows on the soul'. Her hair is parted in the centre and on either side one can just see surviving undulations to suggest it fell in waves over her ears before being gathered into a plait. This would have been wound around the back of her head and can just be seen projecting above it. Her hairstyle bears a resemblance to a style seen on images of the Empress Julia Domna, wife of Emperor Septimius Severus (reigned 197 – 211). A similar style can be seen on the head of Aelia Aeliana, another lady of York, whose tombstone also has a dining scene.⁶ An artist's impression of Julia Velva based on her image on the tombstone appears in 1.7.



1.6 Julia Velva's tombstone: detail of Julia Velva's head

Usually, a couch in the *triclinium* would accommodate three people, but what is shown on Julia Velva's tombstone is probably a bed with a head and foot board - perhaps representing the bed in which she died. It stands at some height from the ground and would probably have

required steps to get into. The frame would have been strung with a web of cords which supported the thick mattress, clearly visible here.



1.7 An imaginative reconstruction of Julia Velva's head and shoulders as they might originally have appeared in painted form on her tombstone (by Bart Ottaway, aged 12).

In addition to Julia Velva herself, there are three other figures portrayed on her tombstone, making four altogether. As many as four figures are rare on Roman tombstones in Britain, but in this case may have been deliberately intended to allude to her initials IV, the Roman numeral for 4 (for further discussion of this see below). Standing on the right of Julia Velva (her left), in front of a table, is a male figure; this is presumably the Aurelius Mercurialis, named in the inscription as the person who set up the tombstone (1.8). His relationship to Julia Velva is not stated, but he was probably her husband and heir.

The face of Mercurialis is also shown with overlarge eyes and he clearly has a beard and moustache. His hair is shown coming to a peak at the front in the manner of Emperor Gordian III (238 – 44) on some of his busts. On the right side of his head (visible on 1.8) his ear is much too near the top of his head, although on the left side it is anatomically correct. Mercurialis's body appears somewhat deformed in having legs rather short in relation to his torso. He wears a form of tunic with long sleeves which comes down to his knees. This is sometimes known as a 'Gallic coat', which, by the second century, was routine attire in the western empire.⁷ Wrapped around Mercurialis's shoulders is a thick, heavy shawl or mantle; here is a man prepared for a York winter! In his oversized right hand Mercurialis holds a scroll

which may represent the will of Julia Velva and may also have been intended to proudly indicate he was literate.



1.8 Julia Velva's tombstone: Aurelius Mercurialis



1.9 Julia Velva's tombstone: the girl

On the left side of the scene a female child, perhaps about 12 years of age, is shown seated in a high-backed basketwork chair; children sat, rather than reclined, to dine (1.9). The girl holds a bird, a symbol of childhood – the ‘sweet bird of youth’ to quote Tennessee Williams. Her hair is also shown parted in the centre, waved and falling to her shoulders in another style adopted by Julia Domna. To the girl’s left, in the centre of the scene, is a small male figure holding a large jug in his left hand (1.10). He is clean shaven, indicating his youth, and wears an unbelted tunic which comes to his knees. Slung across his shoulder running diagonally to the waist is a strap perhaps to hold a bag or purse; this was an era when clothes did not have pockets. This person is probably a household slave; in the conventions of the figural art of the period people of inferior social status were shown small in relation to their masters.

What is shown here is a high-status Roman family group from York in a room in their fine house, a semi-public room which would have been used for receiving not only friends and other guests, but clients seeking favours and assistance. The viewer is, in a sense, a guest as well, asked to pay respect to this little group who look straight out at you confident in the knowledge that they are people of some account in their community. A statement is being made not just for the time when Julia Velva’s passing was commemorated but for the future when the girl, and her siblings perhaps, will grow up and raise their own families. Tombstones like this speak about family and dynasty as much as about a particular individual. They do not, in any sense, give us accurate portraits but conform to an accepted manner of representing people of high social status; in this case in a style which has its origins in parts of Gaul and the Rhineland from where it probably arrived in York with the army.⁸

We learn about a little more about Julia Velva, and the circumstances in which the stone was set up, from the inscription in the lower half.

DM
 IVLI(A)E – VELV(A)E – PIENTISSI
 M(A)E - VIXIT - AN(NOS) - L - AVREL(IVS)-
 MERCVRIALIS - HER(ES) - FACI
 VNDVM – CVRAVIT – VIVVS -
 SIBI - ET - SVIS – FECIT

Letters omitted from the words as they would have been spelled out in full are in brackets and letters run together into one – ligatured – are underlined.

The inscription begins with the standard invocation to the Manes, spirits of the dead, with whom Julia Velva now resides, in the abbreviated form DM (DIS MANIBVS). In the first line is her name, in the dative case, followed by PIENTISSIM(A)E (also in the dative case) meaning ‘very dutiful.’ This is a stock epithet, found on other Roman tombstones, intended to show the deceased conformed to a certain sort of Roman ideal of womanhood and thereby add lustre to her surviving family. The duties which a woman, in an elite household at least, was expected to perform were focused on the domestic sphere in which she catered to the needs of her

husband and family. She also participated in the cult of the household *lares* (presiding spirits) and family deities (*penates*) –and so calling a woman ‘dutiful’ had both a secular and religious significance. If one says the two words JVLIAE VELVAE PIENTISSIMAE out loud one finds they have a certain rhythmic quality which must surely be deliberate – perhaps they were chanted at her funeral.

In the second line we are told that Julia Velva died aged 50 years. This represents quite a respectable life span for Roman Britain in which relatively few people lived beyond about 40 (see below pp). Whether Julia Velva was actually 50 is, of course, not known and in the absence of the sort of systematic recording of births we have today, some approximation may have been made. The rest of the inscription tells us that Aurelius Mercurialis set the stone up ‘for himself and his heirs’ (SIBI ET SVIS FECIT) while he was still alive (VIVVS). The implication is that he would be buried in same place.

Their names tell us that Julia Velva and Aurelius Mercurialis were both Roman citizens, and hence members of the upper echelons of society in *Eboracum*, because they have a family name (*nomen gentilicium* or *nomen*) followed by the familiar name (*cognomen*) by which they were known to friends and family. There was a time when male citizens usually had three names, *tria nomina*, with a *praenomen* before the family name (as in Titus Flavius Flavinus, a York centurion). However, as there were relatively few *praenomina* (hence often written as just the initial letter), their use for distinguishing one man from another was limited and so they had largely, if not entirely, fallen out use by the end of the second century. Julia Velva’s family name is Julia, the female form of Julius, a distinguished name indeed having been that of the great, and deified, Julius Caesar, although she is highly unlikely to have been his direct descendant. It is more likely that she was the descendant of someone who had become a citizen in Julius Caesar’s time, perhaps as a freed slave. Alternatively, she might have been someone who had, herself, been freed from slavery, becoming a ‘freedwoman’ and taken her master’s family name. In any event, Julia Velva may well have known, and taken pride in the fact, that the Julii claimed to be descended from Venus through Aeneas, son of the goddess, who, as Virgil’s *Aeneid* tells us, played a key role in the foundation of Rome. Velva, Julia Velva’s *cognomen*, is thought to be a British (‘Celtic’) name which suggests she was a local girl, quite possibly the daughter of a native woman and a legionary veteran.⁹

Aurelius Mercurialis’s family name, Aurelius, suggests he, or his father, had acquired citizenship, probably following army service, in the reign of either Marcus Aurelius (161 – 80) or his son Commodus (177 – 92). It was common practice for anyone receiving citizenship to take the family name of the ruling emperor of the time, considered, in a sense, as their patron. If he had acquired citizen status, rather than inheriting it, Mercurialis would have been born with just this one name, being what the Romans referred to as a *peregrinus*, literally a ‘foreigner’. Once a citizen, he would have still been known to friends as Mercurialis, but he would have proudly used his two names in the public arena. By naming him Mercurialis his parents had probably hoped to put him under the protection of the god, Mercury, from whom he might acquire some of his qualities as messenger of the gods and the patron of commerce.

Finally, we might look at how the inscription has been structured in terms of certain numeric patterns based on square numbers. Julia Velva's name - IVLIE VELVE - is displayed as 9 (3²) letters and there are 81 (9²) letters altogether (if the DM formula is ignored and ligatured letters are counted as 1). There are 16 (4²) words and the letter I, first letter of Julia Velva's name in Latin, occurs 16 times. Why these patterns were included is not clear, but it may be to do with the desire to creating an inscription with the sort of harmonious character which would appeal to the gods.

Although it might appear quite crudely executed ('provincial') when compared with some of the beautifully carved Roman examples from the Mediterranean world, Julia Velva's tombstone is, none the less, a complex and sophisticated composition in terms of what it tells us in visual and written form about the society of which the people depicted were members and about the values and aspirations which governed how they saw themselves and how they behaved. The tombstone is, therefore, an ideal starting point for an investigation of Roman York in the late second and early third centuries when our couple were amongst its residents.

In the next chapter (2) I shall describe how the York which Julia Velva and Aurelius Mercurialis knew had developed since the Ninth Legion arrived in AD 71. This requires, first of all, a consideration of York's natural environment, critical to our understanding of why the Romans chose York as a base in the first place and of what role it adopted subsequently in the economy and society of its region and of Britain as a whole. This is followed by a summary account of the first century or so of Roman York's history and a description of its topography and built environment, both military and civilian in this period. In Chapter 3 we look at the York in which our couple grew up and lived their lives, beginning with the historical background and then returning to the themes of topography and buildings. In Chapter 4 I shall look at aspects of the economy of Roman York, in terms of both production and trade, the latter illustrating its particularly extensive connections with the wider world in the Julia Velva period. The next chapter (5) discusses the character and composition of Roman provincial society in *Eboracum* and looks at aspects of daily life such as education, dress and hairstyles, and diet and health. Worthy of a chapter on its own is the subject of religion in Roman York. We have already seen that Julia Velva's tombstone has its sacred aspect and, as such, it is a good starting point for reviewing the abundant evidence for belief and cult practice. The links between religion and burial take us back once more to the place where Julia Velva's tombstone was discovered in the heart of one of Roman York's great cemeteries (1.1, 12). Starting from here we will look at the history of the cemeteries and at what we know about burial practice. Finally, in my last chapter, I will draw together some of the themes of the book and speculate on what our lady of Roman York might be like if we were able to meet her.

Sources of evidence

In its role as a contemporary written document and as an archaeological artefact, Julia Velva's tombstone is an important piece of evidence for Roman York. However, before concluding this

chapter, a brief review of all the sources of evidence, and how they have been studied, is in order to remind us of how we know what we know about the city in the Julia Velva period itself - and in earlier and later times as well.

The earliest contemporary written source directly relevant to Roman York (as *Eboracum*) is in the form of the addresses on two wooden writing tablets, which date to c. 95 – 105, from the fort at Vindolanda on the northern frontier.¹⁰ York itself has produced a number of inscriptions of various dates, largely on stone, but also on other media. The inscriptions on stone are usually funerary, on tombstones and sarcophagi, or religious, mostly on altars dedicated to the gods and goddesses, some classical, others local. Other common forms of inscription from York include stamps on the tiles made in the legionary kilns, and makers' names, or initials, on pottery vessels and other artefacts. There are also examples of owners' names and there are some informal graffiti, some in the form of names, others less readily intelligible.

More generally relevant to York, although hardly ever mentioning it by name, are a great range of contemporary literary sources, notably the works of some of the Roman historians. They include Cornelius Tacitus (c. 55 - 120), author of *The Annals*, *The Histories* and *The Agricola* (biography of his father-in-law and governor of Britain c. 78 – 84) which cover the first century AD from the reign of Augustus until about the year 84. Also important is Cassius Dio (c.150 to 235) who wrote a history of Rome from its foundation to the year 229, although much of his work is lost and we rely largely on an eleventh-century 'epitome' (abstract) of his text. Belonging to a similar period as Dio is another Greek speaker, Herodian, who wrote a history of the Roman empire for the years 180 – 238, i.e. from the death of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius to the reign of Gordian I. Like Dio, Herodian did not know Britain at first hand but makes some references to events here. The reliability of Tacitus, Dio and others for events in Britain and elsewhere is usually difficult to assess, although they do create a very compelling picture of the imperial court and its violent and unpredictable character. The same may be said of the *Augustan History* (*Historia Augusta*), probably written in the fourth century and structured as biographies of all the Roman emperors from Hadrian to Numerian (117 to 284).¹¹

If we move on from historical to geographical sources, we should note the work of the Greek-speaking Egyptian, Ptolemy, active in the years c.140 - 60, who compiled a geography of the Roman empire which includes Britain.¹² Ptolemy provides a list of place-names, including York as *Eboracum*, and is one of the principal sources for the names and locations of the territories occupied by the native peoples of Britain. Also of a geographical character, are itineraries, or 'road books', intended for use by the army and imperial postal service, the *cursus publicus*. The most comprehensive, as far as Britain is concerned, is the early third-century Antonine Itinerary (named after the Emperor Antoninus – usually known as 'Caracalla').¹³ It lists place-names in the empire arranged along the main roads and gives distances between them. For Britain there are fifteen itineraries. Roman York's importance as a centre for communications is shown by its location on four of them.

As far as other Roman literature is concerned, one might reasonably ask how relevant much of it is for the study of York or indeed for Britain as a whole. *Britannia* was, after all, a province which was very different in terms of its culture, economy and society from the lands around the Mediterranean. However, York, more than most other places, either in its region or in Britain as a whole, apart from London and a few other towns, had a population in the Roman period which included many people who originated and / or had lived and travelled in the imperial heartlands whether as soldiers, administrators and merchants or as their wives and families. References to the works of Ovid, Petronius, Pliny the Elder, Virgil and other classical authors can therefore, I suggest, contribute meaningfully to the story of Roman York in a way that they would not, perhaps, to that of the rural farmsteads in the region where life went on much as it had before the conquest.

If we now turn to archaeology, we find that surviving above ground today to represent Roman York are only a few remains of the fortress defences. Most important is the west corner tower, the Multangular Tower, and associated stretches of fortress wall to be seen in the Museum Gardens. Another fragment of wall can be seen nearby in St Leonard's Place and a bit of the north-west gate is visible below the floor of a café by medieval Bootham Bar. At the east corner of the fortress one can see the wall and remains of an interval tower where they were exposed in excavations in 1926. Everything else archaeological which bears on the history of Roman York has been found below ground whether in formal excavation, during digging by workmen for cellars, sewers and other utilities or as chance finds in a variety of circumstances.

The buried remains are made up, firstly, of abandoned stone and timber structures in varying states of incompleteness, secondly, of features such as ditches, pits and graves dug into the ground, and, thirdly, of a vast number of superimposed deposits, or strata, composed variously of such things as building debris, domestic and industrial refuse, garden soil and naturally accumulating silts and sands. All of this material is testimony to the intensity of human activity in the city in the Roman period and to the intervention, from time to time, of natural forces. Within the historic core of York, i.e. within much of the city walled in medieval times, there is typically a depth below modern ground level of about 3m to 5m, and in places more, of archaeological remains of which, roughly speaking, the lowest 1m to 3m is Roman. In peripheral parts of the historic core and in suburban areas there is usually rather less depth and sometimes all that survives are features - pits, ditches etc - cut into the natural geology.

Where the remains of the Roman period are deeply buried, they have usually been well protected from damage by modern intrusions. In addition, a factor favouring the preservation of archaeological deposits and the material they contain arises from the city's low-lying situation which means that it has been greatly affected by a gradual rise in the water table. In certain parts of the city, especially close to the rivers, the ground has therefore become subject to waterlogging. This inhibits the usual processes of decay, which require oxygen, and allows the remarkable and unusual survival of organic materials from timber buildings to leather shoes as well as human and animal bones, plant material and even insects. In addition, the Roman deposits at York produce vast quantities of the sort of artefactual material one would

expect from any settlement of the period. In terms of bulk, the principal components are pottery, building materials, such as stonework, tiles and plaster, and industrial waste, such as metalworking slag. Small items – ‘small finds’ – occur in all the metals (although rarely gold) as well as in bone and ivory, wood, glass, jet, stone and ceramics.

Roman York has been the subject of study since the seventeenth century, often by scholars of national as well as purely local reputation. Any artefacts recovered in the early years usually ended up in private collections. However, in 1827 the Yorkshire Museum was opened by the Yorkshire Philosophical Society for the edification of the general public by the display of antiquities, many of them Roman. Today the museum is the principal archive in the city for archaeological material of all periods as well as having extensive galleries devoted to the Roman period.

The first history of Roman York, *Eboracum or the History and Antiquities of the City of York*, was written by a York surgeon, Francis Drake (1696 - 1771) in 1736. It includes material previously published by others and new material arising from his own observations. Just over 100 years later, in 1842, the subject was revisited by Charles Wellbeloved, a Unitarian Minister, and first honorary curator of the Yorkshire Museum. His *Eburacum or York under the Romans* was based both on previous discoveries and his own first-hand observations in the city at the beginning of a great period of redevelopment stimulated, in part at least, by the arrival of the railways. A few line drawings from *Eburacum* are reproduced in this volume. In 1924 Gordon Home published his *Roman York*, a useful survey of the evidence, primarily the material in the Yorkshire Museum collections. Home also made an appeal for proper archaeological excavations in the city which might, for example, solve the problem of whether there were Roman defences around the town south-west of the Ouse. This remains an unanswered question (see p.00) but the first formal excavations in York took place, shortly after Home's book appeared, in 1925 - 7 under the direction of Steuart Miller (1880 – 1952), a lecturer in Roman History and Archaeology at Glasgow University, on behalf of the newly formed York Excavation Committee.¹⁴ Miller's work had as its principal objective the study of the Roman fortress defences with a view to determining the sequence of their construction.

Since Miller (except during World War II), there has been a regular programme of archaeological excavations in York which in the 1950s and 1960s were largely focused on investigating the Roman period. A great landmark in the study of the subject arrived in 1962 when the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments for England (RCHME) published *Eburacum* – as it is referred to henceforth in the text below. This was the Commission's first volume of its great inventory of York's historic monuments which tells us in its own words (p. xxv):

‘...we have recorded the remains of 61 monuments including the legionary fortress with its defences, streets and internal buildings as one monument. Further we have described 154 Roman inscriptions, sculptured stones and architectural fragments and listed some 500 Roman burials.’

Ten years later the pace of excavation picked up considerably following the foundation of the York Archaeological Trust in 1972. Research arising from the Trust's work at sites including 9 Blake Street in the legionary fortress, and 24 – 30 Tanner Row and Wellington Row in the Roman town south-west of the Ouse, forms the basis for much of this book. In addition to excavation, the Trust was involved in many of the developments in research methods which are now standard in archaeology including environmental archaeology or the study of biological material preserved in archaeological deposits.¹⁵ The Trust has also pioneered the study of artefacts and human remains with cutting-edge scientific techniques. Most recently, in connection with the remarkable burials, largely of decapitated males, found at Driffield Terrace on The Mount (1.1, 13), the Trust sponsored the examination of dental enamel and relict DNA which has cast new light on the origins of the population of Roman York.

In 1990 in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16, a new government policy statement on how archaeology should be dealt with in the local authority planning process, reiterated most recently as the revised National Planning Policy Framework in 2018,¹⁶ has resulted in a further surge in the amount of archaeological excavation in York. Some form of fieldwork can now be expected in advance of almost all new developments in the city. Compared to what RCHME had available to it in 1962, the data base we now have for the study of Roman York is hugely increased. Some of the highlights of recent work will appear in our pursuit of Julia Velva's York.

Notes

- 1 RIB I, 688; *Eburacum*, 124, 82; Tufi 1983, 27-8, 42; Mattern 1989, 727, 799 - 800
- 2 Raine 1922
- 3 Buckland 1988, 239 - 49
- 4 *Eburacum* 132, 124
- 5 Hatt 1986, 391 - 4
- 6 RIB I, 682; *Eburacum*, 121, 71
- 7 Wild 1968, 194
- 8 Hatt 1986, 394 – 7; Mattern 1989, 721
- 9 Birley 1979, 122
- 10 Inventory nos 575 (stylus tablet) and 1220 (ink tablet); Birley 1993, 26; 2002, 38
- 11 The works of Cassius Dio and Herodian and the Augustan History are discussed by Birley 1988, 203 – 06
- 12 Rivet and Smith 1979, 103-47; Jones and Mattingly 1990, 16-23
- 13 Rivet and Smith 1979, 150-80; Jones and Mattingly 1990, 23-9
- 14 Miller 1925; 1928
- 15 e.g. Kenward and Williams 1979; Hall *et al.* 1980; Kenward *et al.* 1986; Hall and Kenward 1990
- 16 Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (Department of the Environment 1990); National Planning Policy Framework (Department of Communities and Local Government 2018)

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