SKELETON FOUND BURIED IN ROMAN BARRACKS AT VINDOLANDA

Vindolanda archaeologists are well used to finding thousands of the Roman army’s old weapons, armour, coins and household effects, but they received a nasty shock last week when a volunteer found an almost complete human skeleton buried in a pit in a barrack room floor. Human burials in built-up areas like forts and towns were strictly forbidden in Roman times – the dead had to be interred or cremated in cemeteries on the outskirts – so the archaeologists at first assumed before the complete skeleton was uncovered that the remains must be those of a large dog. But when the complete skeleton was examined by an anthropologist, Dr Trudy Buck, of Durham University, she quickly realized that the bones were those of a young person, possibly a girl, aged between 8 and 10 years old.

The pit in the barracks dated back to the mid third century AD, when the Fourth Cohort of Gauls formed the garrison, and the concealment of the body in this fashion was a criminal act – and it is hoped that further study of the remains may reveal the cause of death.

Dr Andrew Birley, Vindolanda’s Director of Excavations commented: “In the 1930’s my grandfather, Eric Birley, found two skeletons concealed below a floor in a civilian building at Housesteads, one of whom had the blade of a knife stuck in the ribs, and the later coroner’s inquest duly produced a verdict of murder by person or persons unknown, shortly before AD367. I’m sorry to say that Vindolanda has probably produced another Roman murder victim, from around the AD250’s and I shudder to think how this young person met their fate”.

When the forensic examination has been completed at Durham University, the skeleton will be returned to the Vindolanda Museum and will come under the care and protection of museum curatorial staff. Visitors to the museum will be able to see the mortal remains of the unknown youth, whose fate has only been discovered nearly 1,800 years after their death, and the results of the forensic examination next spring.
Dr Trudy Buck (forensic anthropologist) examining the remains of the child skeleton

Photo shows the skeleton in its display case in the new Vindolanda Museum opened March 2011