

DYSLEXIA is my SUPERPOWER

exploring dyslexia in archaeology

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In March 2020, Cara and Amy had a chance conversation (in person – remember them?!) about the high volume of dyslexics in archaeology. We both admitted that while there is a lot of anecdotal evidence, some labour market intelligence and also the excellent work by Theresa O’Mahony on the subject, there was still a gap in our knowledge regarding dyslexia in archaeology. This tied in neatly with the case studies Amy and Rosie Loftus were already preparing for the last edition of *The Archaeologist*, sharing their experiences of how dyslexia and dyspraxia have impacted their working lives.

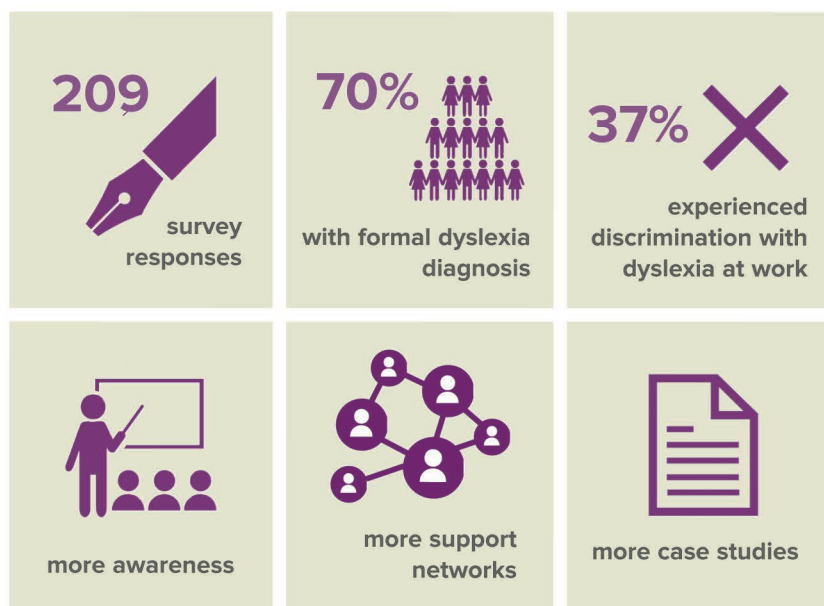
who have provided invaluable data on past experiences and current challenges. The results were sobering, with 37 per cent of respondents reporting discriminative actions from co-workers and senior members of staff, highlighting that in some workplaces, outdated views that ‘dyslexic people are stupid’ persist. A summary report of the results is available on our website.

While these results provide us with evidence to guide the future actions our profession needs to tackle perceptions of dyslexia in the workplace, this article is not about focusing on that aspect of the results. Instead, it explores how archaeologists with dyslexia can be incredibly valuable assets to our workforce who should be celebrated and not dismissed.

Dyslexia is not a new phenomenon, and one respondent drew our attention to the ‘unusual spelling’ on a Roman tablet displayed as a graphic at the Roman Baths in Bath, possibly due to them being dyslexic. The term ‘dyslexia’ was coined by Rudolf Berlin, a German ophthalmologist and professor in Stuttgart almost 130 years ago, so we might rightly ask why there is still a lack of understanding.

The value of dyslexia in the workplace is something dyslexia charities and think tanks have championed in recent years. Initiatives like ‘Made by Dyslexia’ showcase high-profile case studies promoting the advantages of having dyslexia – recognising that in fact it can be a ‘superpower’. It was widely reported in 2019 how GCHQ are actively hiring neurodiverse employees because of the unique strengths and cognitive abilities they hold.

This was reflected in our survey results, where we asked, ‘What positive benefits has dyslexia brought to your work?’ Respondents highlighted strengths in spatial awareness, problem solving, seeing different angles/ scenarios in situations, excellent long-term memory, digital visualising skills, communication and more. All of these skills make excellent archaeologists!

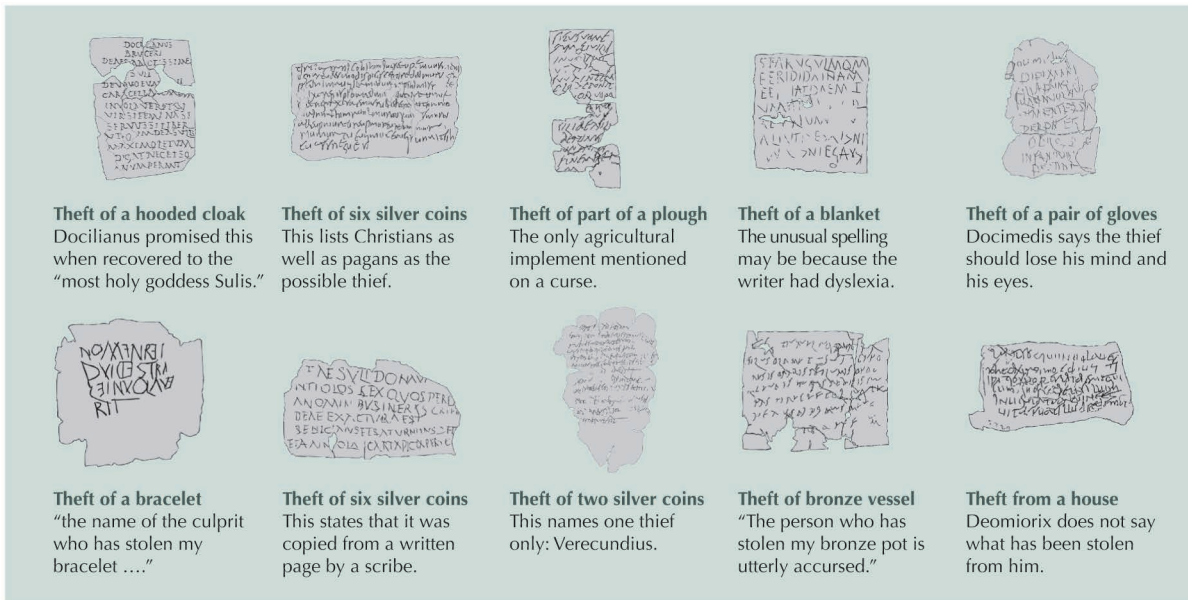


Summary infographics from the dyslexia in archaeology survey carried out in June 2020

Keen to gather new data, to identify the barriers dyslexic archaeologists face and promote ideas as to how the profession might adapt to overcome these, ClfA (Cara and Alex) and Mentoring Women in Archaeology and Heritage (Amy) developed two short questionnaires, aimed at both employers and employees. These were shared widely through email lists and social media.

We were overjoyed at the number of responses to the survey – 209 respondents

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This graphic in the Roman Baths at Bath shows a tablet (four in on the top row) possibly written by someone with dyslexia. Credit: Roman Baths, Bath

By looking at the positives of dyslexia, can we start to think about what roles dyslexics in the past may have had in society. We know that dyslexics think differently, using different parts of their brain to solve problems, find solutions, be creative – would these not have been valuable attributes historically? Dyslexics think strategically and laterally; they often have exceptional communication skills and are fantastic storytellers. And in the case of our potentially dyslexic Roman, are there other examples where we can spot neurodiversity in the past – stories which could be woven into our outreach activities, to highlight representation and encouraging future archaeologists to enter our profession?

Our survey results show that going forward we need figureheads, role models and mentoring to change the cultural perceptions of dyslexia in archaeology and to support dyslexic archaeologists to advance in their careers. If you can help with this, we need to hear from you!

WHAT'S NEXT?

We are at the start of our work with this and other areas of neurodiversity and archaeology. This work focuses on dyslexia, although we recognise that there are many other elements to neurodiversity, and we hope in future to have further conversations about this.

We are so grateful to all the individuals and employers who took the time to complete the survey. There is a lot more detail in the



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responses and we are taking the time to read these in detail and reflect on what they say. Keep an eye out for our next steps – we are proposing to

- host an informal participant-led coffee chat for all members and non-members about what they want to see happen
- create surgeries/online meet ups where people with dyslexia can talk to others about themed experiences, i.e. dyslexia

with budgets, dyslexia in the field, dyslexia in academia

- create dyslexia-themed resources, which will include links for employers to erase the ‘dyslexics are stupid’ attitude, and more individual case studies – some of which are already in the pipeline
- Host a ‘dyslexia awareness in archaeology’ week in October coinciding with Dyslexia Week (5 to 11 October), themed ‘Dyslexia creates’, so please keep an eye on our social media and join us in raising awareness

If you would like to submit a case study or take part in some of the activities above, please get in touch with Alex at alex.llewellyn@archaeologists.net