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An evaluation of biological remains from excavations at Town Street, Old Malton (site code OML94)

by

Keith Dobney, Allan Hall, Michael Issitt,
Deborah Jaques, Harry Kenward and Frances Large and Annie Milles

Summary

Five samples of sediment and a small assemblage of hand-collected bones from medieval deposits in Town Street, Old Malton, were investigated for their bioarchaeological value. The sediments were almost devoid of ancient biological remains, most having at least some later intrusive material. The bones formed too small an assemblage for useful interpretation, but it is possible that further excavation with adequate recovery might yield interpretatively valuable groups.

Authors' address

Environmental Archaeology Unit
University of York
Heslington
YORK YO1 5DD

Telephone: (0904) 433843-51
Fax: (0904) 433850

Prepared for:

York Survey and Research
2 Pear Tree Avenue
Upper Poppleton
YORK YO2 6HH

Telephone: (0904) 794540

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Introduction

Selected samples of sediment ('GBAs' *sensu* Dobney *et al*. 1992) and bone from a small development site approximately 100 m to the west of the site of Old Malton Priory, now St Mary the Virgin, were supplied by York Survey and Research for an evaluation of their potential for bioarchaeological analysis. Five GBA samples representing five contexts, and bone from 13 contexts, were submitted.

Methods

A description of the sediment for four of the GBAs was made using a standard *pro forma* and 1 kg 'test' subsamples taken from these for processing for plant and invertebrate macrofossils, following techniques of Kenward *et al.* (1980) as modified by Kenward *et al*. (1986). The remaining GBA sample (from **1122**) was `bulk-sieved' to 1 mm. Two samples of very low organic content were not subjected to paraffin flotation but material of relatively low density was isolated by means of a 'washover'.

Insects and other arthropods

The flots or washovers were quickly examined for their content of arthropod remains, especially insects, a note being made of the principal species present and of their preservational condition ('assessment recording' *sensu* Kenward 1992).

Plant remains

The flots and washovers were checked for the presence of identifiable plant macrofossils remains. The dried residues were quickly checked for plant material and other components.

Results

The sediment samples

The sediment descriptions and results of analyses undertaken are recorded here in context order. Excavator's context information and questions appear in brackets for each context.

Context 1070 [A rubble deposit containing coal, shaley coal and ash. Is there any evidence of industrial activity (such as slag) within this sample?]

Moist, mid orange-ish brown, plastic, very stony, very slightly sandy, silty clay. Very small (2-6 mm) to large (>60 mm) stones were common to abundant; some were limestone. Trace of ?charcoal were present.

Test (1 kg): The tiny washover contained a little sand, some modern rootlets and a few ?*Heterodera* cysts. One modern moss shoot and a few modern earthworm capsules were also present. The residue was largely composed of shelly limestone 'rubble' with a little oolitic limestone, a few small fragments of flint and small pieces of ironstone.

Context 1101 [Pit fill cut into stone phase]

Moist, dark grey/brown, crumbly, working slightly plastic, very slightly sandy clay silt with some charcoal and modern rootlets present.

Test (1 kg): The tiny flot yielded only traces of plant fragments, a few ?*Heterodera* cysts, a single seed of elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*) and two modern contaminant mites (Acarina). The residue consisted mostly of sand with some shelly and oolitic limestone fragments, a small piece of brick/tile, a tiny quantity of charcoal and some modern rootlets.

Context 1103 [Possible buried soil horizon sealing earlier timber phase]

Just moist, mid grey/brown, crumbly, working slightly plastic, very slightly sandy, clay silt with 1-10 mm scale orange-ish mottles which may have a higher clay content. 2-6 mm scale stones, modern roolets and charcoal were present.

Test (1 kg): This sample yielded a tiny flot containing a few plant fragments, some ?*Heterodera* cysts and one very poorly preserved seed of ?wheat (*Triticum* sp.). The only arthropods present were single specimens of *Acrotrichis* sp., *Anommatus duodecimstriatus* (a burrowing beetle) and Acarina sp., all of which were almost certainly modern contaminants.

The residue was mostly sandy with some shelly and oolitic limestone and small fragments of flint. In addition, there was a little charcoal, some fragments of mammal and fish bone, and single specimens of the molluscs *Vallonia* sp., *Aegopinella* sp. and *Cepaea* sp.

Context 1122 [Deposit within shallow cut above timber phase; mainly charcoal and ash. Contains numerous small bones]

Moist, dark and mid grey, crumbly, working slightly soft, slightly humic sandy silt with a somewhat ashy feel. 2-6 mm, 6-20 mm stones, small mammal bone and land snails were present and charcoal common. Modern rootlets were also present.

Test (1 kg): The tiny flot contained only a single seed of *Atriplex* sp. The residue was mostly sand with small pieces of oolitic limestone and some charcoal. Modern rootlets were present. Fragments of fish bone (including some vertebrae) were present and mammal bone fragments (some burnt) were common. Molluscs were represented by single specimens of *Discus rotundatus*, *Trichia hispida* and *Cecilioides acicula* (the last probably intrusive).

BS: Four mollusc species were present; *Cochlicopa* sp. (2), *Aegopinella nitidula* (1), *Oxychilus alliarius* (1) and *Trichia hispida* (7). Together these suggest the presence of grassland, but probably not short turf.

Context 1162 [Possibly a buried soil horizon sealing timber phase of activity on the site]

Moist, mid orange-ish brown, crumbly, working slightly plastic, very slightly sandy clay silt with small and very small limestone fragments and a little charcoal.

Test (1 kg): The sample produced a small washover containing mostly sand and charcoal (to 10 mm scale) with a few modern rootlets and several ?*Heterodera* cysts. Two of the three invertebrates retrieved (Acarina sp. and Collembola sp.) were probably modern contaminants. The single *Tachyporus* sp. may, however, have been ancient. Some eggshell, 2 *Carychium* sp., and 1 *Cecilioides acicula* (probably intrusive) were also present. The sandy residue contained a few pieces of flint, oolitic limestone and sandstone, two very eroded mammal bone fragments and two tiny pieces of brick/tile. Two specimens of *Trichia hispida,* one *Cepaea* sp. and one *Cecilioides acicula* (the last presumably intrusive) were also present.

Bone

A very small assemblage of animal bones was recovered from this site, the total being only 140 fragments. This assemblage was recovered from four trial trenches and thirteen bone-bearing contexts, most coming from Trenches 3 and 4.

The main assemblage was hand-collected and, as a result, is almost certainly biased in favour of larger species and elements.

Preservation overall was good to fair, with colour being consistently fawn. The bone showed a moderate amount of fresh breakage but there was little evidence of dog gnawing or butchery marks. From the

appearance of the material there is no indication that residual material was present.

Common domestic species were represented (Table 1) and included cattle, caprovids and pigs. Although the sample was small it is interesting to note that pig remains were most numerous (22 fragments), followed by caprovids (19), and cattle (16).

Additional species included domestic fowl (10 fragments) and single horse, hare and rabbit elements. A total of 69 fragments remained unidentified.

Also of interest is the BS sample (from context **1122**), from which a number of fish bones was recovered. These included vertebrae, and skull and spine fragments from species such as herring, eel, flatfish, large and small gadid, and possibly pike. Two vertebrae showed characteristic damage consistent with having been ingested and several showed evidence of charring.

Of a total of 71 identifiable fragments only 14 were measurable, most being shaft fragments or broken articular ends. In addition, two isolated teeth and a single mandible with teeth were present.

Statement of potential: implications for further work

There were few plant and invertebrate macrofossils in these deposits, indicating a low input of organic matter and/or poor preservation in well-drained sediments. Many of the specimens recorded were modern or likely to have been intrusive, and the deposits therefore are considered to have no potential for further investigation for these categories of remains.

The assemblage of vertebrate remains is of little interpretative value because of its limited size. However, on the basis of the material from the evaluation, it is probable that further, more extensive excavation of the area will produce a post-Conquest assemblage of moderate size which has good preservation and is well dated.

Retention/disposal

None of the extracted material is considered to be worth retaining. The unprocessed sediment, likewise, can be discarded.

Archive

All extracted fossils from the test subsamples, and the residues, flots and washovers are currently stored in the Environmental Archaeology Unit, University of York, along with paper and electronic records pertaining to the work described here.

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*Table 1. Hand-collected bone from all trench*es

Species	**Total fragments**	**Total measurable**	**Mandibles with teeth**	**Isolated teeth**
Cattle	16	1	1	1
Sheep/goat	19	5	-	-
Pig	22	3	-	1
Horse	1	-	-	-
Hare	1	-	-	-
Rabbit	1	-	-	-
Bird	1	-	-	-
Fowl	10	5	-	-
Sub-total	**71**	**14**	**1**	**2**
Unidentified	69	-	-	-
Total	**140**	**14**	**1**	**2**