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Assessment of biological remains from excavations at a site at Penrith (site code: SIS96)

by

Allan Hall and Frances Large

Summary

Two sediment samples from early medieval deposits at a site near Penrith were submitted for an assessment of their bioarchaeological potential. Very few plant and invertebrate remains were recovered and further analysis of these deposits is not recommended.

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Authors' address:

Palaeoecology Research Services
Environmental Archaeology Unit
University of York
Heslington
York, YO1 5DD

Telephone: (01904) 434485/433843/434487
Answerphone: 433846
Fax: 433850

Prepared for:

Lancaster University Archaeological Unit
Storey Institute
Meeting House Lane
Lancaster
LA1 1TH

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Introduction

Excavations were carried out by Lancaster University Archaeological Unit at a site near Penrith during 1996. Two General Biological Analysis samples ('GBAs' *sensu* Dobney *et al*. 1992) were submitted for an assessment of their biological potential. The material was of early medieval date.

Methods

The material was initially inspected in the laboratory and described using a *pro forma*. The subsamples were processed in their entirety for extraction of macrofossil remains, following procedures of Kenward *et al*. (1980; 1986).The washovers and residues resulting from processing were examined for their content of plant and invertebrate macrofossils. Notes were made of the quantity of fossils and principal taxa.

Results and discussion

The results are presented in context number order with context information provided by the excavator enclosed in square brackets.

Context 1081, Sample 4004/T
[fill of post hole/cut 1080]
2.65kg processed

Moist, mid yellowish brown, unconsolidated, slightly silty sand, with stones present in the size range 2-20 mm.

The very small washover consisted mainly of very decayed root fragments, some or all of which might be recent. With these were small numbers of rather poorly preserved seeds of a variety of damp ground taxa and weeds, at least some of them clearly modern. Indeed, it is possible that virtually none of the plant remains are ancient. A very small assemblage of insects was also recovered and consisted of a few decomposer species and a weevil. Two earthworm egg capsules were also noted. All may have been of recent origin.

Context 1123, Sample 4013/T
[fill of pear-shaped pit]
3kg processed

Moist, mid orange-ish brown, unconsolidated, slightly silty sand with some lumps (to 2cm) of orange ?burnt earth with clay. Stones were present in the size range 2-60 mm and some rootlets were also noted.

The small washover mainly consisted of root fragments with some very decayed wood up to 20 mm in largest dimension. The few, rather poorly preserved, seeds present included some modern corn-spurrey (*Spergula arvensis*) with a few plants probably representative of wet grassland, though by no means very characteristic.

Several cysts of the soil-dwelling nematode *Heterodera* sp. were present and the only insect remains recovered were two fragments of a fly puparium, an unidentifiable fragment of beetle cuticle, and a wing-case of *Megasternum obscurum* (Marsham). All of the sclerites were rather yellow, indicating

decomposition under dry, and somewhat acidic, conditions.

Recommendations

On the basis of these observations, there is no reason to carry out further analyses of these deposits, nor to undertake sampling for recovery of plant or insect remains unless sediments with clearer evidence in the field for the preservation of charred or waterlogged remains are encountered. However, it is possible that further excavation could recover well-preserved material and any destruction of these deposits should certainly be accompanied by an adequate sampling strategy, with appropriate provision for a post-excavation programme.

Retention and disposal

The remaining sediment from Contexts 1081 and 1123 does not need to be retained but the washovers and residues should be kept for the present.

Archive

All material is 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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