

Palaeoecology Research Services

**Evaluation of biological remains from excavations at
Conistone, North Yorkshire (site code: CBP02)**

by

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Summary

A single sediment sample recovered from excavations of deposits adjacent to the bridge at Conistone, North Yorkshire, was submitted to PRS for an evaluation of its bioarchaeological potential.

A small assemblage of charred plant remains, mostly cereal grains, was recovered from the sample. Most of the grains were of bread/club wheat but there was also some barley, and a few oats and rye present. Some hazel roundwood and remains of some 'weeds' were also noted.

This assemblage provides some data for an area of northern England for which archaeobotanical information is extremely sparse for any period. The difficulties encountered in sampling the deposit, and the consequent lack of an archaeological context and dating for the recovered remains, prevent any further interpretatively useful study of the current material, however. If these problems can be addressed then the assemblage should be recorded more thoroughly, with some quantification.

Any further excavation at this site should certainly allow for the collection and investigation of samples from any deposits with similar concentrations of biological remains.

KEYWORDS: CONISTONE; NORTH YORKSHIRE; CONISTONE TO BUCKDEN PIPELINE; EVALUATION; MEDIEVAL; CHARRED PLANT REMAINS; CHARRED GRAIN

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Introduction

An archaeological evaluation excavation was carried out by Northern Archaeological Associates across an earthwork platform adjacent to the bridge at Conistone, North Yorkshire (NGR SD 9795 6750), during February 2002. This work was undertaken in association with the construction of a pipeline between Conistone and Buckden (to the north).

A single sediment sample ('GBA'/'BS' *sensu* Dobney *et al.* 1992) was submitted to PRS for an evaluation of its bioarchaeological potential.

Excavation showed the earthwork platform to consist of (probably several phases of) a tumbled dry stone field wall retaining a 1.2 m thick accumulation of medieval plough soil (Context 201) below 0.25 m of active topsoil (Context 200). The sampled deposit (Context 202) could not be fully explored as it extended beyond the maximum depth of the trial trench and because the trench itself was subject to repeated flooding by the River Wharfe. However, the deposit was sealed beneath Context 201, the upper half of which yielded a large assemblage of 13th/14th century pottery. Earlier human activity in the vicinity was indicated by the recovery of a high quality flint blade (early Bronze Age), a sherd of Roman pottery, and the proximity of Conistone church which is thought to be pre-Conquest.

Methods

The submitted sediment sample was inspected in the laboratory and its lithology was recorded, using a standard *pro forma*, prior to processing, following the procedures of

Kenward *et al.* (1980; 1986), for recovery of plant and invertebrate macrofossils.

The washover resulting from processing was examined for plant macrofossils. The residue was examined for larger plant macrofossils and other biological and artefactual remains.

Results

Archaeological information, provided by the excavator, is given in square brackets. A brief summary of the processing method and an estimate of the remaining volume of unprocessed sediment follows (in round brackets) after the sample number.

Context 202 [sealed below medieval plough soil Context 201]

Sample 1/T (3 kg sieved to 300 microns with washover; approximately 20 litres of unprocessed sediment remain)

Moist, mid grey-brown, sticky to slightly crumbly (working soft), stony (stones 2 to 60+ mm were present), slightly sandy clay silt (to silty clay), with some charcoal and charred grain.

The washover consisted of about 60 cm³ of charred plant material, largely cereal grains, but with a little hazel (*Corylus*) roundwood (to 15 mm in maximum dimension). The grains consisted for the most part of bread/club wheat (*Triticum 'aestivo-compactum'*), in the form of short, squarish grains most typical of the medieval period. These grains were mainly rather puffed, vesicular and brittle, the surfaces matt. Next most abundant were some barley (*Hordeum*) grains whose preservation was rather better: they were plump, often somewhat brownish in colour (as if not fully charred) and with a glossy surface. Also noted were a few poorly preserved grains of oats (*Avena*) and at least one quite well preserved grain which was probably rye (*Secale cereale* L.). Amongst the cereal were traces of chaff (straw 'nodes' and some unidentified rachis or rachilla fragments) and a small group of 'weeds', mainly dock (*Rumex*), black bindweed (*Bilderdykia convolvulus* (L.) Dumort.) and nipplewort (*Lapsana communis* L.).

The small residue (dry weight 0.49 kg) was of stones (to 60 mm), with a little sand and gravel.

Discussion and statement of potential

This assemblage provides some data for an area of northern England for which archaeobotanical information is extremely sparse for any period. If the context can be more closely dated and especially if it proves to be, for example, a primary pit fill, the assemblage should be recorded more thoroughly, with some quantification. It would be even more valuable were other similar deposits to be encountered associated with structures or other features.

Recommendations

The difficulties encountered in sampling the deposit, and the consequent lack of an archaeological context and dating for the recovered remains, prevent any further interpretatively useful study of the current material. However, if these problems can be addressed (the processed subsample yielded sufficient suitable material for dating by radiocarbon assay to be attempted, at least via AMS) then the assemblage from this deposit (together with remains from a larger subsample) should be recorded in more detail.

Any further excavation at this site should certainly allow for the collection and investigation of samples from any deposits with similar concentrations of biological remains.

Retention and disposal

All of the remaining unprocessed sediment, and the fossils recovered from the processed subsample, should be retained for the present.

Archive

All material is currently stored by Palaeoecology Research Services (Unit 8, Dabble Duck Industrial Estate, Shildon, County Durham), along with paper and electronic records pertaining to the work described here.

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