Palaeoecology Research Services

Evaluation of biological remains from excavations at Skiff Lane, Holme-upon-Spalding-Moor, East Riding of Yorkshire (site code: SKH2003)

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by

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Summary

Three sediment samples, recovered from deposits encountered during excavations at Skiff Lane, Holme-upon-Spalding-Moor, East Riding of Yorkshire, were submitted for an evaluation of their bioarchaeological potential.

One of the processed subsamples provided a well preserved assemblage of plant and insect remains giving some indication of conditions in and near the ditch feature from which it was recovered, and with a hint of the use of peatland resources. In view of its reasonably close dating, superb preservation and rich terrestrial insect component, it is recommended that this material, with the addition of further remains from a second subsample of at least the same size, is recorded fully. As well as giving useful evidence concerning conditions at this site, the assemblage would provide a useful addition to data from various other Iron Age and Romano-British sites in south-eastern Yorkshire, with a view to synthesis.

Any future excavation at this site should certainly be accompanied by further sampling and examination of plant and invertebrate macrofossils to explore the nature of occupation and the local environment at this period.

KEYWORDS: SKIFF LANE; HOLME-UPON-SPALDING-MOOR; EAST RIDING OF YORKSHIRE; EVALUATION; ROMANO-BRITISH; LATE 3RD TO 4TH CENTURY AD; PLANT REMAINS; CHARRED PLANT REMAINS; INVERTEBRATE REMAINS

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Introduction

An archaeological evaluation excavation was carried out by Humber Field Archaeology at Skiff Lane, Holme-upon-Spalding-Moor, East Riding of Yorkshire (NGR SE 8300 3570), during September and October 2003.

The excavation was centred upon an area of archaeological interest which included a Romano-British pottery production site. Excavation revealed Romano-British droveway ditches dating to the late 3rd to 4th century, hedge/fence gullies running parallel to the ditches and a few shallow pits of a similar date. A series of ceramic land drains represented the late 19th-20th century drainage schemes on the site.

Three sediment samples ('GBA'/'BS' *sensu* Dobney *et al*. 1992), selected from six taken, were submitted to PRS for an evaluation of their bioarchaeological potential.

Methods

The submitted sediment samples were inspected and their lithologies recorded, using a standard *pro forma*. Two of the samples were processed, following the procedures of Kenward *et al*. (1980; 1986), for the recovery of plant and invertebrate macrofossils.

The flot and washover resulting from processing were examined for plant and invertebrate macrofossils. The residues were examined for larger plant macrofossils and other biological and artefactual remains. Insect preservation was recorded using the scheme of Kenward and Large (1998).

Results

The results are presented in context number order. 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 1310 [lower fill of north droveway ditch]
Sample 1/T (description only)

Moist, light to mid grey-brown to mid to dark grey-brown, brittle to crumbly (working soft), clay sand. No obvious inclusions were present.

No further investigation of this sample was undertaken.

Context 5016 [lower ditch fill]
Sample 6/T (3 kg sieved to 300 microns with paraffin flotation; approximately 4 litres of unprocessed sediment remain)

Moist, light to mid brown to mid to dark grey-brown, brittle to crumbly (working soft), sandy clay to clay sand, with some fine and coarse herbaceous detritus. Some light to mid orange-brown patches of rotted organic material (perhaps woody root) were also present.

The moderate-sized residue of about 600 ml consisted of herbaceous and woody detritus, mainly roots with some bark and twigs, and including about 100 ml of sand. There were some well preserved alder (*Alnus glutinosa* (L.) Gaertner) fruits, and some mostly moderately well preserved seeds of herbaceous plants, including water-pepper (*Polygonum hydropiper* L.), perhaps most likely to have grown in or by the ditch, and greater plantain (*Plantago major* L.), a species of better-drained soils and indicating some disturbance, perhaps trampling. There were traces of some taxa which might have been introduced with peat and/or turves, notably a single shoot (bearing a terminal bud) of heather (*Calluna vulgaris* (L.) Hull), assuming they were not part of the local vegetation (which seems somewhat unlikely in this low-lying area on alluvium).

The flot, of modest size, contained quite large numbers of insect remains, often very well preserved (E 1.0-2.5, mode 2.0 weak; F 1.0-3.0, mode 2.0 weak). As well as water beetles, numerous water flea resting eggs (*Daphnia* ephippia) attested to aquatic deposition,

probably in water which was normally still or sluggish. There were some waterside species, particularly *Stenus* species and *Lesteva longoelytrata* (Goeze), but no beetles or bugs particularly associated with aquatic or emergent vegetation were noted. The ditch may not therefore have held water permanently. Terrestrial insects were rather abundant, with a range of ground beetles and various weevils and leaf beetles indicating herbaceous vegetation. There were some dung beetles (*Aphodius* and *Geotrupes* species). At least three *Trixagus* sp. were observed: these beetles, apparently found in litter on the ground and climbing on low plants, are rare in archaeological deposits, but their significance in the present case is not clear.

In view of its reasonably close dating, superb preservation and rich terrestrial insect component, it is recommended that this material, with the addition of further remains from a second subsample of at least the same size, is recorded fully.

Context 10007 [lower fill of middle ditch]
Sample 4/T (3 kg sieved to 300 microns with washover; approximately 4 litres of unprocessed sediment remain)

Moist, light to mid brown to mid to dark grey-brown, brittle to crumbly (working soft), clay sand. Flecks of ?organic material (possibly just rotted ?root) were present.

This subsample yielded a very small washover of about 70 ml of very decayed roots, with a trace of fine (less than 2 mm) coal and a little sand. The tiny residue was of fine sand (dry weight 68 g).

Discussion and statement of potential

One of the two processed subsamples (from Sample 6, Context 5016) provided a well preserved assemblage of plant and insect remains giving some indication of conditions in and near the ditch, and with a hint of the use of peatland resources (seen repeatedly in deposits of this general age in the area). The other subsample did not provide interpretatively useful remains.

Recommendations

As noted above, further material should be examined from the sample from Context 5016 with a view to eventual publication. As well as giving useful evidence concerning conditions at this site, the assemblage would provide a useful addition to data from various other Iron Age and Romano-British sites in south-eastern Yorkshire, with a view to synthesis.

Any future excavation at this site should certainly be accompanied by further sampling and examination of plant and invertebrate macrofossils to explore the nature of occupation and the local environment at this period.

Retention and disposal

The remaining sediment from Context 5016, together with the fossils recovered from the processed subsample, should be retained. Unless they are required for the investigation of non-biological remains, the other sediment samples may be discarded.

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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