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Plant and invertebrate remains from a cistern on the foreshore at Saltwick, N. Yorkshire

by

Allan Hall and Harry Kenward

Authors' address:

Environmental Archaeology Unit
University of York
Heslington
York YO1 5DD

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

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Gary Marshall
National Trust

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A sample of sediment from the basal fill of a stone-lined cistern was submitted for analysis of plant and invertebrate remains. The sediment was described in the laboratory using a standard *pro forma* and a subsample processed using techniques described by Kenward *et al.* (1980), involving disaggregation, sieving to 300 μm and paraffin flotation.

The sample consisted of light to mid grey, moist, plastic to sticky clay silt with wood fragments, occasional fragments of herbaceous plant detritus and what appeared to be fine charcoal. The 1 kg subsample did not disaggregate easily so it was treated with dilute sodium pyrophosphate to accelerate the process. The residue left after disaggregation consisted mainly of wood fragments, many of them splinter-like, the largest about 50 x 20 x 5 mm, with a very pale colour and fresh appearance. Two of the largest fragments were identified as pine (*Pinus* sp.) and ?spruce (cf. *Picea abies*). With the wood were a few small fragments of bark, a little coal (to 10 mm), brick/tile (to 25 mm), a piece of flint (to 15 mm) and a few small stone chippings, a little sand and traces of ?glassy slag, burnt clay and charred organic material (not charcoal).

The flot from paraffin flotation was very small and included only small quantities of insect remains which, however, were very well preserved. Thirteen beetle and bug species were recorded as adults, only *Cryptophagus* species being represented by more than one individual. There was a mixture of species associated with decomposing matter and species found in open air habitats including disturbed places. A single tentatively identified *Tipnus unicolor*, a spider beetle typically associated with old buildings, was the only very strongly synanthropic species. These remains give no clear evidence as to the way the deposit built up.

There was a single whole beetle larva, whose condition suggested a very recent origin, identified as probably belonging to the family Haliplidae. Likewise, a grass spikelet of very fresh appearance was also observed. These may have been contaminants during sampling.

Identifiable plant remains in the residue were few but mostly quite well preserved. There was a fragment of wheat (*Triticum*) rachis internode and glume base from an ear of this cereal, a leaf of the peatland plant cross-leaved heath (*Erica tetralix*), a tiny frond fragment of bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) and a moss leaf tentatively identified as *Pleurozium schreberi*. These remains seem most likely to have originated in some kind of litter, perhaps from a nearby building, or perhaps in fuel, but the assemblage is really too small for more than speculation.

Reference

Kenward H. K., Hall A. R. and Jones A. K. G. (1980). A tested set of techniques for the extraction of plant and animal macrofossils from waterlogged archaeological deposits. *Science and Archaeology* **22**, 3-15.