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An evaluation of biological remains from excavations at Bishop Wilton, N. Humberside (site code VBW93)

by

John Carrott, Keith Dobney, Allan Hall,
Deborah Jaques, Harry Kenward and Annie Milles

Summary

A single sample of sediment representing a possible kiln floor was examined for its content of biological remains. Apart from a few poorly preserved charred wheat grains and a single land snail, the subsample examined was devoid of ancient biological remains.

In addition, a small amount of hand-collected bone and a human skeleton from other parts of the site were reviewed. The latter was of a male of about 16-18 years. The non-human bone comprised a small assemblage, mostly rather broadly dated and offering little prospect for further worthwhile analysis.

Authors' address:

Environmental Archaeology Unit
University of York
Heslington
York YO1 5DD

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

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Humberside Archaeology Unit
Property Services Department
Humberside County Council
County Hall
Beverley
N. Humberside HU17 9BA

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(i) The kiln floor sample

A single sample of clay from a presumed kiln floor was submitted for analysis of plant and invertebrate macrofossil remains. After description of the sediment in the laboratory, a 2 kg subsample was processed following the methods of Kenward *et al.* (1980). From the resulting residue, a 'washover' was obtained which was checked for recognizable biological remains

The sediment was a dark grey-buff, stiff (working plastic), very stony clay with abundant angular flint and chalk stones 2-60 mm and a trace of large mammal bone and some fine modern roots.

The washover consisted mostly of modern rootlet fragments, with a single land snail (*Trichia* sp.) and three whole charred grains (and perhaps also a few fragments) of wheat, probably bread/club wheat (*Triticum aestivo-compactum*). The whole grains had a very short, squarish, plump form. No chaff was recorded. The residue consisted of angular chalk with some flint and ?ironstone to 20 mm maximum dimension.

(ii) The animal bone assemblage

The excavations at Bishop Wilton produced only a single standard-sized box of animal bones from a total of 38 contexts. The assemblage can be divided into three main chronological groups: Phase II (AD1100-1200), Phase III (1200-1500) and Phase II-III (1100-1500). Bone from seven contexts from 'Phase IV' was not recorded since all was from 'topsoil' deposits.

From the entire assemblage, a total of 283 fragments (weighing 4411.5 g) were recorded, of which 100 (3131.5 g) were identified to species. Unfortunately, most of the bone was from the most broadly dated Phase II-III (28 contexts). Only five contexts from the more tightly dated Phases II and III produced animal bone fragments, amounting to a total of only 59 fragments (2408.5 g), of which a mere 31 (1688 g) could be identified to species. Of these, only 11 fragments derived from the most tightly dated (Phase II) deposits.

Since all material was hand-collected, the assemblage is almost certainly biased towards the larger and more visible species and elements.

Preservation overall was fair, although bone from some contexts was recorded as 'poor' and 'battered'. Colour was also variable, ranging from dark brown to fawn. Fresh breaks and dog gnawing was observed in material from most contexts and evidence of butchery was noted, mostly on cow-sized fragments.

The range of domestic animals represented included cow (34 fragments), caprovid (31 fragments), pig (16 fragments) and horse (10 fragments). Also recovered were several fragments of dog (*Canis* f. domestic), cat (*Felis* f. domestic) and rat (*Rattus* sp. and assumed

to be intrusive, because of the striking differences in preservation and colour from the rest of the bones from the same context). Finally, from context 57 (Phase II), a single fallow deer (*Dama dama*) metatarsal shaft fragment was identified.

The quality of preservation, dog gnawing, extensive butchery and the presence of numerous fresh breaks ensured that only a very small number of measurable bones and teeth were available for study. This was compounded by the lack of quantitative recovery and the small size of the assemblage.

(iii) The human skeleton

A single human inhumation was unearthed in the northernmost trench, on the very limit of the excavations. This crouched, almost complete, inhumation, lying on its right side, was moderately well preserved, although the skull was crushed and fragmented by the weight of overburden. Once cleaned and dried, analysis showed it to be the remains of an adult male of approximately 16-18 years of age. These conclusions were based on the evident non-fusion of the epiphyses of the knee, wrist, shoulder and pelvis and fusion of the elbow, ankle, acetabulum and hip, along with the presence of the third molar and associated tooth wear. The pronounced supra-orbital ridges, large mastoid processes, pronounced mental eminence and, more importantly, the narrow sciatic notch,all point to the individual being male.

There was no evidence of pathology on the skeleton apart from a moderate-sized caries lesion on the occlusal surface of the right mandibular second molar and moderate dental calculus deposits present most noticeably on the lingual surfaces of the lower molars and incisors. An interesting dental anomaly was the retention of the deciduous right maxillary canine, still present as a very worn crown, which had displaced the permanent canine labially causing its misalignment.

Implications

The single sample of sediment examined proved to have no potential for further analysis and, if typical of the site as a whole, suggests that further work on other deposits will be of very limited value.

The animal bone assemblage from Bishop Wilton is very small and the most of the material derives from very broadly dated contexts. There are limited numbers of fragments providing biometrical and age at death information, and as a result little zooarchaeological information could be gleaned from the study of this assemblage.

The human skeleton, although relatively well preserved, is of little intrinsic value as a single specimen. No grave goods were recovered and thus its dating must be speculative, although it is possibly Roman in date. However, other human remains may well be present at this site and further development may provide a larger sample of greater importance.

On the basis of these conclusions, it is recommended that no further work on bone be undertaken.

There is no reason to retain any of the bioarchaeological material from this site.

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.