

Reports from the Environmental Archaeology Unit, York 94/30, 4pp.

**The remains of a chicken from a Roman grave
at Saltersford water treatment plant, near Grantham, Lincolnshire**

by

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Summary

A substantial proportion of the skeleton of a chicken was identified from a Roman grave of mid 2nd century date. This is interpreted as evidence of a specific funerary ritual, involving possible food offerings, parallels of which exist for the Roman period in Great Britain and for mainland Europe.

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27 May 1994

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Introduction

During excavation, the remains of part of a chicken were recovered from below the knees of a poorly preserved human skeleton of probable early to mid 2nd century date. The poor condition of the human remains and the lack of diagnostic features associated with the skull and pelvic region made the attribution of sex problematical. However, the small size and gracile nature of the surviving elements suggest that the remains are from an adult female.

Although there appeared to be little archaeological evidence of direct articulation, all the avian bones were in close association with each other and certainly represent the remains of a single chicken. Preservation of the material appeared fair to poor, with what is assumed to be copious root etching visible on the surface of all elements.

Bird skeletal elements recovered included both left and right lower leg bones (tibiotarsus and tarsometatarsus), two wing bones (radius and carpometacarpus), the wish-bone (furcula), several vertebrae and 21 phalanges. The major leg bones were well enough preserved to allow some biometrical data to be recorded (Table 1)

Discussion

The remains of domestic fowl (in addition to pig and some other birds) are not uncommon finds from graves dated to the Roman period, both from Britain and mainland Europe, and are usually thought to represent food offerings for

the deceased (Lauwerier 1983; 1988; 1993 and Philpott 1991). Often both the head and the meatless portions of the lower legs have been removed (some are even arranged in bowls or on platters), strengthening the assumption that they do indeed represent food offerings. Interestingly, however, only the lower legs and feet are present in the example from Saltersford, whilst the major meat-bearing elements (i.e. upper wings and legs) are wholly absent. If this particular case represents a food offering to the dead, it may well be either a symbolic offering or all that remains of a ritual funerary meal carried out prior to burial.

Other food offerings (which have left no physical trace) may also have been originally placed in the grave. For example, Lauwerier (1993) points out that recipes using beef may have often involved filleted joints (unlike chicken where meat is usually left on the bone) and as a result do not survive in the archaeological record.

Previous research on food offerings from Roman graves has attempted to show a correlation between certain categories of offering and the sex of the deceased. The results of this work apparently indicate that chickens are usually associated with female burials (Martin-Kilcher 1976; Wahl and Kokabi 1987; 1988). However, a recent re-evaluation of the data on which these assumptions were based, suggests that little or no real association exists between the sex of the individual and the category of food offering. (Lauwerier 1993). The data from Saltersford certainly do not contradict the original hypothesis, although a single poorly preserved individual of

dubious sex attribution has little interpretative value.

Conclusions

The chicken remains excavated from Saltersford treatment plant represent an additional interesting example of the practice of Roman funerary offerings already well documented for Britain and mainland Europe.

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Element	Measurement 1	Measurement 2	Measurement 3	Measurement 4
Tibiotarsus (right)	Dip = 18.1			
Tibiotarsus (left)	Dd = 10.9			
Tarsometatarsus (right)	Bp = 13.5	Bd = 11.7	SC = 5.9	GL = 68.4
Tarsometatarsus (left)		Bd = 11.9	SC = 6.0	

Table 1. Biometrical data (measurement in mm)