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**Assessment of vertebrate remains from excavations at Thorley,
Hertfordshire (site codes: HAT93, HAT136, R2400)**

by

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Summary

The small collection of animal bones from three separate excavations undertaken at Thorley, Hertfordshire, represented material from features of both prehistoric and Roman date. Individual contexts produced very limited quantities of animal bone, mostly from the major domestic mammals. Few measurable bones and mandibles with teeth were present and the material was fragmented, with fresh breaks evident throughout.

This assemblage has an extremely limited research potential because of its small size and variable preservation, and the rarity of fragments providing biometrical or age-at-death data. As a consequence, the vertebrate remains are of very limited interpretative value and no further detailed work is recommended.

Keywords: THORLEY; HERTFORDSHIRE; PREHISTORIC; ROMAN; VERTEBRATE REMAINS;
RITUAL DEPOSITS

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Assessment of vertebrate remains from excavations at Thorley, Hertfordshire (site codes: HAT93, HAT136, R2400)

Introduction

Five boxes (approximately 48 x 25 x 18 cm) of animal bone from Thorley, Hertfordshire, mostly from deposits dating to the late prehistoric and Roman periods, were submitted for assessment. Most (four boxes) of the vertebrate remains were recovered from excavations undertaken during 1994. A single box represented material from two earlier evaluations.

Methods

All the material was scanned and as a result of the fragmentary nature of the assemblage, only brief notes were made on the bones from some of the more tightly dated contexts.

Results

Most contexts yielded only small numbers of bone fragments (i.e. less than 20 fragments, Table 1), and those few with substantially more than 20 fragments produced bones which appeared very fragmented, containing few identifiable or measurable fragments.

Very little bone was present in the samples, with no small mammals and only a single bird element being recovered.

Preservation of the bone overall was rather variable, although the material attributed to the Roman period appeared to be generally in better condition. Much of the prehistoric material was scored as 'poor' in preservation, being battered and heavily eroded in appearance. Colour was mostly

fawn or brown, with some variation apparent within material from each context.

Few of the bones showed evidence of butchery, although fresh breakage, which probably occurred during excavation, was noted at moderately high frequencies (20-50% of the entire assemblage), as was dog gnawing.

The vertebrate remains consisted mainly of cattle fragments, with a small proportion of caprine, horse and canid elements also present. The unidentifiable fraction comprised mainly cow-sized shaft, rib, cranium and vertebra fragments.

Additional information worthy of further note included amphibian bones recovered from Context 1493, a 2nd century or later ditch fill. These bones provide some evidence that this feature may have been wet during this period. Also recorded was part of the skeleton of a medium-sized dog (from Context 1482). It has been suggested by the excavator that this dog burial may represent a ritual deposits. A similar interpretation has also been inferred for a cattle skull and horse mandibles from two nearby pits. Lack of more detailed contextual information restricts the authors from commenting further.

Statement of potential

The small size of the assemblage, variable preservation, and the very limited numbers of identifiable and measurable fragments render this material of extremely limited zooarchaeological potential. As a result, it has no value in "enhancing our

understanding and extent of animal husbandry from the later Bronze Age and Iron age sites” (McDonald 1995, 26) and will shed very little light on our understanding of the pastoral economy of the site during the Roman period.

However, the presence of what could be described as ‘special deposits’ from site A of possible pre-Roman date, may reflect votive deposits noted at other sites of Iron Age date (e.g. Grant 1984, Dobney and Jaques in press). A more detailed and integrated analysis of the archaeological information would be required in order to understand these deposits further.

Recommendations

No detailed work on this material is warranted, although the production of a basic archive may aid further archaeological interpretation, particularly with regard contextual information and possible ritual activities.

Time estimates for the production of a basic archive can be found in Table 2.

Archive

All bone is currently stored in the Environmental Archaeology Unit, University of York, along with the paper and electronic records pertaining to the work described here.

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Table 1. Summary data for the vertebrate assemblages from HAT93, R2400 and HAT136.*

Site	No. of contexts containing bone	No. of contexts with > 20 fragments	No. contexts noted	No. contexts scanned	Total no. of fragments
HAT93	11	1	1	11	56
R2400	45	7	3	45	456
HAT136	168	38	21	168	2578

*compiled using data provided by Hertfordshire Archaeological Trust

Table 2. Time estimates (in days) for production of basic archive of vertebrate remains from Thorley. Key to staff initials: RF1 = Keith Dobney; RA = Deborah Jaques.

Task	Staff	Time
Administration	RA	0.5
Record selected bone material	RA	2
Prepare archive report	RA	1
Finalise Report	RF1	0.5
Totals	RF1	0.5
	RA	3