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**Evaluation of biological remains from excavations at
47 - 51 Skeldergate, York (site codes: 1995.3017 and 1995.435)**

by

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Summary

Four samples of sediment and one box of hand-collected animal bone from deposits of medieval and post-medieval date revealed by excavations at 47 - 51 Skeldergate, York, were submitted for an evaluation of their bioarchaeological potential.

Small numbers of poorly preserved plant and invertebrate remains of little interpretative value were recovered from the sediment samples.

Although the small size of the recovered bone assemblage precludes any further detailed recording and interpretation, it is clear that most of the material is fairly well preserved, and from deposits which appear to fit within a well-defined chronological framework. Consequently, it is probable that further excavation would recover a larger collection of tightly dated and well preserved material.

No further work is recommended on the material currently available.

Keywords: SKELDERGATE; YORK; EVALUATION; MEDIEVAL; POST-MEDIEVAL; PLANT REMAINS; INVERTEBRATE REMAINS; VERTEBRATE REMAINS; ANIMAL BONE

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Evaluation of biological remains from excavations at 47 - 51 Skeldergate, York (site codes: 1995.3017 and 1995.435)

Introduction

Excavations were carried out by York Archaeological Trust at 47 - 51 Skeldergate, York early in 1996. Four General Biological Analysis samples ('GBAs' *sensu* Dobney *et al.* 1992) and one box of bone were submitted for an evaluation of their biological remains. The deposits considered here were of medieval and post-medieval date.

Methods

All of the GBA samples were inspected in the laboratory; 1 kg subsamples were taken from each of the GBAs for extraction of macrofossil remains, following procedures of Kenward *et al.* (1980; 1986).

The flots, washover and residues resulting from processing were examined for their content of plant and invertebrate macrofossils. Notes were made on the quantity of fossils, their quality of preservation, principal taxa, and main ecological groups.

Results and Discussion

The results are presented in two groups—those from Trench 2 and the borehole samples. Context information provided by the excavator is given in square brackets.

Trench 2 (1995.435)

Context 2003, Sample 1/T

[Fill of shallow ovoid cut 2004. Domestically derived pit?]

Moist, mid brown, crumbly (working sticky when wet), sandy silt with very small to medium-sized stones (2 to 60 mm), brick/tile, mortar, charcoal, large mammal bone and modern rootlets present.

The large washover was mostly charcoal (to 20 mm), with two charred grain fragments, four fragments of very rotted ?fish bone, two mollusc fragments (*Cecilioides acicula* (Müller)—a burrowing species and probably intrusive—and ?*Discus rotundatus* (Müller)), rootlets and other plant detritus and some slag.

The moderately large washover consisted of charcoal to 25 mm.

The small residue consisted of moderate amounts of sand, brick/tile and mortar (both up to 20 mm) with traces of cinder, charcoal, mussel shell and ?fish bone; there was also a snail shell and a mammal tooth. The only plant remains observed were modern root fragments.

Context 2008, Sample 2/T

[Sealing wall 2013. 11/12th century. Redeposited natural or *in situ* silting in possible drainage gully?]

Moist, mid brown, unconsolidated, sand with small stones (6 to 20 mm), brick/tile, mortar and charcoal present.

No washover was performed on this sample

The small residue contained charcoal, root fragments and significant quantities of mortar. These inclusions suggest that the deposit formed by *in situ* silting—it is certainly not simply redeposited ‘natural’ (i.e. not glacial, fluvio-glacial or riverine material).

Borehole samples (1995.3017)

Context 5003, Sample 4/T

[Borehole 5]

Moist, mid to dark grey brown, stiff (working soft and slightly plastic), slightly sandy slightly clay silt and fine and coarse herbaceous detritus with small stones present.

The small flot was mostly plant detritus with a small assemblage of invertebrate remains, predominantly decomposer beetle species with mites, a fly puparium, a bug fragment and a *Daphnia ephippium* also noted.

The bulk of the moderately large residue consisted of fragmented dark-coloured fibrous wood, presumably splintered from a timber during boring. It appeared to be oak, and exhibited a texture, hardness and colour typical of the best preserved archaeological material. ‘Seeds’ were sparse in the subsample but well preserved; most were from probable weeds, all were typical of urban archaeological assemblages. One specimen of note was a fragment of a shoot tip (consisting of two pairs of scale leaves) of conifer, probably in the family Cupressaceae. Such

ornamentals are common in urban gardens and some doubt as to its antiquity must be asserted. If it is definitely not a contaminant, it suggests that the deposit concerned is probably post-medieval, perhaps post-1750.

Context 6006, Sample 3/T

[Borehole 6]

Moist, dark grey brown with orange patches, slightly stiff (working soft), slightly humic silt with very small to medium-sized stones (2 to 60 mm), mortar, charcoal and rotted wood present.

The small flot was mostly plant detritus, again with a small assemblage of invertebrate remains dominated by decomposer beetle species. Mites, fragments of insect larvae and pupae and fly puparia were also noted.

The moderately large residue was of sand and gravel with a mixture of occupation debris—mortar, brick/tile, charcoal and wood fragments. There was a small assemblage of poorly to moderately well preserved ‘seeds’, mainly weeds (and dominated by chickweed, *Stellaria media* (L.) Vill.) with smaller amounts of stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica* L.). Plants perhaps suggesting the presence of food waste included two charred grains of wheat (*Triticum*) and a third, unidentified, charred cereal grain, and a seed fragment which may have been linseed, *Linum usitatissimum* L.

Bone

A single box (31x31x22 cm) of animal bones was submitted. A total of 10 bone-bearing contexts was represented, mostly dated to the medieval or post-medieval periods on the basis of information provided by the excavator.

All vertebrate remains were scanned and briefly commented upon. Only 104 fragments (37 identified) were recovered from Trenches 1 and 2, most of which (73 fragments) were from the former. Table 1 shows the species present in the assemblage, along with the numbers of measurable bones and mandibles with teeth.

Overall, the bone was of fair preservation, with much of the material being brown or fawn in colour. A single context (1011) contained poorly preserved, dark brown fragments, with rounded edges. Little evidence of butchery was noted, with the exception of material from Contexts 1011 and 1012. These deposits produced cattle long bones which had been split longitudinally. Dog-gnawing was evident on a small number of fragments.

Cattle, caprine and pig were the most frequently represented taxa, with a single juvenile roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus* L.) metatarsal also present. Additionally, two unidentifiable fragments of fish were recorded from Context 2003.

Recommendations

Sediment samples

These deposits warrant no further analysis for plant and invertebrate animal remains and it is unlikely that others encountered during development would be worth examining, although if deposits at depth with preservation of the kind seen in Sample 4 are to be destroyed, they should be subjected to detailed recording and sampling. Such deposits certainly should not be damaged by development without proper excavation and sampling, and commensurate funding for post-excavation analysis.

Bone

Although the small size of the recovered bone assemblage precludes any further detailed recording and interpretation, it is clear that most of the material is fairly well preserved, and from deposits which appear to fit within a well-defined chronological framework. Consequently, it is probable that further excavation would recover a larger collection of tightly dated and well preserved material. Previous work at the neighbouring site of Baile Hill produced a moderate-sized, well preserved vertebrate assemblage of 12th -13th century date, which included a wide range of species (Rackham 1977).

Well-dated assemblages from the medieval and post-medieval periods are uncommon both regionally and nationally and, as such, should be considered as high priority for further

research. Any destruction of these deposits should be accompanied by an adequate sampling strategy, with appropriate provision for a post-excavation programme.

Retention and disposal

The sediment samples need not be retained.

The bone assemblage should be retained for the present. If no further excavation is to be undertaken at this site then the current material may be discarded.

Archive

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

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Table 1. Hand-collected bone from Trenches 1 and 2, 47 - 51 Skeldergate, York

Taxon		Total no.	No. measurable	No. mandibles
<i>Bos f. domestic</i>	cattle	18	4	1
Caprinae sp.	sheep/goat	6	3	1
<i>Sus f. domestic</i>	pig	7	4	-
<i>Equus f. domestic</i>	horse	2	-	-
<i>Capreolus capreolus L.</i>	roe deer	1	-	-
<i>Gallus f. domestic</i>	chicken	1	-	-
Fish		2	-	-
<i>Sub-total</i>		<i>37</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>2</i>
Unidentified		67	-	-
Total		104	11	2