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**An assessment of vertebrate remains from excavations at Neasham Abbey,  
Darlington, County Durham (site code: NA96)**

by

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**Summary**

*Two boxes of hand-collected bone from excavations at Neasham Abbey, Darlington, County Durham have been assessed for their interpretative potential.*

*The research potential of this assemblage is restricted by its small size and the rarity of fragments providing biometrical and age-at-death data. As a result the vertebrate remains are of little interpretative value and no further detailed work is recommended.*

**Keywords:** NEASHAM ABBEY; DARLINGTON; COUNTY DURHAM; ASSESSMENT; VERTEBRATE REMAINS

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## An assessment of vertebrate remains from excavations at Neasham Abbey, Darlington, County Durham (site code: NA96)

### Introduction

During November 1996 Northern Archaeological Associates undertook excavations at Neasham Abbey, County Durham, on the site of a Benedictine priory. The area under investigation was restricted to a single narrow strip, the foundation trench for a flood defence wall. Features uncovered included wall foundations, a 16th century domestic hearth and a series of probable workshop hearths associated with what may have been a courtyard.

Two boxes (approximately 40 x 30 x 12 cm) of animal bone were submitted to the EAU for assessment. Almost half of the fragments were recovered from deposits associated with a substantial cobbled surface (Context 6). Medieval pottery came from the rubble layers, whilst the cobbled area produced post-medieval sherds suggesting that this area continued in use after the demise of the priory during the Dissolution.

### Methods

All the hand-collected bone was examined; subjective records were made of preservation, angularity (i.e. the nature of the broken surfaces) and colour, whilst quantities, and identifications were noted where appropriate.

All fragments not identified to species or species group were recorded as 'unidentified'. These included skull, vertebra, rib and shaft fragments and other elements where species identification was unclear.

### Results

The small assemblage of bone amounted to 694 (10994 g) fragments of which 224 (7001 g) were identified to species. Thirty-three of the 42 bone-bearing contexts yielded less than 20 fragments.

Preservation of the material was good to fair, although bones from two contexts were described as poor. Colour was variable, ranging from dark brown to fawn, and in a number of cases this variation occurred within single contexts. Little fresh breakage and dog gnawing was observed. Material from some deposits showed evidence for butchery, including the longitudinal chopping of cattle vertebrae (indicating the splitting of carcasses into sides).

The range of identified species is shown in Table 1, together with total number of fragments, numbers of measurable bones, numbers of mandibles with teeth *in situ* and numbers of isolated teeth. From this table it can be seen that the remains of cattle were most common, followed by caprovids. Fragments of pig were also recorded, along with small numbers of chicken bones.

Cattle remains were represented mainly by maxilla and mandible fragments, isolated teeth, metapodials and phalanges, all indicative of primary butchery waste. However, caprovid fragments included major meat-bearing bones (i.e. scapula, humerus and pelvis), whilst only small numbers of head and distal limb elements were recorded.

Bones of wild mammal included two fallow deer (*Dama dama* (L.)) fragments from

Contexts 102 and 136, while a third fragment from Context 34 could only be tentatively identified as cervid. Venison was highly regarded in the medieval and post-medieval periods and was usually only available to wealthy individuals either through hunting in their own parks or through gifts provided by patronage (Neave 1991). The presence of these few fragments, therefore, hints at high status occupation.

Contexts 34 and 64 each produced single fragments of rabbit. In the medieval period, rabbit was classed as a delicacy and its remains are mainly confined to high status sites, such as ecclesiastical institutions and castles (Locker 1985; Jaques and Dobney 1995; Albarella and Davis 1996). However, both of the bones from Neasham Abbey were light in colour and appeared somewhat greasy in texture and it seems more likely that these fragments represent modern intrusive material.

A human ?metapodial fragment, recovered from Context 34, suggests this might be a mixed/reworked deposit.

Additional taxa identified from the assemblage included goose, duck and a single jackdaw tibiotarsus (*Corvus monedula* L.).

### Statement of potential

The site itself is of some interest, with deposits spanning the pre- and post-Dissolution period. Unfortunately, the bone assemblage, although well preserved and potentially tightly dated, is too small to allow any useful interpretations to be made. Additionally, few fragments providing biometrical and age-at-death data were present, further limiting the zooarchaeological potential.

### Recommendations

No further work on this material is recommended.

### Retention and disposal

The bone should be retained if required for archive purposes.

### Archive

All material is 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 Neasham Abbey.

Species		No. fragments	No. measurable	No. mandibles	No. isolated teeth*
<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i> (L.)	rabbit	2	-	-	-
<i>Sus f. domestic</i>	pig	29	2	1	3
Cervid	deer	1	-	-	-
<i>Dama dama</i> (L.)	fallow deer	2	-	-	-
<i>Bos f. domestic</i>	cattle	99	20	2	3
Caprovid	sheep/goat	71	18	4	6
<i>Anser</i> sp.	goose	2	-	-	-
<i>Anas</i> sp.	duck	1	-	-	-
<i>Gallus f. domestic</i>	chicken	15	-	-	-
<i>Corvus monedula</i> L.	jackdaw	1	-	-	-
cf. <i>Homo sapiens</i> L.	human	1	-	-	-
<i>Sub-total</i>		224	47	7	12
Unidentified bird		4	-	-	-
Unidentified		466	-	-	-
<i>Sub-total</i>		470	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>		<b>694</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>12</b>

\* Includes only those teeth of use for ageing or sexing information