

Palaeoecology Research Services

**Evaluation of biological remains from excavations at
land off Masonic Lane, Thirsk, North Yorkshire
(site code: YORYM2000.2401)**

by

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Summary

Five sediment samples and one bag of hand-collected bone from deposits revealed by excavations at Masonic Lane, Thirsk, were submitted for an evaluation of their bioarchaeological potential.

The deposits that were examined yielded only a few, mostly poorly preserved charred plant remains and a small quantity of uncharred material. They were of little interpretative value. No invertebrate remains were recovered.

Vertebrate remains were mostly from modern or undated deposits and only a small quantity were recovered from the two 12th century contexts. Most of the bones were reasonably well preserved and represented the usual range of domestic species.

No further work is recommended on the plant and hand-collected vertebrate remains. However, the possibility that preservation of better preserved plant and vertebrate material in suitable contexts at this site should be borne in mind during any further interventions or development work, since evidence from biological remains for past environments and human activity in this town is very limited.

KEYWORDS: MASONIC LANE; THIRSK; NORTH YORKSHIRE; EVALUATION; MEDIEVAL; 19TH/20TH CENTURY; PLANT REMAINS; VERTEBRATE REMAINS

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Evaluation of biological remains from excavations at land off Masonic Lane, Thirsk, North Yorkshire (site code: YORYM 2000.2401)

Introduction

An archaeological evaluation excavation was carried out by York Archaeological Trust at land off Masonic Lane, Thirsk, North Yorkshire (NGR SE 4272 8211), between 18 October and 26 October 2001.

Five sediment samples ('GBA'/'BS' *sensu* Dobney *et al.* 1992) and a small bag of hand-collected animal bone were recovered from deposits from four trenches. All but two of the deposits were of 19th/20th century date or undated. Two 12th century ditch fills (Contexts 3001 and 3006) were revealed in Trench 3.

All the material was submitted for an evaluation of its bioarchaeological potential.

Methods

The sediment samples were inspected in the laboratory. Descriptions of the lithology of two samples, 1 and 2 (Contexts 3001 and 3006) were recorded using a standard *pro forma*. Both samples were bulk-sieved to 300µm.

The washovers and residues resulting from processing were examined for plant and invertebrate macrofossils and the residues were sorted for bone, and other biological and artefactual remains.

All of the hand-collected bone was recorded; 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. Additionally, notes were recorded for each context concerning fragment size, dog gnawing, burning, butchery and fresh breakage.

Results

Sediment samples

The results of the investigation of the washovers are summarised by Context in Table.

Context 3001 [12th C ditch fill] Sample 1/T (3 kg)

Mid-dark grey-brown, crumbly to unconsolidated (working slightly sticky and plastic when wet), slightly silty, slightly clay sand with stones 2-20 mm present.

This subsample yielded a large residue of about 650 cm³ of coarse quartz sand with some pebbles (to 40 mm in maximum dimension) and a very small washover of a few cm³ of charcoal (to 10 mm) and modern woody roots. There were a few very poorly preserved (puffed, eroded) charred cereal grains, amongst which was one well-preserved grain of barley (*Hordeum* sp.). There were traces of uncharred seeds of no interpretative value, except for duckweed, *Lemna*, presumably once growing in the ditch.

Context 3006 [12th C ditch fill] Sample 2/T (3 kg)

Mid-dark, slightly orange-grey-brown, brittle to crumbly (working somewhat sticky and plastic when wet), slightly silty, slightly clay sand with stones 2-60 mm, charcoal (to 20 mm) and fragments of bone present.

The large residue of about 950 cm³ consisted of coarse quartz sand and gravel (to 30 mm) with a trace of bone (to 40 mm). The very small washover comprised a few cm³ of modern woody roots with charcoal (to 10 mm) and with a moderate number of poorly preserved charred cereal grains. Again one was a well-preserved specimen of barley, whilst the remainder included specimens tentatively identified as wheat (*Triticum*), oats (*Avena*) and rye (*Secale cereale*). There were also a few uncharred seeds, of which the only ones present in more than trace amounts were those of *Lemna*. The washover also yielded traces of aluminium foil, some white and yellow scraps of what may have been plastic or paint, and a small fragment of blue cotton yarn/fabric.

Vertebrate remains

In total the assemblage from the four trenches amounted to 60 fragments representing ten contexts. Details of the vertebrate remains from individual contexts can be found in Table 1.

Trench 1

Three contexts (Contexts 1005, 1007 and 1008), all of 19th/20th century date, produced three fragments of bone, including a very well preserved rabbit pelvis fragment.

Trench 2

A total of six bones were recovered from two deposits (Contexts 2000 and 2001). Both deposits were of modern date. Again, rabbit remains were identified, together with a number of large and medium-sized mammal shaft and vertebra fragments. Preservation of the material was good.

Trench 3

Three deposits, two of which were fills of a 12th century ditch (contexts 3001 and 3006), produced a small assemblage, amounting to 12 fragments. Overall, preservation was good, although some fragments from Context 3001 were rather battered in appearance, whilst bones from Context 3006 were variable in colour. Most fragments represented large and medium-sized mammals, however, cow and caprovid remains were also identified.

Trench 4

Bone producing deposits from this trench were undated. Thirty-nine fragments were recovered, most of which were battered in appearance. This is not surprising given that Context 4007 was described as a plough soil. Fresh breakage was also prevalent. Cattle remains were present and included isolated teeth and mandible fragments. Most other bones could only be identified as large mammal shaft fragments.

Discussion and statement of potential

These two deposits yielded only very small amounts of mostly poorly preserved charred plant material and a very little uncharred material of limited interpretative value.

Vertebrate remains from this site were rather scarce, although preservation was reasonable. Much of the material was from modern deposits and those from the ditch fills were variable both in colour and ‘angularity’ (the nature of the broken surfaces). This suggests the possible presence of redeposited material.

Recommendations

It is not thought profitable to carry out further analysis on the samples to hand. However, the possibility that preservation of better preserved plant material in suitable contexts at this site should be borne in mind during any further interventions or development work, since evidence from plant remains for past environments and human activity in this town is vanishingly small. Moreover, material dated to the 12th century is rather scarce, regionally.

No further work is recommended for the present vertebrate assemblage. On the basis of the preservation of the recovered remains, further excavation may produce a moderate assemblage of reasonably preserved animal bones.

Retention and disposal

The present material need not be retained.

Archive

All material is currently stored by Palaeoecology Research Services (Unit 8, Dabble Duck Industrial Estate, Shildon, County Durham), along with paper and electronic records pertaining to the work described here.

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References

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Table 1. Hand-collected vertebrates recovered from deposits from excavations at land off Masonic Lane, Thirsk, North Yorkshire.

Trench	Context/ Date	Nos. of fragments	Notes
1	1005 19 th /20 th		Preservation: fair. Large-sized mammal: 1 humerus shaft fragment – juvenile individual.
1	1007 19 th /20 th	1	Preservation: fair. Medium-sized mammal: 1 shaft fragment.
1	1008 19 th /20 th	1	Preservation: good. Bone has ‘greasy’ appearance. Medium-sized mammal: 1 rib fragment.
2	2000	1	Preservation: fair. Rodent gnawed. Medium-sized mammal: 1 rib fragment.
2	2001 19 th /E20 th	5	Preservation: good; Colour: fawn; Angularity: spiky. Cow: 1 first phalanx. Rabbit: 1 metapodial. Large-sized mammal: 1 vertebra fragment – chopped longitudinally; 1 humerus shaft. Medium-sized mammal: 1 shaft fragment.
3	3001 12 th	5	Preservation: fair; Colour: brown; Angularity: spiky and battered. Cow: 1 mandibular premolar. Large-sized mammal: 1 scapula fragment (sawn); 1 vertebra fragment. Unidentified: 2 fragments
3	3003 modern	2	Preservation: fair Large-sized mammal: 1 shaft fragment. Medium-sized mammal: 1 shaft fragment.
3	3006 12 th	5	Preservation: good; Colour: variable; Angularity: spiky. Cow: 1 isolated upper tooth; 1 proximal metacarpal. Caprovid: 1 metacarpal (measurable); 1 first phalanx. Both represent same individual. Large-sized mammal: 1 rib fragment.
4	4004 undated	14	Preservation: fair; Colour: brown; Angularity: battered and rounded. Cow: 1 metacarpal shaft; 1 premolar. Large-sized mammal: 1 mand fragments. Medium-sized mammal: 4 shaft fragments. Unidentified: 7 fragments
4	4007 undated	25	Preservation: fair; Colour: brown; Angularity: battered and spiky. Fresh breakage quite extensive. Cow: 2 mandible fragments; 1 proximal radius fragment. Large-sized mammal: 1 pelvis fragment; 3 cranium fragments; 1 mandible fragment; 1 shaft fragment. Medium-sized mammal: 2 shaft fragments. Unidentified: 14 fragments.