

AH
CAS92
[92/40]

An evaluation of the bioarchaeological value of deposits from excavations at Castlethorpe 2, Brigg, South Humberside, 1992

Annie Milles, Keith Dobney, Allan Hall, and Harry Kenward

Summary

One sample from the excavation of a prehistoric ditch at the site of the deserted medieval village was examined for plant and animal remains. The landsnails suggest that the ditch contained rather damp grass, whilst the sides might have been bare. The very small, hand-collected animal bone and human bone assemblage from the excavations indicate further work to be of little value unless larger, better preserved and systematically collected material is available. However, it is felt that further investigation of the landsnails at these two sites could yield useful information about the landscape in the area.

Authors' address:

Environmental Archaeology Unit
University of York
Heslington
York
YO1 5DD

0904 433843-51

4 June 1992

An evaluation of the bioarchaeological value of deposits from excavations at Castlethorpe, Brigg, South Humberside, 1992

Annie Milles, Keith Dobney, Allan Hall, and Harry Kenward

One sample taken during the excavation of the deserted medieval village was selected by the site director for an evaluation of its potential as a source of information about past environment and activity through analysis of plant and animal remains: there was also a very small hand-collected animal bone assemblage.

In the laboratory, the sample was examined and its lithology described using a standard *pro-forma*. A 1 kg subsample was processed following methods outlined by Evans (1972),

The processed subsample was examined for molluscan, insect and plant remains. The results of the analyses are presented and brief context information is given in brackets.

Context 112, sample 117 (taken from the fill of a prehistoric ditch, underneath part of a human skeleton): mid orange-brown, dry to moist, brittle to crumbly, slightly sandy silty clay which contained worm burrows filled with a darker grey sediment, modern seedlings, and angular stone (2mm-6cms).

The landsnails included *Cochlicopa lubrica* (5), *Cochlicopa* sp. (3), *Vitrina pellucida* (1), *Vitrea* sp. (2), *Pupilla muscorum* (14), *Vertigo pygmaea* (6), *Punctum pygmaeum* (2), *Cepaea* sp. (1), *Vallonia costata* (9), *Vallonia pulchella* (25), *Vallonia* sp. (23), *Trichia hispida* (64), *Cecilioides acicula* (13) and *Aegopinella nitidula* (1), and would be typical of relatively moist conditions in the lower part of the ditch, whilst the presence of *Pupilla* may indicate bare ground, or very short vegetation on the sides. The absence of species more closely associated with shaded conditions suggests that the grassland was not particularly tall. There were also a very few charred cereal grain fragments.

The animal bone assemblage

The majority of material was very poorly preserved, exhibiting both a high degree of physical erosion and what appeared to be iron oxide staining, but little in the way of excessive fragmentation. Erosion took the form of general bone surface degeneration as well as more specific root etching or what may well be insect tracking (Brothwell 1992).

Interestingly, in contrast to the mammal bones, the few bird bones that were recovered exhibited exceedingly good preservation. None showed signs of erosion but all were similarly well stained.

11 contexts produced the scant remains of both wild and domestic animals and birds. Cattle were represented by only two fragments (a single thoracic vertebra chopped laterally through the transverse process and a well preserved cuboid-navicular bone), sheep by two (a cervical vertebra

showing evidence of possible digestion, and a humerus shaft fragment) and pig by a single proximal radius fragment.

Context 93 produced the incomplete poorly preserved remains of a single horse, represented by a full set of maxillary teeth, a badly crushed and fragmented skull, 4-5 fragments of cervical vertebrae, rib fragments and an innominate bone. A further innominate, identified as horse, was recovered from context 9. It was similarly poorly preserved and stained but derived from the same side of the body as that from context 93. It therefore certainly derived from a separate individual.

Domestic bird remains were represented by only three bones, a coracoid and tibiotarsus identified as chicken (*Gallus f. domestic*) and a carpometacarpus of domestic or Greylag goose (*Anser anser*). In addition a single fragment of humerus from context 57 was tentatively identified as Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*).

A single proximal tibia fragment of rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) from context 6 indicates that mixing of deposits or intrusion of material may have occurred if an Iron Age or pre-conquest date for this context is correct. Interestingly, however, the bone exhibits the same erosion and staining apparent in the rest of the assemblage.

The Human Remains

A very small number of human bone fragments were recovered from the site. Like the animal remains these were extremely poorly preserved, showing severe physical and possibly chemical weathering on the bone surfaces.

Identified elements included three small skull vault fragments, a single humerus shaft fragment, three fragments of tibia shaft and a shaft and proximal fragment of femur. No more than a single individual is represented by these remains and in view of the presence of visible cranial sutures and a possibly fused proximal femur, this individual may well have been a young adult. The remains are, however, too scant and badly preserved to provide any further specific information regarding age, sex or pathology.

Implications

This assessment suggests that further work on the Mollusca from this site should be carried out, in particular to establish the type of landscapes occupied by the prehistoric sites and the medieval village, and to examine the effects of associated agricultural activities. However, the scant nature and relatively poor preservation of the animal bones renders any future work of fairly low priority in terms of zooarchaeology or physical anthropology. A larger, well preserved and systematically recovered assemblage of Iron age date would be of much greater importance.

References

Brothwell, D.R. (1992) Bones and beyond bones: insects, stains and keratin remains. *Circaea* 9 (1), 15-17.

Evans, J.G. (1972) *Land snails in archaeology*. London: Seminar Press.