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# Evaluation of biological remains from excavations at Flemingate House, Beverley (site code FHB93)

by

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## Summary

A series of samples of sediment and a small assemblage of hand-collected shell and bone from medieval deposits at Flemingate House have been examined. Of the three samples selected for analysis, only one gave modest preservation of plant remains and a few insects but was not of much interpretative value.

The small assemblages of hand-collected shell (mostly oyster) and bone were of little bioarchaeological value.

Although further samples of sediment for analysis of plant and invertebrate remains seem unlikely to produce useful assemblages, bone from any subsequent excavation (if sieved from large samples) may be of value.

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### Methods

Nine samples of sediment from five contexts, mostly of 12th-13th century date, were submitted for an evaluation of their bioarchaeological potential. All nine samples were described in the laboratory (using a standard *pro forma*) and three samples representing three contexts selected for analysis.

For these, 1 kg 'test' subsamples were processed following methods outlined by Kenward *et al.* (1980; 1986) and 'squashes' for parasite eggs made following methods of Dainton (1992).

### Results

The sediment descriptions and the results of analysis of the three selected samples were as follows (with excavator's context information in brackets):

#### *Trench 1*

#### **Context 41, sample 50** [floor silt, 1st quarter C13th]

Mid grey-brown to light orange-brown, crumbly to sticky (working plastic), slightly sandy silty clay with stones and pebbles 2-20 mm and flecks of brick/tile, charcoal and ?small bone; also some lumps of paler material and some orange iron-rich patches.

Test subsample: The small flot contained some charcoal and pale orange plant fragments, together with traces of very rotted arthropod cuticle, three very fresh-looking elderberry seeds and a rush seed. The modest-sized residue was of sand and gravel to 35 mm, with some chalk and other stones, a trace of fish bone, brick/tile and charcoal. Much of the material, however, consisted of brown calcareous concretions to 15 mm, some with bone fragments or impressions of plant (?grass) fragments. A small subsample disaggregated using dilute hydrochloric acid did not reveal the presence of any parasitic worm eggs, though there was evidently plant-derived matter present, including ?grass pollen, and phytoliths.

Parasites: No eggs were recorded

#### **Context 65** [slot fill, undated]

#### **Sample 59**

Mid grey-brown to orange, sticky to plastic, slightly stony, slightly sandy silty clay with traces of stones 2-20 mm, chalk flecks and charcoal and patches of orange and buff sediment. No further analysis.

**Context 68** [organic silt above natural, mid C12th]

**Sample 71**

Mid grey-brown, crumbly (working plastic), very slightly sandy clay silt with moderate amounts of limestone or chalk chips 206 mm, and traces of mortar/plaster and vivianite. No further analysis.

**Sample 72**

Mid grey-brown to olive-buff, plastic, sticky, slightly silty clay with traces of stones 20-60 mm, chalk flecks, vivianite, charcoal and wood.

Test: A very small group of insect remains was recovered from the small flot, the eight beetle taxa recorded being typical of urban occupation sites. Beyond this, the insects had no interpretative value. Plant remains in this and the modest-sized residue (of which about 40% by volume consisted of strongly decayed wood and herbaceous detritus, with a little charcoal), included a modest range of identifiable taxa representing mainly waste ground and cultivated soils, though with some plants of wet places, and a single cultivated taxon, summer savory (*Satureja hortensis*). There were also some concretions and chalk to 15 mm, a little bone and pot and quartz sand. The concretions were grey, iron-stained, slightly calcareous and appeared to be formed of mineral sediment.

Parasites: a single *Trichuris* egg was recorded.

*Trench 2*

**Context 108** [organic silt layer above natural, C12th]

**Sample 110**

Mid grey-brown, crumbly, sticky (working plastic), slightly stony slightly sandy silty clay with traces of stones and pebbles 2-20 mm and charcoal, and patches of paler buff and orange material. No further analysis.

**Sample 118**

Mid grey-brown to orange (and small buff pebbles), plastic, stiff, sticky, moderately stony slightly silty clay with traces of stones 2-60 mm, charcoal/manganese salts and ?a charred seed. No further analysis.

**Sample 119**

Mid grey-brown through buff and ginger to pale grey, crumbly, stiff (working plastic), slightly stony silty clay with traces of stones 2-60+ mm (especially limestone/chalk flecks) and of charcoal. No further analysis.

### Sample 120

Mid grey-brown, crumbly, sticky (working plastic), slightly silty clay with traces of stones 2-60 mm, chalk (including chalk chips and flecks) and of charcoal.

Test: The small flot included only traces of poorly preserved arthropod remains, with two beetle taxa and a single fly puparium recognizable, with traces of several plant taxa of no interpretative value. The residue was almost identical to that for subsample 50/T but the concretions were more sand-rich and none showed bone fragments or impressions of plant debris.

Parasites: Three *Trichuris* eggs were recorded, suggesting that some faecal material had been present.

Context 111 [pit fill; undated]

### Sample 116

Mid grey-brown, crumbly to sticky (working plastic), slightly stony, slightly sandy, slightly silty clay with a trace of herbaceous detritus and traces of stones 2-60 mm (including chalk). No further analysis.

### Shell

A very little hand-collected shell was recovered from contexts 103 and 105; all the specimens were oyster, but for a single garden snail (*Helix aspersa*) and a cockle (*Cerastoderma edule*) shell from 105. They are not worthy of more work and further sampling of shell would not be warranted unless particularly conspicuous concentrations were to be encountered.

### Bone

The excavations produced two standard-sized boxes of animal bone. The material, which came from two separate trenches, was all hand-collected. On the basis of archaeological evidence, the assemblage from Trench 1 (11 contexts) was dated to the mid 12th-early 14th centuries and that from Trench 2 broadly to the 12th-16th centuries (three of the six contexts from Trench 2 being more tightly dated to the 12th century).

The entire assemblage consisted of 346 fragments, weighing 6645.5g. Of this total, only 131 fragments could be identified to species. Most of the bones recovered were from deposits from Trench 1 (243 fragments) and of these only 92 were identified to species. Trench 2 produced only 103 fragments, only 39 of which were identified to species.

Preservation overall was mostly fair, although the bones from several contexts were recorded as being poorly preserved. Colour varied from dark brown, through brown, to

fawn and although the majority of bone fragments were angular, a few were rather battered in appearance. Dog gnawing occurred throughout, and in some contexts was quite extensive. Evidence of butchery was fairly common, but was restricted, on the whole, to cow-sized fragments. Three shaft fragments from a metatarsal, a tibia and a femur from context 19 showed evidence of chop and knife marks. All three bones were tentatively identified as red deer (*Cervus elaphus*).

The bulk of the identifiable bones came from domestic mammals and included cattle (35 fragments), sheep/goat (50 fragments), pig (13 fragments) and horse (2 fragments). Bird bones were also present (11 fragments from each trench), mostly consisting of goose and domestic fowl. Context 19 yielded three possible red deer bones, as already mentioned, whilst a cat radius fragment was also recovered from Trench 1. In addition, five fish fragments were identified (two from Trench 1, and three from Trench 2). These represented the remains of large gadids.

From the whole of the assemblage, a total of 37 measurable bones were recorded, of which 22 were sheep/goat fragments from Trench 1. There were also six mandibles with teeth and a single isolated tooth of use for ageing purposes.

### **Implications**

With the exception of sample 72 (context 68) the samples examined offered little evidence for preservation of biological remains and, unless they are atypical of the site as a whole, suggest that further bioarchaeological analysis is not warranted. It is unlikely that further useful information would be obtained by closer inspection of sample 72, despite the presence of a small macrofossil assemblage.

The small size of the bone assemblage and the broad dating of the contexts renders the zooarchaeological value of the assemblage of limited value. However, should further opportunities for excavation arise, it would be likely that a moderate-sized bone assemblage of medieval date, which is relatively well preserved, will be recovered. This would provide important comparative data from an area of the town from which we have little information for comparison with other published sites from Beverley.

### **Retention and disposal**

There is no reason to retain either the samples of sediment or hand-collected shell and bone recovered from this site.

### **References**

Dainton, M. (1992). A quick, semi-quantitative method for recording nematode gut parasite eggs from archaeological deposits. *Circaea* 9, 58-63