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Report on a human inhumation and other vertebrate remains from Staxton Motel, North Yorkshire (site code OSA98EV12)

by

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Summary

A single human inhumation and a small quantity of other vertebrate remains were recovered from an evaluation excavation at Staxton Motel, North Yorkshire. A brooch was found with the skeleton which, together with other evidence, suggested an Anglian date. Skeleton 1028 represents the poorly preserved remains of an adult (25-35 years old) male, 5'4"-5'7" tall, of relatively gracile build and with no pathological conditions visible on the recovered parts of the skeleton.

The parasite squash undertaken on the abdominal soil sample was devoid of any recognisable organic component. The small quantity and poor preservation of the vertebrate remains from other contexts renders them of no zooarchaeological or interpretative value.

Keywords: STAXTON; N. YORKS; ANGLIAN?; INHUMATION; HUMAN REMAINS; ANIMAL BONE

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Introduction

A single human skeleton and a very small amount of animal and human bone were recovered from an evaluation excavation undertaken by On-Site Archaeology at Staxton Motel (NGR SE 5935 5151) in late 1998/early 1999, in advance of development. The skeleton, together with samples of soil from the cranial and abdominal regions, were submitted to the EAU for analysis. Additional bone from the grave fill and two other contexts was also examined. Dating evidence for the skeleton was scarce but a brooch found in the cranial sample is of possible Anglian date (Pearson *pers. comm.*)

Methods

A small subsample of the abdominal sediment sample was taken for a parasite 'squash' following Dainton (1992). The remainder of the abdominal sample, and the cranial sample, were sieved to 1 mm to recover small bone fragments.

The skeleton was washed where necessary and examined in the EAU laboratory. Detailed notes were made on the skeletal elements present, ageing and sexing criteria and pathology. Estimated age from tooth wear followed Brothwell (1972), whilst stature estimation was calculated using the methods outlined by Trotter and Gleser (1952 and 1958), as given in Bass (1987).

Results

Human skeleton (Context 1028)

Table 1 shows the skeletal elements present. Overall preservation of skeleton 1028 was poor, the articular ends of the long bones in particular being very degraded or entirely missing. The bones were also fragile, especially the cranium, which fragmented prior to and during washing. Most of the bone degradation appeared to have been caused by the acidic nature of the burial environment.

The poor preservation of the material meant that many features of the pelvis and skull used in sex determination could only be provisionally assessed. However, cranial features, the sciatic notch and the linear aspera suggest this individual was probably male (the sciatic notch was relatively wide for a male, but the cranial characteristics were much more clearly defined).

All epiphyses present were fused (including the vertebrae), suggesting an adult individual, although no 3rd molars were present. This lack of 3rd molars could be congenital or a result of late eruption (determination is not possible without an x-ray examination). Therefore, age estimation was undertaken on the basis of tooth wear and indicated an individual of approximately 25 -35 years at death. The individual was probably at the younger end of this age range at death as the tooth wear only just fell into this category and the cranial sutures were very open.

An estimation of stature could only be

undertaken using the right femur. The calculation produced an estimate of 163 cm \pm 3.94, giving a height range of 5'4" to 5'7" for this individual. The bones were quite gracile for a male individual but this may be consistent with the relatively short stature.

No pathological conditions were noted on the skeleton. However, the poor condition of the bones, and in particular the absence of articular surfaces, may mean any evidence of pathology had been destroyed in the ground.

Other vertebrate material

Bone material was recovered from three other contexts including the grave fill. Overall preservation was variable but mostly poor, brittle and eroded (acid etched). Colour varied from beige to ginger and angularity (appearance of broken surfaces) was described as 'battered' or 'rounded'. Table 2 details the fragments found in these contexts.

The parasite squash on the abdominal sample showed it to be devoid of recognisable organic material, and hence no evidence of parasite eggs was present.

Discussion

Skeleton 1028

Skeleton 1028 represents the poorly preserved remains of an adult (25-35 years old) male, 5'4"-5'7" tall, of relatively gracile build and with no pathological conditions visible on the remaining parts of the skeleton.

A single poorly preserved human skeleton is of little value in providing information about past populations. However, a previous

excavation at Staxton, adjacent to the Motel site, also produced a human skeleton (Dobney and Brothwell 1994). No direct dating evidence was recovered for that individual.

If the dating of both skeletons is Anglian, then the possibility they are part of the Anglian cemetery known to exist in the vicinity (Pearson *pers. comm.*) is increased. An Anglian date would also increase the significance of the finds, as this period is extremely poorly represented both regionally and nationally.

Other vertebrate remains

The presence of human bone fragments in two of the contexts (1022 and 1029) suggests these contexts are rather mixed, incorporating redeposited material. The human mandible and tibia fragments are not part of skeleton 1028 as they duplicate elements already present. However, the phalange shaft fragments from Context 1029 may be part of skeleton 1028. A Beaker burial ground is known to exist near the Staxton Motel site (Pearson *pers. comm.*) and these scattered human remains suggest that intercutting of outlying earlier graves may have taken place.

The very small quantity of animal bone recovered, together with the poor preservation of the material renders the assemblage of no zooarchaeological or interpretative value.

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. Skeletal elements present for the human skeleton from Staxton Motel, North Yorkshire. Key: I = indeterminate, L = left, R = right, frag/s = fragment/s, vert/s = vertebra/e, phal/s = phalanx/phalanges, dist. = distal, prox. = proximal.

Element	Skeleton 1028
Cranium	Fragmented - occipital, parietals, frontal, temporals, zygomatics mostly complete, sphenoid, basal and R maxilla more fragmented, L maxilla missing (teeth present)
Mandible	L and R tooth rows present, articular parts of ramus broken off but present
Teeth	Lower M2-M2 present. Upper M2-M2 present except for right I2 (?post-mortem loss). M3 either congenitally absent or unerupted.
Cervical verts	Atlas recognisable, 5 other frags
Thoracic verts	Seven were reasonably complete, plus 2 frags
Lumbar verts	Four were reasonably complete
Scapula	R scapula only present, distal and medial parts fragmented
Clavicle	L and R present, articular ends missing
Sternum	Not present
Rib	Six fairly intact right ribs plus 13 fragments not determined to side
Humerus	Both present, R had part of distal articulation missing, L had both ends missing
Radius	R distal end missing. L both ends missing
Ulna	R distal end missing. L both ends missing
Carpals	None present
Metacarpal	Seven shaft fragments present
Manual phalanges	None present
Pelvis	R pelvis only present, most of iliac crest and pubic area missing, several pelvic frags recovered from sample
Sacrum	Possible remnants of one sacral vert present
Femur	R femur relatively intact, parts of proximal and distal ends missing. L femur - shaft only, femoral head in sample
Patella	Neither present
Tibia	L tibia proximal end missing. R tibia shaft only
Fibula	L fibula distal end missing. R tibia shaft only
Tarsals	None present
Metatarsal	One shaft fragment present
Pedal phalanges	None present

Table 2. Other human and animal remains from Staxton Motel, North Yorkshire, by context.

Context	Preservation	Fragments present
1022	Preservation of human material fair to poor. Other fragments poor to very poor. Colour also variable - beige to fawn.	Human tibia shaft fragment. Human vertebra fragment. Dog mandible - right side P4-M2 present, large dog greyhound size but more robust. 6 unidentified fragments.
1025	Preservation of all fragments very poor and eroded (acid soil etched). Beige colour.	Horse 1st phalanx. 2 unidentified shaft fragments.
1029	Preservation variable - fair to poor. Colour also variable fawn to ginger.	Human mandible - left side, C-M1 present and in wear, mental eminence suggests male individual. 3 Human - ?phalanx shaft fragments. Caprovid (sheep/goat) maxillary premolar. Pig tibia fragment - proximal end unfused. 1 unidentified ?human bone fragment.