AML Report 2579

Caistor St. Edmund, Norfolk.

BIOLOGICAL REMAINS — Peter Murphy.

2.5 litre soil samples were taken from almost all excavated contexts. Charcoal and carbonised cereals were extracted by flotation in water, collecting the flot in a 250 micron mesh sieve. The non-floating residue was washed through a 1 mm mesh sieve, dried, and sorted for bone fragments and small artefacts.

Molluscs were extracted from a lump of yellowish-brown (10 YR 5.5/4) chalky clay from context 17 using the method of Evans (1972).

All samples were contaminated with modern roots and seeds (notably of Chenopodium album, Polygonum aviculare and Veronica hederifolia), with fragments of modern insect cuticle and with small chips of coal. Shells of the burrowing snail Cecilioides acicula, again presumably modern and intrusive, were observed in samples from contexts 5, 14 and 17. No other molluscan species were seen, even in the chalky clay from context 17, where it had been hoped that locally calcareous conditions would exist.

RESULTS

(1) Charcoal. All contexts sampled contained charcoal fragments, most of which were too small to be confidently identified (under about 3 mm). Larger fragments of the following taxa were identified:

| Context No. | 4 | 6 | 10 | 14 | 15 | 17 | 18 | 22 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Crataegus-type (Crataegus/Sorbus/Pyrus/Malus group) | | | | | | | + | |
| Fraxinus sp. | + | | | | | | | |
| Quercus sp. | + | + | + | | + | + | + | + |
| Unidentified conifer | | | | + | | | + | |

(2) Carbonised cereals. Half of a poorly-preserved caryopsis of a species of wheat (Triticum sp.) was recovered from context 5. It is an elongate grain, and is probably of spelt or emmer. Unidentified fragmentary cereal grains were retrieved from samples 4 and 22.

(3) Bone. Small fragments of burnt bone, up to 8 mm in length, were extracted from contexts 17 and 22. The clay lump from context 17 also produced a lower limb bone of an amphibian, lacking articulations.

DISCUSSION

The preservation of biological materials in freely-draining gravel soils, such as are found at this site, is invariably poor, and penetration by modern roots, with consequent contamination of the archaeological deposits, is commonly extensive. Nevertheless,

/Beaker

Beaker occupation deposits are so rarely available for study that it was decided to sample most contexts from the site.

Only very limited conclusions may be drawn from the results. The range of tree species represented by charcoal is typical of prehistoric sites: a predominance of oak, with some hawthorn-type, ash and unidentified conifer. None of these need be intrusive. The presence of carbonised cereals may reflect local cereal cultivation; the wheat grain from context 5 is of an elongate type, unlike modern bread wheat, and therefore is not likely to be a modern contaminant. The burnt bone and amphibian bone may or may not be intrusive.

It is suggested that sampling during any future excavations at this site should be restricted to deposits which are obviously very rich in charcoal or carbonised seeds, where the effects of modern contamination could be regarded as insignificant.

Evans (1972). Land Snails in Archaeology. London.