The Plant Remains from Durham Claypath

(grid ref. NZ 274 427)

Excavator: Peter Clack Archaeological Unit for North-East England University of Newcastle

by: Marijke van der Veen

Introduction

During 1984 a small scale excavation was carried out at the car park on Claypath, Durham City, in order to determine the origin and development of the lower Claypath area. Particular objectives were to assess whether the area was settled before ca. A.D. 1100 when Durham City was moved to its present location, and whether the area had formed part of the relocated City after 1100. The results of the excavation suggest that the lower Claypath area was 'colonised' for the first time only after Durham City had moved to its present location (P. Clack, pers.comm.).

A number of samples were collected for botanical analysis. Two of these have been selected for analysis and the results are discussed below. Context 113 was a dark brown sticky clay with organic matter, interpreted as an occupation deposit. It probably dates to the mid llth - 12th century. Context 221 was an organic layer forming the primary fill of a pit, and is dated to the early-mid 13th Century.

In both cases 1 kg. of sediment was washed through a stack of sieves (lowest mesh size 0.5mm), and the residues were sorted under the microscope. The identifications were done with the magnification ranging from 12-50x.

Results

The results of the analysis are listed in Table 1. Only a small number of crop plants was present. <u>Hordeum</u> (barley) and <u>Avena</u> (oat) were present by only one carbonised grain each. A few waterlogged grains of cereals were also found. Flax, <u>linum ussitatissimum</u>, was present in farily large numbers. Unfortunately, it is not possible to say whether the plant was used for its fibres (linen), or for the oil content of the seeds (linseed). No fibres were found in the samples. A large range of wild plants was found, representing a number of different habitats. The following species are commonly found as arable weeds : <u>Agrostemma githago, Raphanus raphanistrum, Chrysanthemum segetum,</u> <u>Anthemis cotula, Spergula arvensis, Brassica campestris etc.</u>

Species occurring on disturbed ground and waste places are: <u>Chenopodium album, Atriplex hastata/patula, Urtica urens, Urtica</u> <u>dioica, Polygonum convolvulus, Polygonum persicaria etc.</u>

Grassland habitats are represented by : <u>Rhinanthus</u> <u>cf</u>. <u>minor</u>, <u>Prunella</u> <u>vulgaris</u>, <u>Linum</u> <u>catharticum</u>, <u>Leontodon</u>, <u>Rumex</u> <u>acetosella</u> etc.

There is also some evidence of wet or damp ground : <u>Carex</u> spp., <u>Eleocharis cf. palustris, Ranunculus flammula, Ranunculus repens, Polygonum</u> <u>hydropiper, Lychnis flos-cuculi</u> etc. <u>Sambucus nigra, Corylus avellana</u> and <u>Rubus fruticosus</u> represent hedgerow or woodland-edge habitats.

Discussion

Apart from the category of wasteland species, all plants found in the samples must have been brought onto the site from some distance. The fact that both samples contain a mixture of habitats suggests that we are dealing with residual material, which has originated from more than one event. Plant remains from waterlogged urban deposits do, in fact, commonly contain this mixture of habitats, making any interpretation of their meaning complicated, if not impossible. No interpretation of the material is offered here, other than the comment that the samples are typical for an urban context.

Durham, 17th June 1986

Marijke van der Veen Biological Laboratory Dept. of Archaeology University of Durham 2

Table 1 Plant remains from Durham Claypath

r. Z

	Context:	113	221
	occupatio	on deposit	pit fill
	date:	11 - 12C	13C
Species			
Hordeum sp. (barley)		1	
Avena sp. (oats)		1	
Cerealia indet		2	9
Linum ussitatissimum (flax)		11	26
	,	<u>_</u>	
Ranunculus repens (creeping butter	cup)	2	4
Ranunculus flammula (lesser spearw	ort)	2	4
Ranunculus sp.		3	5
Brassica campestris (wild turnip)		1	1
Raphanus raphanistrum (wild radish	1)	6	
Viola sp. (violet)			2
Lychnis flos-cuculi (ragged robin)			1
Agrostemma githago (corn cockle)			1
Stellaria media (chickweed)		17	4
Spergula arvensis (corn spurrey)		4	11
Chenopodium album (fat hen)		82	7
Atriplex hastata/patula (orache)		6	15
Chenopodiaceae indet		21	
Linum catharticum (purging flax)			1
Potentilla erecta-type (tormentil)		1	14
Rubus fruticosus (blackberry)		1	1
Polygonum lapathifolium (pale pers	icaria)	64	10
Polygonum persicaria (red shank)		6	7
Polygonum hydropiper (water pepper	;)	25	4
Polygonum convolvulus (black bindw	veed)		1
Polygonum sp.		2	
Rumex acetosella (sheep's sorrel)		3	6
Rumex sp.		5	3
Urtica dioca (stinging nettle)		1	1
Urtica urens (small nettle)			1
Corylus avellana (hazelnut)		3	10
Rhinanthus cf. minor (yellow ratt)	.e)	1	
Prunella vulgaris (self heal)		15	9

Galeopsis cf. tetrahit (common hempnettle)	6	5
Sambucus nigra (elderberry)	1	
Anthemis cotula (stinking may weed)	3	5
Chrysanthemum segetum (corn marigold)	2	7
Lapsana communis (nipple wort)	90	29
Leontodon sp. (hawk bit)	1	1
Sonchus asper (sow thistle)	1	5
Eleocharis cf. palustris (common spike rush)	1	1
Carex spp. (sedge)	32	40
Gramineae indet (grasses)	33	39
Mosses	+	+
Indet	2	9
Total	458	299

4

No-

.