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SECOND REPORT ON FISH REMAINS FROM OKEHAMPTON CASTLE, DEVON.

by M R WILKINSON.

Samples: from excavations in 1979, 1980 & 1981, with further material from F109 excavated in 1978.

Recovery: reasonable 'trench recovery' together with a small number of sieved units.

Quantity: some 250 identifiable bones, together with numbers of scales, from ca 30 units.

Date: late twelth/early thirteenth to sixteenth century.

Procedure: all material identifiable to bone and/or taxonomic group recorded; measurements on premaxillae and dentaries after Wheeler & Jones 1976.

Species Identified

Elasmobranch sp. Shark or ray
Clupea harengus Herring
Salmo sp. Salmon or trout
Anguilla anguilla Eel
Conger conger Conger eel
Merlangius merlangus Whiting
Gadus morhua Cod
Melanogrammus aeglefinus Haddock
Merluccius merluccius Hake
Molva sp. Ling
Sparidae sp. Sea bream
Mugilidae sp. Grey mullet
Eutrigla gurnardus Grey gurnard
Aspitrigla cuculus Red gurnard
Pleuronectes platessa Plaice

With the exception of the red gurnard all of the fishes were identified in the first report; reference should be made to that report for details of their life histories. The red gurnard is similar to the grey species, a small inshore marine fish taken on lines and by trawls.

Discussion

This assemblage of fish remains is almost identical to the larger body of material analysed earlier, in terms of the species list, the sizes of fish, and the relative abundance of species. The interpretation presented in the first report is therefore applicable to all the material but several points deserve further comment.

1. Most of the assemblage was recovered by hand and so some bias

towards the larger elements and species is likely. The small number of sieved units confirms this view as the smaller species occur more frequently in them. This evidence suggests that the herring, and to a lesser extent the other smaller fish, are underrepresented in the samples.

2. When this is taken into account the fauna more closely resembles that described in the historical record. The most important fishes were the larger gadoids(hake, then cod, ling etc) and the herring, followed by small gadoids(whiting, cod etc) and flatfish(plaice etc) and freshwater fishes(eel, salmonids), and then a range of inshore marine species.

3. The fauna is predominantly marine but the sieved units show that freshwater fishes were widely eaten. Their relatively low numbers here can be attributed to the impoverished local freshwater fauna and the flourishing marine fisheries.

4. All of the fishes could be caught in the waters off Devon and Cornwall and the predominance of hake and small inshore fishes suggests that most or all of the catch was local.

5. There is no direct evidence of whether the fishes were eaten in a fresh or preserved form. The latter was more common in medieval times but a high status site such as Okehampton castle could have provided a market for more fresh fish.

6. Overall, the fish fauna from this site resembles the picture that is emerging of medieval fisheries in general. Exploiting a range of species(20-30 fishes), both marine and freshwater, dominated by large gadoids(hake in the south-west, cod etc elsewhere), herring and a range of small inshore species.

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