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LATE IRON-AGE GLUME WHEATS FROM WILMINGTON GRAVEL-PIT, KENT

Among the fifty oval pits excavated at this site there was a single, 'subrectangular' one close to a boat-shaped hut and containing a deposit that was conspicuously rich in charred remains of grain (Mr B. Fhilp , pers. comm.). A small sample of 330 g of this deposit was retained by the excavator and, of this sample, ca. 290 g was floated and sorted by Alison Locker at Fortress House. To our surprise, the charred remains consist predominantly of wheat grains with almost no wood charcoal at all, though with just a few of those weed and chaff contaminants typical of stored wheat grain.

The ca. 200 wheat grains derive from Emmer (<u>Triticum dicoccum</u>) and Spelt (<u>T. spelta</u>) in roughly equal proportions,¹ though a conspicuously large proportion of the grains were very small and could possibly be regarded as 'tail grain'. Mixed with these wheat grains was an assortment of minor contaminants:

a. four assymetric grains of six-rowed hulled barley
(Hordeum cf.vulgare);

b. three spikelet forks and eight glume bases of Spelt;

c. one (possibly two) spikelet forks of Emmer;

1. The gross morphology of the grain of most forms of Emmer cultivated in British prehistory overlaps (in charred remains) with that of many primitive forms of Spelt. As a result, the precise contribution of either species to a mixture of this sort cannot be ascertained from the grain alone. Nevertheless grains representing the extreme types of either species allow the assertion that both were present in quantity at this site. d. a few fragmentary remains of oats, probably weed oats in all cases.

(These oats remains included - floret bases,

- rachilla internodes,

- lemma bases',

- awn fragments,

- grains,

- and a pedicil tip (spikelet bases).)

e. five or so seeds of a legume. These seeds lack testas, but can perhaps be referred tentatively to <u>Vicia hirsuta</u> the Hairy Tare;

f. three grain fragments of a species of Brome (Bromus sp.);

g. a single seed of a Poa Grass (though not Poa annua), and, finally

h. a kernal of (?) Sheep's Sorrell (Rumex acetosella).

Such a mixture of Emmer and Spelt seems to be archetypal of Late Iron Age assemblages from sites in several, widely separated parts of Britain. In the Neolithic and Bronze Age, Emmer was the predominant wheat of agricultural Britain. Butby the Early Iron Age, at least, many farmers had started to cultivate some Spelt, such that, by the end of 1st century AD, Spelt appears to

2. One of the floret-base bears remains of the abscission-surface of the 'suckermouth' form characteristic of the two weed species <u>Avena fatua</u> and <u>A. sterilis</u> (inc. <u>A. ludoviciana</u>). (The tightly-twisted state of the awn fragments also fits this identification.) However, in the absence of the upper disarticulation scar of the second rachilla segment, even the best preserved floret base cannot be assigned unequivocally to one or other of these two species.

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have largely supplanted Emmer which, in most wheat remains of this date, is present as only a minority component.

In the Late pre-Roman Iron Age, however, both cereals appear still to have been under extensive cultivation, perhaps as mixed crops. The chronological implications of the composition of this Wilmington sample therefore accord very closely with the dates assigned on the basis of other evidence.

The preponderance of clean grain in this sample clearly suggests that we are dealing with a primary product of grain processing, perhaps an accidentally charred grain store. However, there is a large percentage of small, often malformed, grain that resembles the 'tail grain' characteristic primarily of waste fractions, and the presence of these grains can be expected in semi-cleaned grain only when the sieves used were finer than usual. As for the chaff and weed-seed contaminants, small numbers such as these are not unusual in sieve-cleaned grain.³ But while alternative interpretations could certainly be offered here, they cannot be satisfactorily explored in such a small sample.

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3. The effects of sieving grain are detailed elsewhere (in Hillman, G.C. 1981. 'Reconstructing crop husbandry practices from charred remains of crops'. In Farming Practice in British Prehistory, ed. R. Mercer. Edin. Univ. Press).