BRIQUETAGE TYPOLOGY AND SEDIMENT SAMPLES FROM EAST HUNTSPILL, SOMERSET

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During November 1978 a briquetage mound at East Huntspill was sectioned by a sewer trench. Dr. Roger Leech took the opportunity to record the section and collect samples of briquetage as well as a number of sediment samples. The mound was on a peat hummock and was sealed by 1.5-2.25 m of estuarine clay. It was made up of interleaved layers of charred material and fired clay within which were a number of hearths (Leech 1981, p.37).

The briquetage (fired clay objects assumed to have been used in salt extraction) was examined to select pieces for further scientific study. During this examination an outline classification by shape was made of the material:-

i. Fire bars: Clay bars of unknown length (the longest is 20 cm) and roughly square cross-section with sides of c.4 cm. No evidence was found that the bars tapered to one end as do some examples from the Huntspill area (Leech 1981, p.35) and most of those from Essex (de Brisay 1975).

ii. Pedestals: Clay drums of circular cross section c. 4 cm in diameter and unknown length, the longest fragments are up to 14 cm long. Some pieces expand at one end in the fashion of a mushroom.

iii. Wedges: Lumps of clay of roughly triangular cross-section.

iv. Tiles: Flat slabs of fired clay averaging 2 cm thick but sometimes up to 3.5 cm. In each case one of the flat surfaces is smooth whilst the other is rough and flaked as if by heat. The rough surface is covered with plant impressions. Two such fragments from context 6 had blobs on the smooth surface where they may have been in contact with a pedestal or some other briquetage element. Another large slab (Sample 20) 18 x 22 cm had two surviving edges at right angles and part of a notch which might originally have held a fire bar or other briquetage element. Tiles of this type, occasionally, with notches, are widespread on Somerset briquetage mounds (Leech 1981, p.35).

v. Other shaped pieces:

1. Piece of clay with possible pedestal impression.
2. Clay fragment 9 cm x 3.5 cm carrying the impressions of both circular and rectangular briquetage elements.
3. A 9 cm long by 2.5 cm diameter rod of fired clay found by twisting in the fashion of rope.

vi. Amorphous clay lumps: Fired clay fragments without clear shape or form.

The numbers of fragments of each type from the various contexts is outlined in Table 1.

On the basis of evidence from the Essex Red Hills (de Brisay 1975, 1978) it seems possible that the tiles and shaped pieces of clay with briquetage impressions represent hearth fragments. A

Table 1

East Huntspill : typological classification of briquetage

	Context 1	Context 6	Context 10	Sample 20	unstrat.	Total
Fire bars	3	4	2	-	29	38
Pedestals	4	3	1	3	18	29
Wedges	1	-	1	-	1	3
Tabular slabs	-	60	4	1	45	110
Other shaped pieces 1)	-	-	1	-	-	1
2)	-	-	1	-	-	1
3)	-	-	-	-	1	1
Amorphous clay lumps	6	-	3	-	-	9
Total	14	67	13	4	94	192

curious feature of the Huntspill assemblage is the absence of any recognisably distinctive crystallization vessels which have, however, been found on other sites in the Levels (Leech 1981, p.35).

Following the typological examination, fragments were selected for chemical analysis by John Evans of North East London Polytechnic. The samples selected were as follows: a pedestal (context 1); fire bar (context 6); tile (context 6); tile (context 10); an undiagnostic body sherd of domestic-type pottery; two sub-samples (2 and 14) of ash from the mound. It is hoped that this chemical analysis, which is being carried out as part of a wider research programme involving other briquetage sites, may enable conclusions to be drawn regarding the functions of the various briquetage elements and the processes involved.

The tiles had abundant plant impressions on their rough surfaces and the impressions on four such slabs from context 6 have been identified by Miss Pam Paradine. She reports that the tiles had good clean fractures which were liberally covered with fine impressions of cereal grains, spikelets, glumes and straw. Occasional grain and short lengths of straw were found in the matrix. The impressions identified were of Triticum spelta L (Spelt wheat), spikelet impressions, glumes and straw; Hordeum vulgare L. (barley) impressions of one grain or two grain spikelets with rachis attached, one or two grains very occasionally in matrix; Secale cereale (rye) impressions and many actual grains. Other plant remains included small lengths of grass stem and an apical segment of the lomentum of Sinapis arvensis L. (Charlock), a common weed of arable land. Similar impressions of cultivars and weeds of cultivation have been reported by Bradley (1975, p.23) in briquetage from Hampshire.

During recording of the mound a series of sediment samples were fortunately taken by Mr. B. Levitan. A preliminary examination of these was carried out with the objective firstly of describing the sediments and secondly of assertaining what fuel was used in the hearths. 200 grams of the samples were washed on a nest of sieves of sizes 2 mm, 1 mm, 0.5 mm and 0.21 mm, each of the fractions was then examined under the binocular microscope. Sample 14 was described in the field as a layer of hearth ash which formed part of a thick layer of burnt material. It was black (Munsell designation moist 7.5 YR 2/0) with inclusions of white (5 YR 8/1) somewhat calcareous deposit (fizz produced in HCl). The sample contained lumps of carbon which were fibrous, strongly laminated and penetrated in places by roots but lacked clear wood structure. There can be little doubt that these represent ash from the burning of peat as fuel in the salt extraction process. Basically similar ashy lumps were produced in the laboratory by burning a lump of originally unburnt peat from the site (Sample 11) in a muffle furnace. Sample 2 was described in the field as a layer of white ash; it had a mottled appearance with zones of light grey (5 YR 7/1), very pale brown (10 YR 8/3), white (5 YR 8/1) and black 7.5 YR 2/0). The sediment seems likely to be of similar origin to Sample 14. A brief examination of Sample 3 showed that this also consisted of burnt and partly burnt lumps of peat.

The very limited laboratory work arising from this salvage excavation has at least demonstrated that peat was used as fuel and it is interesting that similar evidence has recently been found on Lincolnshire briquetage sites (L. Biek, pers.comm.). The mound was at least partly waterlogged with the result that peat was

preserved along with four pieces of wood which await examination at Sheffield to see if they are suitable for dendrochronolical study. Such excellent preservation underlines the potential of these sites for palaeoenvironmental and other scientific evidence.

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