

Fish and amphibian remains from North Shoebury, Essex

Although approximately 60 10 kg samples of different archaeological contexts were wet-sieved on 1 mm mesh, fish bones were recovered from only six layers. Of the 54 identified bones, 23 were from early medieval ditches, 29 from Roman ditches and one each from an Iron Age pit and a Bronze Age ditch. Table 1 shows the date and type of features which produced fish bones and the species present. Bones were identified by comparing ancient specimens with modern reference skeletons in the Environmental Archaeology Unit.

The Bronze Age ditch produced a single branchial bone. This was from a flat fish of the family Pleuronectidae and compared closely with a branchial from a flounder, Platichthys flesus (L.), of approximately 20 cm total length.

The Iron Age pit yielded a single shark tooth which has been examined by both Alwyne Wheeler and Alison Longbottom of the British Museum (Natural History). They agree that the tooth is not identifiable to species and that it is probably a Tertiary fossil. Several fossil sharks teeth have been recovered from the London Clay (Lower Eocene) of Shoebury. Thus the tooth recovered from the Iron Age pit is unlikely to be of archaeological significance.

The Roman ditches both contained remains of eel, Anguilla anguilla (L.). A total of 27 identifiable bones, mainly vertebral centra, from a minimum of two fish 30-40 cm total length were recognized. In addition frog, Rana sp., bones were recovered.

The two early medieval ditches samples contained the following: three burnt vertebral centra of herring, Clupea harengus L.; a fragment of dentary, a hypobranchial and 4 vertebral centra from medium sized (c. 70 cm total length) cod, Gadus morhua L.; and 10 vertebral centra and one urohyal from a pleuronectid flatfish 15 - 35 cm total length. Frog bones were present in both samples.

While most animal bones found on archaeological sites owe their presence

to man's domestic, industrial or ritual activities, some may be the remains of creatures which died on or very near the site. The interpretation of small groups of bones such as these must therefore be guarded.

The cf. flounder bone from the Bronze Age ditch and the eel and frog remains from the Roman ditch are from animals which can live in freshwater and are found in the North Shoebury area today. Unfortunately there is insufficient evidence to determine whether or not these bones were human food debris.

By contrast, there can be little doubt that the early medieval fish bones are human food refuse, for herring and cod are marine fish and must have been deliberately imported. Although only a few fragments of identifiable fish bone were recovered, cod was represented by head bones and vertebral centra suggesting that whole fresh fish were brought onto the site in the early medieval period.

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Table 1

Sample	55	74	44	45	3	7
Date	Bronze Age	Iron Age	Roman	Roman	Early Medieval	Early Medieval
Type of feature	Ditch	Pit	Ditch	Ditch	Ditch	Ditch
Number of identified bones	1	1	4	25	10	13
Taxa present						
Selachii (shark)		X				
<u>Clupea harengus</u> L. (herring)					X	X
<u>Anguilla anguilla</u> (L.) (eel)			X	X		
<u>Gadus morhua</u> L. (cod)					X	X
Pleuronectidae (flatfish)	X				X	X
<u>Rana</u> sp. (frog)			X		X	X

Table 1: Showing the distribution of fish and amphibian bones in sieved samples and the date and type of feature.

List of identified bones

Context	Sample	Number and kind of bone	Identification
1412	55	1 branchial	Pleuronectidae cf. <u>Platichthys flesus</u> (L.) (flounder)
1525	74	1 tooth (?Tertiary fossil)	Selachii, shark
1364C	44	2 vertebral centra 1 vomer 1 ilium	<u>Anguilla anguilla</u> (L.) (eel) " " <u>Rana</u> sp., frog
1364B	45	19 vertebral centra 1 left dentary 3 cleithra 1 basihyal 1 vomer	eel " " " "
0304	3	2 vertebral centra (burnt) 1 hypobranchial 1 vertebral centrum 5 fin rays 3 vertebral centra 1 ilium	<u>Clupea harengus</u> L. (herring) <u>Gadus morhua</u> L., cod " " Gadidae, cod family Pleuronectidae (flatfish) frog
0345B	7	1 vertebral centrum (burnt) 1 dentary fragment 3 vertebral centra 7 vertebral centra 1 ilium	herring cod " flatfish frog