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The plant remains from Manor Farm, Borwick, Lancashire.

(grid ref. : SD 513 725)

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The excavation at Manor Farm exposed an early Bronze Age ring cairn, which contained two 'in situ' inhumations. In addition, ca. 11 concentrations of scattered inhumed bones were found and 7 concentrations of cremated bone.

Samples for the analysis of carbonised plant remains were taken from the two 'in situ' burials, SF 55 and SF 73. Both burials were dated to the early Bronze Age by the associated grave goods: a simple early Bronze Age flat axe and a flat rivetted dagger blade of the same date in SF 55, and a less well preserved early Bronze Age flat dagger blade in SF 73.

The four samples were processed using manual flotation into an 0.5 mm mesh sieve. The sample sizes are given in Table 1; the results in Table 2.

Table 1 : Sample size.

SF 55	: sample 1	-	36 litre of sediment
	sample 2	-	28 litre of sediment
SF 73	: sample 4	-	36 litre of sediment
	sample 5	-	16 litre of sediment

Table 2 : Number of seeds in each sample.

Sample :	1	2	4	5
Species:				
Gramineae indet.	1	-	-	-
Cerealea indet.	-	1	-	-
Polygonum sp.	-	-	1	-
Total	1	1	1	0

As can be seen from Table 2, the results are minimal : only three fragments were found, none of which could be adequately identified. In sample 1, one grass seed was found, but it was badly preserved and could not be identified to genus. In sample 2, one cereal grain was found, again too badly preserved to distinguish it as either wheat or barley. The Polygonum sp. seed from sample 4 again is too fragmented to allow an identification to species level.

The relevance of the analysis of plant remains from burial sites as against habitation sites, can be rather limited, as the origin of the material is often poorly understood. However, so little is known about the crop-plants from the early Bronze Age, that even simple presence/absence data are useful at this stage. It was therefore felt important to collect flotation samples from the two in situ burials from Manor Farm. Unfortunately, the results were minimal.

Reports on the plant remains from burials of only three other British sites are known to the writer : Whitton Hill, Northumberland (Van der Veen 1982), late Neolithic, Trelystan, Powys (Hillman 1982), early Bronze Age, and Abingdon, Oxfordshire (Jones 1978), middle Bronze Age. All three concern cremation burials. In the samples from Whitton Hill and Abingdon cereals were present in addition to seeds of wild plants. In the Trelystan sample no crop remains were present, but a large quantity of charred culm nodes and rhizome fragments of grasses with seeds of wild plants were found. In this last case the plant remains are thought to have derived from grass and other plants growing beneath the pyre, or from grass used as tinder to light the pyre (Hillman 1982). The plant remains from Abingdon are interpreted as having derived either from the burning of the pyre or from other ritual practices, and not from domestic activities nearby (Balkwill 1978, Jones 1978).

While it is possible to envisage several activities that may produce carbonised plant remains on cremation sites, this is more difficult for inhumation sites. So far, too little work has been done on either cremation or inhumation sites to be able to assess whether or not the near absence of plant remains in the Manor Farm samples is a common feature on inhumation sites.

References:

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