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Plant remains from the Milburngate excavation, Durham City.

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During the trial excavation in the car park of the Milburngate shopping centre, Durham City, a peaty deposit was discovered covering the grey clay 'natural', and spreading across most of the site. A date for the deposit is not yet available, but it was sealed by a sandy layer, thought to represent a levelling-off phase, in which 12th century pottery was present. The deposit looked highly organic, containing many fragments of wood, though these were generally in very bad condition. The deposit was situated above the water level on the site and consequently was rather dry, especially considering how wet the digging season had been. The absence of permanent waterlogging had caused serious degradation of the organic material present and had reduced the deposit to a rather homogenous layer.

In order to gain a first impression of the state of preservation of the plant remains in this deposit a l kilogram sample, DMG 83 - 192, was collected and analysed. Although the results of this sample would naturally be limited, it was thought they might assist the excavator in assessing possible future work on the site.

The sample was soaked in water and some detergent. After at least two weeks the material had not entirely dissolved in the water, but still contained lumps of compressed organic matter. Ca. 10 % of the sample was washed through a stack of sieves (1.0 mm, 0.5 mm and 0.3 mm).

The two largest fractions were sorted completely under the microscope, the smallest fraction was just quickly screened. The sample contained mainly organic matter; hardly any sands, silts or clays were present. It looked made up of very badly preserved wood fragments and some other unidentified plant remains.

The 10% sample analysed contained 58 seeds, see Table 1, mainly from one species, <u>Carex</u> sp., sedge. Two seeds of <u>Ranunculus</u> sp., buttercup, and one of <u>Rumex</u> sp., dock, were also found. The other fragments were all too badly preserved to enable identification.

Table 1.	Number of seeds in sample DMG	83-192 (10% 0	f 1 kg.)
	Carex sp. (sedge)	43	
	Ranunculus sp. (buttercup)	2	
	Rumex sp. (dock)	1	
	indet.	12	
	Total	58	

Considering the general state of the deposit on excavation, a surprisingly large number of seeds were found. The number of species present, however, is very low and slightly unusual for urban contexts. Sedge seeds are not known to be stronger than other seeds, thus an over-representation of sedges because of differential preservation is not very likely.

The sedges will not have grown naturally on the site; they generally prefer damp habitats along lakes, ponds, rivers or ditches. The site is too far from the river and too well drained to suit the growth of sedges. While we are clearly not dealing with a natural deposit, the plant remains give no information as to the function or origin of the deposit. In fact, plant remains from these urban contexts are frequently difficult to interpret. Often the insect remains are more informative on the origin or function of a deposit than the plant remains (Allan Hall, pers. comm.). In conclusion: the plant remains from this sample,

unfortunately, do not offer much information concerning the origin of the deposit. The assessment of possible future work on this site might therefore have to be based on other environmental data (like insects) or solely on archaeological grounds.

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