From: Excavations at Checker Walk, Abingdon, Oxon

Ани *Карот.* 4377

Oxoniensia, forthcoming

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Bone and Shell Report, Checker Walk

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Nearly 1440 bones and shells are reported on. The main aim was to determine the general nature of the bone debris and particularly any which might have been associated with the monastic occupation.

A11 bones recovered were examined. Some of uncertain date were recorded where the data has archaeological relevance. Results of identification are given in Tables 1 and 2. Other evidence is presented as proups of bones discussed period by period.

Romano-Britsh features

The bones from the c. 1st century ditches appear similar to those elsewhere from Abingdon at this period and hence to the refuse from Celtic rather than Romanised settlements (). Material from the oits F37 and F50 is similar to the dated Roman period refuse. That from the late ditch F46 might indicate some Roman cultural change, for example in the presence of domestic birds and the abundance of pig, but some of this cultural debris may in fact be of mediaeval origin.

Mediaeval Pit F40

Before excavation of the site began, it was hoped that abundant refuse from the Abbey would be found so that a detailed investigation of monastic diet could be undertaken. Two bucketfulls of soil from F40 were sieved with a sieve of 2.5 mm mesh, but identifiable small bones were few (Table 2) and further sieving was abandoned.

Except for the bones of small fish the identified debris is similar to that recovered by ordinary excavation (Table 1). Small unidentifiable fragments and burnt ones are much more common where soil is sieved (Table 3). Fine bone debris is often closely associated with kitchen or table refuse such as found in the floor layers at the moated manor, Harding's Field, Chalgrove () although deliberate rubbish clearance could transport such material some distance fom buildings. The modest quantities of bone in the relatively large feature of F40 and the low density of identified bones in the sieved soil does not show the direct dumping of kitchen rubbish into the pit: less direct entry of rubbish is probable, such as tipping in sweepings from yard surfaces.

Three characteristic mediaeval species were represented in F40: fallow deer (a first phalanx), rabbit, and black rat. At this period rabbit may be mainly associated with people of higher status; later it becomes more commonly found in archaeological deposits.

Romano-British/Mediaeval Layers The less well-dated layers, F42, F43, F44, F45, F48 and F49, above the Roman ditches, contained material similar to both the earlier deposits and the mediaeval ones above, but with the exception of a mandible fragment of a red deer in F44 and a cat skeleton in F45. Deer bones seem to be characteristic of regional sites with higher social status () and it would be tempting to associate this one with the Abbey. Cat remains, especially of small ones, tend to be more typical of mediaeval occupation than. Romano-British.

The skeleton is of a small to medium sized cat. Bone length Measurements (GL) are: hu 105, fe 93, & ti 102e mm. Distal width of hu is 15.6 mm. All the epiphyses of bones are fused and the teeth of the mandible are eruoted but not worn. These indicate a mature individual. No signs of pathology or butchery were obvious.

Mediaeval and Post-mediaeval yard areas The remaining groups of bones are different in character, particularly in the presence of greater proportions of cattle; most noticeably in F10/F33 which dates to the late mediaeval or early post-mediaeval period. This feature thus consisted of relatively coarse but well-preserved bones deposited over the upper-most level of cobbling. Debris in this ?late mediaeval cobbling and its loamy matrix F34, and in the lower ?13th-14th century cobbling F38, was similarly coarse but less abundant.

The bones in these last two features show signs of abrasion consistent with battering within or on the cobbled surfaces. Leaching from ground surface exposure of bones is visibly greater for F34. Recent breakages are common among this material.

F34 included a human tooth, a foot digit and an eroded limb shaft fragment of the same species. Possibly a Romano-British grave was accidentally dug out by mediaeval activity, but, alternatively, excess spoil from the lay or monastic graveyards nearby might have been dumped to form some of F34.

The coarseness of debris in these deposits appears, from studies elsewhere (), to be related variously to a) debris of destruction, b(areas outside buildings, and c) areas further away from those devoted to cooking and eating activities. Thus, bones in F34 and F38 accumulated in part as larger bones were dispersed by rubbish clearance, scavenging and other processes following food consumption inside the Abbey buildings. Similar processes probably explain the bones in F10/F33 although this feature may be of post-Dissolution date around the time when most of the monastic buildings had been demolished.

In these later deposits cranial elements of pigs are common and metapodials absent, though sample sizes are small. Bones from all parts of the cattle skeleton are present. This information suggests, again, a general spread of refuse which perhaps incorporates a greater proportion of uncooked refuse than in the deposits of finer debris to be found inside buildings.

Some data on the slaughtering ages of domestic animals is gven in Table 4.

Monastic diet

The bulk of the meat diet does not appear to have differed greatly from Romano-British predecessors and mediaeval people in the town (), although perhaps a better and more varied diet is indicated by the abundance of cattle and pig and presence of deer, rabbit and fish, as well as a mass of marine mussels (<u>Mytilus edulis</u>) observed in a builder's trench nearer the Abbey buildings.

Table 1 - Freq	uency	of	bones	and s	shells at	Checker Walk						
Period &	Romano-British			R-B/med	Mediaeval			Late/post med.		Sieved sa		
Feature	?	1	st ce	nt AD	?late	Layers	13th cent.	13th-	-14th cent	? destr.	18th/19th	13th ce
type	Pits		Dit	ches	ditch	42, 43, 44	Pit	Cobbl	ed areas	layer	Cess pit	P11
	37 4	50	47	54	45	45, 48, 49	40	38	34	10/33	16 & 30	40
Cattle	6		4	2	11	27	17	9	9	71	2	-
Sheeo/goat	14		14	6	20	58	25	4	4	27	2	5
Pig	-		1	2	24	12	17	3	6	27	-	-
Horse	-		1	1	-	2	-	1	1	1	-	-
Dog	-		-	-	-	3	3		-	-	-	~
Cat	-		-	-	~	-(a)	-1		-	-	-	-
Red deer	-		-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fallow	-		-	-	-	-	1	-	-	2 (b)	-	-
Rabbit	-		-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Black rat	-		-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	1]
Sub-total	24		19	11	55	103	66	17	20	128	4	7
Unidentified	21		19	20	113	141	96	23	82	193	3	172
Total	45		38	31	168	244	162	40	102	321	7	173
Burnt	-		2	-	-	4	2	-	-	-	-	25
Domestic Fowl	-		-	-	4	-	-	-	-	1	-	-
Domestic goose	-		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	~
Other birds	-		-	-	3	1	1		~		_	-
Oyster	1		-	-	1	1	-	-	2	14	-	-

(a) Excluding cat skeleton from F45: 28 bones and 11 ribs.

(b) The antler bases in F10/F33 are probably of a fallow stap killed prior to shedding of velvet, or possibly of a young red deer stap.

Other indentifications: 3 human bones (F34); Goose, cf. ? Barnacle (F40, F46); Teal (F46); Conger eel, <u>Conger Conger</u> (F10/F33); sieved bones (Table 2).

Table 2 - Sieved debris in two bucketfuls of soil from F40 (13th century pit).

	-ragment no.	Weight (gm)
Sheep Rabbit Black rat Unidentified mammals Total of burnt unidentified mammals Unidentifiable bird <u>b</u> Fish: Herring, <u>Clupea Harenous</u> Gadoid (Cod, Haddock, etc)	c. 17	Weight (gm) 4.4 0.5 0.1 31.9 4.1 0.3 (combined wt.
Hazelnut shell fragments	10	1.U) n.W.

Table 3 - Size of mammal bone fragments (mm).

	0-1	1-2	2-3	3-4	Total
Sheeo Rabbit Unidentified Burnt	1 108 16	2 1 31 8	1 5 1	1 2 -	5 1 147 25
					178

Table 4 - Records of Mandible Wear Stage (MWS)

Roman F54: pig 18; sheep 34e

Late Roman ? F46: pig 21 and 19

Mediaeval, 13th century F40: sheep 2

Late mediaeval-early post-mediaeval F10/F33: cattle 2; sheep 44e (a); pig 18, 19 and 21

(a) estimate from mandible with severe ceriostecsis involving loss of P4, M1 and cossibly M3, a long time prior to death since the anterior edge of M24s well worn and the alveoli of missing teeth have receded and nearly closed over.