

Plant remains from Ewanrigg cemetery, Cumbria
(grid ref. NY 0342 3508)

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Introduction

During 1983 excavations were carried out at this Bronze Age cremation cemetery. The site is situated on a small hill, the top of which contained a cist-burial. The cremations were dug into the hill slopes. Associated with the cremations were several urns. The radio-carbon dates from the cremations give a date for the site at the end of the first half of the second millennium BC. (see Table 1).

Samples were collected from all 9 cremations and all the sediment from inside of the two complete pots was kept. The samples were processed in the normal way, using manual water flotation into a 0.5 mm mesh sieve. The flots were sorted under the microscope. The context, volume and dating evidence for each sample is given in Table 1, the results of the analysis in Table 2.

Results

Only few plant remains were found in the samples. All species were from wild plants. Two of them, hazelnut and wild raspberry, are probably collected food plants, and indicate nearby woodland. Woodsage is found in woods, but can also be found in grassland. Goosegrass is a common arable weed in the later prehistoric period, but is also found in hedges and on waste places. Ribwort and the grasses point to some grassland. Unfortunately, a relatively large proportion of the plant fragments was too badly preserved to enable identification.

Interpretation

Very little is known about plant remains from cemetery sites and their interpretation is difficult. We require samples from many more of these sites before we can hope to detect patterns in the evidence. At the moment we can only make tentative suggestions.

The hazelnuts and raspberries might represent the remains of food given to the dead. The other species might have become accidentally carbonised as plants growing underneath the funerary pyre, and it is also possible that they represent the remains of a posy put with the body.

Future work

In the light of the fact that so little is known about plant remains from this period, it would be important to collect more samples in case of further excavation. However, as the results so far have not been very informative, the following procedure is suggested: the contents of all cremation pits and urns should be kept. Initially a small random sample out of the total number could be analysed and on the basis of those results either the analysis is stopped, or the sample proportion is increased.

If at all possible, future work on the cemetery should be combined with an excavation of the associated settlement. As mentioned above, plant remains from this period are extremely rare, and as such the importance of a plant assemblage from this settlement is self-evident. However, in addition, the

study of the plant assemblages from both the settlement and the cemetery would allow detailed comparisons to be made, which could greatly improve an understanding of plant remains from cemetery sites.

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Table 1 Ewanrigg 1983



<u>Context no.</u>	<u>Context</u>	<u>Volume</u>	<u>Dating Evidence</u>
5	cremation pit	3.5 litres	1690 [±] 90 bc (HAR-5959)
6	"	1.5 "	-
14	"	0.5 "	-
16	"	2.0 "	-
17	"	3.5 "	-
18	"	1.0 "	1750 [±] 90 bc (HAR-5961)
18 	content of urn	9.5 "	
20	cremation pit	1.0 "	-
21	"	0.2 "	-
22	"	0.5 "	1520 [±] 70 bc (HAR-5960)
22 	content of urn	2.0 "	

Table 2 Ewanriggg 1983

Table 2

Ewan Iggg 1983

Species	Context	<div><div>14</div><div>18</div></div>										Total	
		5	6	14	16	17	18	18	20	21	22		22
Corylus avellana (hazelnut shell fragm.)		7	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	1	8
Rubus cf. idaeus (raspberry)		1	.	.	.	1
Rubus sp.		1	1
Teucrium scorodonia (wood sage)		.	1	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	1
Galium aparine (goose grass)		1	.	.	.	.	1
Plantago lanceolata (ribwort plantain)		.	.	.	1	.	.	2	.	.	.	1	4
Gramineae indet. (grasses)		1	.	1	.	.	2
root frag. grass		1	.	.	.	.	1
indet.		1	.	.	.	.	.	1	1	1	2	3	9
Total		8	1	0	1	0	0	6	2	2	2	6	27