

GORHAMBURY VILLA: THE BIRD REMAINS

by Alison Locker

Some 301 bird bones were recovered from securely dated deposits, 78% of the bones were found in the first and second century contexts. (The measurements are available in the archive).

The following species were identified; domestic fowl (Gallus domesticus), domestic goose/greylag goose (Anser domesticus/Anser anser), domestic duck/mallard (Anas domesticus/Anas platyrhynchos), duck indet., teal (Anas crecca), ?crane (Grus grus), woodcock (Scolopax rusticola), pigeon (Columba sp.), blackbird (Turdus merula), ?song thrush (Turdus philomelos), finch (Frigillidae), rook (Corvus frugilegus), crow (Corvus corone corone), and jackdaw (Corvus monedula).

The following table shows the total number of each species found in each period. The many unidentifiable bird fragments are mainly from splintered long bones.

	IA	1st	2nd	3/4	Med	TI
dom. fowl	-	24	32	11	3	70
goose	-	2	9	1	-	12
duck/mall.	-	9	11	1	-	21
duck indet.	-	1	-	1	-	2
teal	-	2	-	-	-	2
?crane	-	2	-	-	-	2
woodcock	-	2	6	-	-	8
pigeon	-	-	-	2	1	3
blackbird	-	5	1	-	-	6
?song thrush	-	1	-	1	1	3
finches	1	2	-	-	-	3
rook	-	-	1	-	-	1
crow	-	-	1	2	-	3
jackdaw	2	1	-	-	1	4
unident.	-	63	62	16	20	161
total	3	114	123	35	26	301

Domestic fowl was the most commonly identified species in the roman and medieval periods. However, none were found in the Iron Age deposits, fowl are known to have been kept at this time, but Caesar has remarked that they were not kept for meat. Domestic fowl were all identified from post cranial fragments except for one broken skull from the 3rd/4th century. One spurred metatarsal represented a male, or possibly castrate, from the second century (West in press). Knifecuts were observed close to the distal end of a 1st century humerus, and across the midshaft of a second century humerus. A second century ulna showed exostoses over the mid shaft, this may be the result of an injury to the wing.

Geese were also identified from the roman levels, whether these are domestic or the greylag from which the domesticate is thought to have been bred is not clear. A single knifecut was seen at the proximal end of a 1st century humerus. Similarly it was not possible to separate domestic duck from mallard, these were the second most commonly identified birds, these two groups may

represent the slaughter of domestic birds kept at the villa or the catch of wild fowlers. Wild pigeons may have been encouraged to use 'columbaria' for nesting and breeding, as have been found at a few villa sites (Wilson 1973, 114)

Wild fowlers would also have caught teal, Britain smallest duck, and woodcock, who can be found in forests, heathlands with scattered trees and feed on swampy and marshy ground.

Today the crane only occurs in Britain as an annual vagrant, but used to be more common. Two tibiotarsus shafts were tentatively identified from a first century context (69). The adult birds tended to make tough eating, and a roman method for overcoming this recommended that the bird was cooked with the head outside the water, and when the crane was cooked it was wrapped in a warm cloth and the head pulled so that the head came off with the sinews attached leaving only the meat and bones (Ibid 115).

Small birds such as thrushes etc may have been netted, as in other roman provinces, and were added to dishes containing many ingredients such as meat, brains, vegetables, pulses and herbs (Ibid 115). The corvids (rook, crow, jackdaw) have been eaten in the past, and could also have been killed as pests scavenging round the villa. Butchery marks were only seen on domestic fowl and goose.

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References

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