

FISH BONES FROM DRAGONBY, LINCOLNSHIRE

A group of thirteen fish bones was collected by hand-picking trowelled deposits during excavations at Dragonby. Most were from large salmon, Salmo salar. There was also one vertebra of pike, Esox lucius and one vertebra from eel, Anguilla anguilla. These three fish are all species indigenous to the British Isles and can be caught in the Dragonby area today.

In addition, one most unusual bone was found. This was from a fish which does not live in the British Isles today and there is no evidence that it ever inhabited British waters. A highly distinctive fragment of a fin spine (plate 1) was identified as from a large specimen (approximately 1 metre total length) of the genus Synodontis. The bone was examined by Dr Angela von den Driesch of the Institut für Palaoanatomie, Domestikationsforschung und Geschichte der Tiermedizin der Universität München and by Alwyne Wheeler of the Fish Section of the British Museum (Natural History) who both confirmed the identification. The spine was found in a layer (DR 67 EH) dated by pottery and other finds to the Romano-British period.

Synodontis is a genus of a family of freshwater African catfish, the Mochokidae (upside-down catfishes) Nelson (1976). The genus is abundant in the river Nile and has been depicted in ancient Egyptian wall paintings and reliefs. Two species, Synodontis schall and S. batensoda were recognized by Gaillard (1923). Illustrations show fishermen removing the fin spines from freshly caught fish.

Finds of Synodontis fin spines have been reported from several sites in Egypt. Driesch (1983) discussed finds of Synodontis from the sites of Elephantine and Karnak where several species were recognized. Spines were assigned to species according to the pattern and form of their teeth. Unfortunately, the Dragonby specimen was not well enough preserved to be assigned to species.

The most likely explanation for the remarkable find of a spine of an African catfish at Dragonby is that it was imported from the Nile region during the Roman period, perhaps as a talisman, or simply as a curio.

References

- Driesch, A. von den (1983) Some archaeozoological remarks on fishes in Ancient Egypt. pp 87-110. In Grigson, C and Clutton-Brock, J. (eds.) Animals and archaeology: 2. Shell middens, fishes and birds. British Archaeological Reports International Series, 183.
- Gaillard, C. (1923) Recherches sur les poissons représentés dans quelques tombeaux Egyptiens de l'Ancien Empire. Mémoires de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale 51. 1-136. Cairo.
- Nelson, J. S. (1976) Fishes of the world. John Wiley: New York.

Catalogue of fish bones

- DR57 F1682 LD 1 precaudal vertebral centrum, pike, Esox lucius (width 5.6 mm)
 1 caudal vertebral centrum, eel, Anguilla anguilla (width 1.7 mm)
- DR63 KD 1 precaudal vertebral centrum, salmon, Salmo salar (width 11.1 mm)
- DR63 W A6 1 precaudal vertebral centrum, salmon, (width 9.4 mm)
- DR64 KB 1 precaudal vertebral centrum, salmon, (width 10.8 mm)
- DR67 EH 1 fin spine, Nile catfish, Synodontis sp.
- DR72 ABA F000 1 caudal vertebral centrum, salmon, (width 13.7 mm)
- DR72 BK E 3 caudal vertebral centra, salmon (width 14.5, 14.5, 13.2 mm)
- 2 fragments of fish vertebrae, unidentified
- DR73 CN 1 precaudal vertebral centrum, salmon (width 11.9 mm)

Note: width is the maximum width of the articulating face of the vertebral centrum.

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April 1986