

Ancient Monuments Laboratory
Report 66/89

PLANT REMAINS FROM FURNESS ABBEY,
CUMBRIA: AN INITIAL SAMPLE.

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Summary

One sample, collected during the watching brief of a sewer trench at Furness Abbey, Cumbria, yielded well-preserved waterlogged material. The botanical assemblage was dominated by alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) bracts and female cone fragments. Other taxa indicated a wet carr woodland habitat. A few periderms of cereal were found indicating that there was some local cereal cultivation. With more samples and their associated archaeological information it should be possible to examine the development of the landscape by the local monastic community, communities for which we have little environmental information.

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Plant remains from Furness Abbey, Cumbria: an initial sample

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One soil sample from the base of a sewer trench being excavated at Furness Abbey, Cumbria was sent to the Bio.Lab for analysis. It was washed through a stack of sieves, the finest mesh being 500 microns. Botanical remains were hand-sorted from these sieves and identified, at magnification of up to x50, by comparison with modern reference material held in the Bio.Lab..

No contextual information was known about this small sample labelled sewer trench - Furness Abbey (FUS 88 sample A).

The plant remains were waterlogged and well-preserved. They were dominated by *Alnus glutinosa* (alder) bracts and female cone fragments. Other taxa indicate a damp, woodland environment with an understorey characteristic of alder carr (alder woodland on peaty soils). Although the *Rubus idaeus* (raspberry) seeds could have been a source of food, the plants grow naturally in thickets on damp soils and are seen to be part of the natural community represented here.

There are also seeds from disturbed/cultivated ground plants but they are not abundant. Grass caryopses are common, but grass grows everywhere and, since the caryopses are not identifiable any further, little may be inferred about the communities they represent. Periderms of wheat/rye and oats were found occasionally and, with some of the grasses, may indicate debris in the form of hay and straw. This was not an important component of the vegetation represented by this sample.

Botanically this sample represents a wet ground community with alder trees and with some evidence of grassland, perhaps cereal growing, nearby.

The sample contained well-preserved botanical remains and other samples, once tied in with archaeological information, should be analysed. They could give important information with respect to the usage of plants in a monastic community. There is not often the chance to look at material so closely related to the monastic life and any such samples are important on a national as well as local scale.

Table 1: waterlogged plant material from Furness Abbey sewer trench

BioLab code number	1114
Furness Abbey sewer trench	
<i>Alnus glutinosa</i>	107
Gramineae undiff.	94
<i>Urtica dioica</i>	84
<i>Rubus idaeus</i>	82
<i>Cerastium arvense</i>	52
<i>Carex</i> (lenticular)	45
<i>Ranunculus repens</i> -type	43
<i>Polygonum persicaria</i>	20
<i>Chenopodium</i> sp(p).	12
<i>Chenopodium album</i>	8
<i>Alnus glutinosa</i> 'cone' fragments	8
<i>Polygonum aviculare</i>	8
<i>Viola</i> sp(p).	8
<i>Bromus</i> sp(p). grain	8
<i>Ajuga reptans</i>	6
<i>Sinapis arvensis</i>	5
<i>Lysimachia nemorum</i>	5
<i>Lycopus europaeus</i>	4
<i>Rumex acetosella</i>	4
<i>Carex hostiana</i> -type	4
<i>Ranunculus flammula</i> /cf. <i>flammula</i>	4
<i>Luzula</i> sp(p).	4
<i>Rumex obtusifolius</i> -type	3
<i>Carex</i> (trigonous)	2
<i>Eurhynchium</i> sp(p).	2
<i>Rubus fruticosus</i>	2
<i>Corylus avellana</i> nut fragment	1
<i>Prunella vulgaris</i>	1
Legume flower	1
<i>Mentha</i> -type	1
<i>Triticum</i> / <i>Secale</i> periderm	1
<i>Avena</i> periderm	1
<i>Rosa</i> - thorn	1
<i>Sambucus nigra</i>	1
<i>Spergula arvensis</i>	1
<i>Scrophularia nodosa</i>	1
<i>Cirsium</i> sp(p).	1