

Ancient Monuments Laboratory
Report 92/89

CHARRED PLANT REMAINS FROM AN IRON
AGE DEFENDED ENCLOSURE AT PARK
FARM, BARFORD, WARKS.

L C Moffett

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Summary

This Iron Age enclosure is located on the fourth terrace of the Warwickshire Avon. Most archaeobotanical evidence for the Iron Age in the west midlands comes from second terrace sites and hillforts so the charred plant remains from Park Farm were of interest for comparative purposes. Charred material was not in fact very abundant and consisted mainly of small dense chaff fragments of emmer and spelt, and weed seeds, possibly the by-product of cereal processing. Other food plants present were barley, hazel and sloe.

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CHARRED PLANT REMAINS FROM AN IRON AGE
DEFENDED ENCLOSURE AT PARK FARM, BARFORD, WARKS.

by Lisa Moffett

Despite the increasing commitment among archaeologists to recover charred plant remains from their sites, the amount of data available for any given period in any particular region of the country is often still very sparse. This is true for the Iron Age in Warwickshire, and indeed in the west midlands region generally. What little data there is comes mostly from hillforts and gravel sites on the second terrace of the Avon (Greig 1987). In view of this, it was decided to sample the site at Park Farm, Barford, which is on the fourth terrace of the river Avon, to provide some much-needed archaeobotanical documentation for this type of site in Warwickshire.

Methods

During excavation contexts were selected by the archaeologist to be sampled for charred plant remains. The contexts chosen for sampling were those which appeared to contain the most occupation material. The samples were wet sieved on a 1mm mesh sieve to remove sticky clay which might impede flotation of the charred material. The wet sieved residues were dried and then floated to separate the charred material from the remaining mineral fraction. The flot was decanted onto a 0.85mm mesh sieve and slowly dried. Some of the samples were sorted by a biotechnician and some were sorted by the author.

Results

Approximately thirty-five samples were collected. Most of them were poor in charred plant remains other than wood charcoal. Nine samples which appeared to contain the most charred seed material were selected for analysis and the results are given in the table.

The cereals represented are emmer, spelt and barley, with most of the cereal remains being spelt chaff. These are the three main cereals of the British Iron Age, although emmer, the main wheat of the earlier prehistoric period, was largely replaced by spelt during the Iron Age. Probably wild food resources are represented by hazel and sloe.

Most of the other wild plants present were probably growing as

arable weeds. Corn spurrey (Spergula arvensis), fat hen (Chenopodium sp.), tare/vetchling (Vicia/Lathyrus), knotgrass (Polygonum aviculare agg.), black bindweed (Fallopia convolvulus), sheep's sorrel (Rumex acetosella agg.), dock (Rumex sp.), some of the bedstraws (Galium sp.), and brome (Bromus secalinus/mollis group), are all weeds of arable fields and most of these will grow in any disturbed habitat such as waysides and gardens. Corn spurrey and water-pepper (Polygonum cf. hydropiper) are both calcifuge (Clapham et al. 1987), although water-pepper is not normally regarded as a weed. Since this is not a region with much calcareous soil, calcifuge plants could be growing almost anywhere, but water-pepper would be more likely to be found on the floodplain or on a low terrace. It grows in damp ground and shallow water, but could conceivably be harvested with a crop that had been grown on poorly drained soil or at the edges of wet ditches.

It is difficult to place much interpretation on the assemblage of plant remains since they appear to represent nothing more than a thin scatter of residual material. The material from a working hollow (222) in the top of the enclosure ditch contained a relatively more abundant amount of spelt and emmer/spelt chaff. It is possible that this represents the remains of fine sieving (see Hillman 1981) which is performed to remove the smaller chaff fragments and weed seeds from the grain. The presence of chaff remains is no indication of whether or not crops were grown at the site, since emmer and spelt are both often stored as spikelets (the grain still encased in its enclosing chaff parts) (Hillman 1981). Cereal supplies, therefore, might well have been brought on to the site from elsewhere.

Also noteworthy is the large number of seeds of black bindweed in context 441. Black bindweed seeds are fairly large and heavy, and may not have been completely removed from the crop by winnowing and sieving. They may represent the final stage of grain cleaning which is to hand sort the grain for large weed seeds, any remaining straw and chaff fragments, and pieces of grit, before consumption (Hillman 1981).

In attempting to compare archaeobotanical data from different Iron Age sites, the general poverty of data from sites of different types becomes clear. In its general paucity of plant remains, Park Farm appears to resemble other defended enclosures such as the ones at Rollright (Moffett 1988) and Northmoor (Moffett in Allen forthcoming). Rollright is on the Cotswolds and Northmoor on the first terrace of the Upper Thames, but despite the difference in location it is possible

that their economies were both based primarily on pastoralism (Lambrick 1988:125, Allen forthcoming). Remains of charred cereals tend to be substantially more abundant on the settlements on the second gravel terraces, such as Wasperton on the Warwickshire Avon (Bowker n.p.) and Ashville (Jones 1978) and Gravelly Guy (Moffett in prep.) on the Upper Thames. The second terrace settlements tend to be larger, so it is not entirely clear as yet whether this difference is a difference in the subsistence base of the economy or is merely reflecting the presence of more people consuming more crops.

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BARFORD PARK FARM

Table of charred plant remains

Context:	177	212	222	291	422	423	441	446	449	
Sample size (litres):	20	10	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	
Flot size (mls.):	6	38	47	8	3	5	4	9	6	
% of sample sorted:	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	
Cereals										<u>Common name</u>
Triticum dicoccum glume bases	-	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	emmer
Triticum dicoccum/spelta spikelet forks	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	
Triticum dicoccum/spelta glume bases	9	4	33	5	2	1	3	-	1	
Triticum dicoccum/spelta grains	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Triticum spelta glume bases	1	3	10	-	-	-	1	-	2	spelt
Triticum sp. grains	1	7	3	8	2	2	1	1	2	
Hordeum vulgare indet. rachises	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	barley
Hordeum vulgare grains	-	1	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	
Cereal indet. grains	2	7	2	2	-	-	1	-	2	
Coleoptiles	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	
Wild species										
Spergula arvensis	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	corn spurrey
Chenopodium sp.	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	fat hen
Vicia/Lathyrus	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	tara/vetchling
Prunus spinosa	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	sloe
Polygonum aviculare agg.	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	-	-	knotgrass
Polygonum cf. hydropiper	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	8	-	water pepper
Fallopia convolvulus	-	-	-	-	2	-	19	-	-	black bindweed
Rumex acetosella agg.	-	-	-	-	2	1	-	-	-	sheep's sorrel
Rumex sp.	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	dock
Corylus avellana frags.	1	-	-	-	3	1	-	-	-	hazel
Galium sp.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	bedstraw
Carex sp.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	sedge
Bromus secalinus/mollis group	2	5	3	2	-	-	1	-	-	brome grass
Gramineae indet.	4	7	6	3	1	4	4	5	-	
Gramineae culm nodes (small)	3	-	-	-	-	-	7	1	-	
Gramineae aerial culm frags.	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	
Gramineae rhizome frags.	10	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Indet. tuber/rhizome frags.	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	1?	-	
Tree buds	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Unidentified	2	-	-	1	-	-	12	1	-	