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THE FISH BONES FROM BROUGH ST. GILES HOSPITAL, NORTH YORKSHIRE.

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Summary

The fish bones form the site of the hospital are from the medeaval and post medaeval use of the site. The assemblage comprises both fresh water and marine species with a small number of fish bones being present in relatively large number of contexts. Many of the fresh water specimens are from small individuals, and it is suggested from this unrepresentative sample that marine species, such as cod, ling, haddock and rays were more important and were probably brought to the site, particularly in the early periods, salted or dried.

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Introduction.

Excavations at the site of the medieval hospital at St Giles by Brompton Bridge resulted in the recovery of fish bones both from the time of the hospital and the subsequent post medieval occupation as a farmstead.

The fish bones were recovered from areas 2,3 and 4 and were largely recovered by sieving, i.e. from 60 contexts only 6 contained hand picked material. In the sieved material there was a high proportion of indeterminate fragments, these were either non specific fin ray fragments or very small pieces with no recognisable features. Of the 60 features 35 contained fish bones identifiable to species/group level.

The following species were identified; Rajidae, roker (Raja clavata), eel (Anquilla anquilla), herring (Clupea harengus), Salmonidae, dace (Leuciscus leuciscus), c.f. roach (Rutilus rutilus), cod (Gadus morhua), haddock (Melanogrammus aeglefinus), ling (Molva molva), Gadidae, bullhead (Cottus gobio) and c.f. perch (Perca fluviatilis).

Since the sample is small and there does not appear to be any difference between the fish from the three different areas the tables show the species separated into phases rather than spacial distribution.

The scales are close to perch, but as these scales are difficult to assign to species, and as perch has only been identified from a single vertebral centrum, these have only been identified as cycloid.

The variety of species identified suggest that in all phases marine fish were more exploited as food than fresh water fishes that could have been caught in the river Swale.

The fresh water species, i.e. eel, salmonids, dace, roach, bullhead and perch are from small specimens, e.g. the salmonid vertebral centrum from 469 in phase 8 is similar in size to that from a specimen of total length 12 cms, and that from 593 (phase 5b/6) is from a specimen of around 20 cms total length. The bullhead bones (including the characteristic preopercular, a dentary and 2 articulars) were from individuals of between 6-8 cms in total length. This species has no food value for man although it is eaten by other fish including chub and trout. The dace pharyngeal is from a small specimen of approximate total length 10 cms.

The eel vertebral centra, although small, may well be food remains, eels were often caught in rivers in traps called 'eel-bucks' stretched across the river, catching the fish on their migration and were commonly eaten during the medieval period.

Table 1. Phases 2/3 to 6. The Medieval Occupation.

	2/3	3/4	---4a---		----------4b----------					4b/5b	----------5b----------					5a/5b	-----5b/6-------				------6-------			
	379	1467	2044	2046	617	877	1121	1145	1242	1478	663	701	902	2107	1081	569	593	632	725	1037	207	547	1636	Tl
Ray	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	2
Roker	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Eel	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	1	-	-	-	6
Herring	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	1	-	-	1	1	8
Salmonidae	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	5
Dace	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1
Roach	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Cod	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Haddock	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Ling	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Lge Gadoid	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Bullhead	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	3
Perch	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Cycloid scale	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	19	-	1	1	-	3	2	-	29
	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	25	2	1	4	2	3	6	1	61

Table 2. Phases 7 to 10; The Post Medieval Occupation.

	-7-7/8		-------8-------			8/9	------9--------			-9/10--			
	584	535	171	469	519	527	465	511	599	1070	410	600	
Ray	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Roker	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Eel	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	2
Herring	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Salmonid	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Dace	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Roach	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Cod	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Haddock	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Ling	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Lge Gadoid	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	2
Bullhead	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
Perch	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Cycloid scale	-	1	-	-	1	2	-	7	1	-	1	3	16
Total	1	1	1	1	2	6	1	7	1	1	2	3	27

The marine species include rays, identified from two teeth, and roker, specifically identified from a fragment of 'buckler' (dermal denticle). Cod, ling and haddock may well be evidence of salted or dried fish. The cod vertebral centrum from 2107 in phase 5b was chopped axially through the centrum, possibly evidence of splitting the fish. The ling quadrate from 465 (phase 8/9) was from a specimen of over 100 cms total length, an average size for a fish from inshore waters. A ling vomer from area 4 was unstratified. Haddock was identified from 2 vertebral centra.

These species could all have been caught in the North Sea and were probably brought to the site from local ports such as Scarborough, Middlesborough and Hartlepool where a significant proportion of the catch would have been salted, smoked or dried for inland marketing.

Although the fish remains are few there is quite a wide variety of species. It would appear that this sample is rather unrepresentative of the anticipated contribution of fish to the diet both during the occupation of the site as a hospital and subsequently as a farmhouse. More evidence of the consumption of marine species, particularly herring during the medieval period would be expected. The fish identified from the hospital of St Mary of Ospringe in Kent (Wall 1980, 255) show larger numbers of fish bones, particularly among the handpicked material and more especially cod during the Occupation and Dissolution periods. However this site is near to the coast line and no exclusively freshwater species were identified.

In conclusion it may be said that despite the sieving of a large number of contexts at Brough St Giles the evidence for the consumption of fish remains scanty. The bones of fresh water species are largely from specimens too small to suggest much exploitation of the River Swale, and the marine species merely indicate the presence of some of the staple species, but without giving any evidence for their relative importance.

References

Wall SM 1980. The Animal Bones from the Excavation of the Hospital of St Mary of Ospringe. Archaeologia Cantiana Vol XCV1, pp 227-266.