

Ancient Monuments Laboratory
Report 2/89

THE FISHBONES FROM A 13TH/14TH
CENTURY DEPOSIT FROM CLEEVE ABBEY,
SOMERSET.

Alison Locker

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Summary

A sample sealed by the make-up of a floor in the reredorter in Cleeve Abbey was sieved and found to contain a variety of marine fish; all these would have been eaten. The Abbey being only five miles from the coast, transportation of fresh fish would not have been a problem. As well as the fish bones rib fragments of ox, sheep, bones of domestic fowl, blackbird and shell fragments of oyster, whelk and limpet were also identified.

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A 4 kg sample of a deposit of late 13th to early 14th century date from beneath the floor of a room in the ground floor of the reredorter was wet sieved. Fragments of bone and shell were extracted.

A number of fish bones were identifiable to species or group level. Eel (Anguilla anguilla), herring (Clupea harengus), haddock (Melanogrammus aeglefinus), whiting (Merlangius merlangus), Gadoid indet., hake (Merluccius merluccius), gurnard (Triglidae), mackerel (Scomber scombrus) and plaice/flounder (Pleuronectes platessa/Platichthys flesus).

The number of bones are summarised below;

Species	skull	vert.	other	total
Eel	2	-	-	2
Herring	-	3	-	3
Haddock	3	4	-	7
Whiting	-	7	1?otolith	8
Gadoid (cf imm cod)	-	6	-	6
Hake	-	3	-	3
Gurnard	1	-	3 fin ray	4
Mackerel	-	1	-	1
Plaice/Flounder	1	6	-	7
Total	7	30	4	41

A number of indeterminate fragments, such as fin rays, were also found which have not been included in the table.

All the fish are marine, except for eel which although part of its life cycle is spent in the open ocean is usually caught in estuaries and rivers. Since the Abbey is only 5 miles from the coast transportation of fresh fish would have presented no difficulties. Information on the biology of these species can be found in Wheeler 1978.

Despite the presence of fish ponds at Cleeve where water was drawn off the river to drive two mills outside the precinct, then feeding two fish ponds before draining into the abbey moat (Bond 1988, 98), there is no evidence from this sample of the consumption of fish from the ponds. Eels, although they were kept in ponds could just as easily have been caught in the river.

Although there are much data, both documentary and topographical, relating to the use and management of fish ponds during the medieval period the evidence from fish remains usually emphasises the importance of marine fish rather than freshwater. The relatively high prices recorded for freshwater fish during this period ensured they remained a high status food, and Bond (*Ibid* 74) has shown that sea fish generally appeared to have been preferred on monastic sites. The small sample from Cleeve also supports this view, although as a single context it cannot be

regarded as representative of the site.

As well as fish remains a few fragments of ox and sheep ribs were identified (the former showed evidence of chop and knife marks), a fragment of domestic fowl coracoid, a blackbird carpometacarpus and some fragments of bird long bones. Fragments of oyster, limpet and whelk were also present. The entire sample is composed of domestic food refuse.

References.

Bond C J 1988. Monastic Fisheries. In Medieval Fish, Fisheries and Fishponds in England, Part 1, Ed M Aston. BAR British Series 182(i). pp 69 - 112.

Wheeler A 1978. Key to the Fishes of Northern Europe. Warne.