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Ancient Monuments Laboratory
Report 29/92

STANWAY, ESSEX: PLANT REMAINS FROM LATE NEOLITHIC/EARLY BRONZE AND MIDDLE IRON AGE PITS AND LATE IRON AGE BURIALS.

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Summary

Early prehistoric pits produced only charcoal though one pit tentatively dated to the MIA included charred hazel nutshell, sloe and hawthorn fruitstones, an assemblage more characteristic in this area of the Neolithic, suggesting dating should be reconsidered. MIA pits included charred remains of emmer, spelt and barley with weed seeds, apparently domestic assemblages. Planking at the base of a LIA burial pit was preserved mainly by ferrimanganiferous replacement. A 'pyre' deposit of LIA date included cremated bone, charcoal, tubers , rhizomatous material, moss stem, and fruits/seeds of Sieglingia and Montia. This resembles assemblages widely reported from Bronze Age cremations and represents grassland vegetation either uprooted or kindling or charred in situ.

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Introduction

Excavation of crop mark sites on gravel at Stanway by the Colchester Archaeological Trust showed that the large rectilinear enclosures seen in aerial photographs were of Late Iron Age date and defined areas around high-status burials. Within enclosure B samples for bulk-sieving/flotation were collected from a probable cremation pyre deposit, from a large grave pit and from a further pit with charcoal-rich fill. Other pits, of Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age and Middle Iron Age date were also sampled.

Methods

The samples were processed in a flotation/bulk-sieving tank, using 0.5mm meshes throughout. The non-floating residues were sorted without magnification, extracting small artefacts and cremated/burnt bone fragments > 2mm. The dried flots were partly or completely sorted under a binocular microscope at low power. The distribution of carbonised plant remains and cremated/burnt bone is indicated in Table 1.

Results

The two samples from the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age pit F16 produced abundant charcoal and heat-shattered flint but nothing further. The significance of these deposits is unclear. The lower fill of pit F30, tentatively dated to the Middle Iron Age, produced abundant charcoal but also carbonised hazel nutshell fragments (Corylus avellana) and fruitstones of sloe (Prunus spinosa) and hawthorn (Crataegus monogyna). Deposits of this type are known in Essex from features of Late Neolithic date (Murphy, 1990a) and seem to represent specialised activity areas associated with the processing or consumption of woodland foodstuffs. They are not known from Iron Age contexts elsewhere in the county, and it may be worth reconsidering the dating evidence for F30.

Other pits, confidently dated to the Middle Iron Age, produced assemblages of charred cereals (emmer, spelt and six-row hulled barley) associated with arable weed seeds. The material is not particularly well-preserved and it is not possible to be specific about the type of crop processing activity represented. However the charred remains present appear to be ordinary domestic assemblages. The associated burnt bone fragments are too small for identification but presumably again relate to domestic food preparation.

The sample from F6, the Late Iron Age grave pit, was from planking at the base of the feature. It included some small charcoal fragments but much of the material comprised black to reddish-brown wood fragments preserved by ferrimanganiferous replacement. It does not appear that the planks were heavily charred : preservation was largely due to impregnation with minerals leached down through the gravel fill of the pit. Pit F17 included a very large amount of charcoal (c 1kg of flot) but no other charred plant remains. The 'pyre' deposit, L5, however produced a more diverse assemblage comprising indeterminate tubers, rhizomes, monocotyledonous stem fragments, moss stem fragments and fruits and seeds of the heath grass Sieglingia decumbens and the herb Montia fontana subsp. chondrosperma,

derived from a type of acidic grassland, presumably growing locally on leached gravel-based soils. Assemblages of grassland plant remains and rhizomatous material commonly occur in Bronze Age cremation deposits (eg Murphy 1990b) but have also been reported from another Late Iron Age 'pyre-pit' at Baldock, Hertfordshire (Murphy 1990c). They seem to represent either plants uprooted for kindling or vegetation charred *in situ* beneath a pyre.

References

Murphy, P. 1990a. The Stumble, Essex (Blackwater Site 28): Carbonised Neolithic plant remains. A.M. Lab. Report 126/90.

Murphy, P. 1990b. Moverons Farm, Brightlingsea, Essex: Carbonised plant remains from a Bronze Age cremation cemetery. AM Lab Report 122/90

Murphy, P. 1990c. Baldock, Hertfordshire: Land molluscs, carbonised cereals and crop weeds, charcoal, avian eggshell and coprolites from prehistoric and Roman contexts. A.M. Lab. Report 123/90.

Context	A113	A208	A388	A419	A432	A460	A461	A498	A508	A577	B72	B129	B144
Feature	F16	F16	F22	F27	F30	F30	F22	F44	F38	F56	L5	F6	F17
Feature-type	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	?Pyre	Grave	Pit
Period	LN/EBA	LN/EBA	MIA	MIA	?MIA	?MIA	MIA	?IA	MIA	MIA	LIA	LIA	LIA
Cereal indet (ca.fr)	-	-	+	-	-	-	+	-	+	+	-	-	-
Cereal indet (ca)	-	-	28	-	-	-	-	-	6	6	-	-	-
Cereal indet (cn)	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1+fr	-	-	-
Triticum spp (ca)	-	-	19	-	-	-	-	-	3	6	-	-	-
Triticum spp (gb)	-	-	17	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Triticum spp (spb)	-	-	11	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Triticum spelta (gb)	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
Triticum dicoccum Schubl (gb)	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
Triticum dicoccum Schubl (spf)	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Hordeum vulgare L emend Lam (ca)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4(a)	-	-	-
Hordeum sp. (ca)	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-
Montia fontana L.ssp.chondrosperma	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-
Chenopodium album L	-	-	44(b)	-	-	-	fr	-	27(b)	2	-	-	-
Chenopodiaceae indet	-	-	13	-	-	-	-	-	5	-	-	-	-
Vicia/Lathyrus sp	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-

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Feature	F16	F16	F22	F27	F30	F30	F22	F44	F38	F56	L5	F6	F17
Feature-type	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	?Pyre	Grave	Pit
Period	LN/EBA	LN/EBA	MIA	MIA	?MIA	?MIA	MIA	?IA	MIA	MIA	LIA	LIA	LIA
Leguminosae indet.(c)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-
Prunus spinosa L	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Crataegus monogyna Jacq	-	-	-	-	-	3+fr	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Polygonum aviculare agg	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
Polygonum persicaria/ lapathifolium	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fallopia convolvulus	-	-	3	-	-	-	fr	-	-	-	-	-	-
Rumex acetosella agg	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-
Rumex spp	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
Corylus avellana L	-	-	-	-	-	3(d)	-	-	-	1(d)	-	-	-
Plantago lanceolata L	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-
Carex sp.	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sieglingia decumbens (L) Bernh	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	-	-
Bromus mollis/secalinus	-	-	18	-	-	-	fr	-	5	-	-	-	-
Avena sp (ca)	-	-	13	-	-	-	-	-	4	1	-	-	-
Avena sp (a.fr)	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Bromus/Avena	-	-	6	-	-	-	-	-	4fr	1	-	-	-
Gramineae indet	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-
Tubers (e)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-
Rhizome fragments	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-
Monocot stem frags.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-
Moss stem frags	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-
Mineralised wood (f)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-

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Feature-type	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	Pit	?Pyre	Grave	Pit
Period	LN/EBA	LN/EBA	MIA	MIA	?MIA	?MIA	MIA	?1A	MIA	MIA	LIA	LIA	LIA
Charcoal (g)	3	2	2	3	1	3	1	3	1	2	3	1	4
Indeterminate seeds etc	-	-	3	-	-	1	1	-	1	1	4	-	1
Cremated/burnt bone	-	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	-	-	+	-	-
Sample volume (litres)	10.5	9.5	12.0	3.0	13.0	7.5	7.0	2.5	11.5	6.0	14.0	20.0	16.5
% flot sorted	25	50	100	25	100	25	100	25	100	100	25	100	3.125

Table 1 : Carbonised plant remains etc. from Stanway (STW/4.88)
Taxa are represented by fruits or seeds except where indicated
Abbreviations: awn - awn; ca - caryopsis; cn - culm node; fr - fragment; gb - glume base; spb - spikelet base; spf - spikelet fork.
Notes: (a) Two lateral grains; (b) Numbers estimated from whole seeds and fragments; (c) Small-seeded types; (d) Nutshell fragments representing at least those counts (e) Ovoid, c 4.5 x 2.5 mm and c 3.0 x 1,8 mm with root stumps; (f) Black to reddish-brown ferrimanganiferous replacement; (g) Subjective scale : 4 = cm 1kg of flot with large charcoal frags; 1 = rare, small charcoal fragments.