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WORCESTER BARREL

Report
2439

INTERIM REPORT ON THE REMAINS FOUND IN LAYER ① AND THE CLOTH 18-iii-76

The plant, animal, and other remains being identified from the Worcester barrel contents represent the surviving fraction of all the material that was originally in and around it. The seeds demonstrate the presence of plants either on the spot or in material brought in, because they happened to be at the seeding stage. The pollen results show likewise that certain plants were either there or present in material brought to that place while they were flowering, although not to the same precision of identification. The beetles, too, may have been living in particular habitats nearby, and the parasite ova and fly puparia have their own story to tell, as they represent the barrel contents but not the surroundings.

The pollen and seeds present belong to a variety of different habitats and clearly do not represent the surroundings of the barrel. The large amounts of grass and cereal pollen shows that there was hay and straw, and a few nodes seem to confirm this although the rest of the stems and other parts have rotted away without trace. Grass and cereal seeds do not usually survive either, but among the few grass seeds that of the rye-brome, Bromus secalinus was identified, which seems to have been a common cornfield weed in the past, and even a crop in its own right at times. There is a large range of seeds of weeds which would have grown in fields and meadows before the introduction of modern herbicides and seed cleaning methods. The main cornfield weeds are the corn marigold, (Chrysanthemum segetum), the corn cockle (Agrostemma githago), the stinking mayweed (Anthemis cotula), the cornflower (Centaurea cyanus) and the thistles (Sonchus asper and S. oleraceus). The meadow species include the knapweed (Centaurea nigra), the nipplewort (Lapsana communis), the meadow buttercup (Ranunculus acris) and the hedge parsley (Torilis japonica). This generally fits in with the less specific evidence of the pollen record. The pollen and seed record also shows some signs of waterside vegetation, with seeds of sedge (Carex sp) and the hemlock water dropwort. There is very little sign of anything that might be local vegetation actually growing near the find-site.

There is an interesting collection of stones and seeds of food plants. Some, like the grapes, appear to have been spat out without having been eaten, as the seeds were all whole and undamaged. This suggests that the grapes may have been fresh, and this in turn may be a sign that grapes were grown locally rather than being brought in as raisins. Viticulture is nowadays restricted to certain parts of southern Britain and may be regarded as a rather marginal commercial activity, but in the past was far more widespread, perhaps linked with very slight climatic changes, so this find from Worcester is very important. The cherry stones compare with those of the modern morello cherry (Prunus cerasus) which may grow wild in hedges, although

the wild shrubs are probably escapes from cultivation, often bird-sown. There is also quite a collection of plum stones, the largest of which compare with those of the bullace (Prunus institia) and the smaller ones comparing with those of the two types of wild sloe. Bullace is thought to be derived from the cultivated plum, while the sloe is one of the wild parents of the plum. Both grow wild, although the bullace could have been cultivated, and the fruit of the bullace is edible after it has stayed the winter on the tree, and after cooking. The fruit of the sloe, however, is not usually regarded as palatable.

Other edible plant remains include the strawberry (Fragaria vesca), which would be the wild strawberry that we know today as the cultivated kind is the result of crosses between the wild species and American species. The wild strawberry could have been cultivated or encouraged in its natural habitat, like the other fruit whose seeds were abundant, the bramble (Rubus fruticosus). A number of apple pips were also found, and some of the other plant remains present could represent food or medicine.

Very large numbers of the ova of parasitic worms were found and counted in the pollen preparations which had been made up with this in mind as well as the pollen. These are probably species that are parasitic on humans, although not as yet specifically identified. This and the presence of large numbers of fly puparia are the actual evidence for the presence of human excreta in the barrel.

Other remains so far investigated include the beetle remains which are separately reported by Mr. P.J. Osborne, and the cloth which has been cleaned and conserved by Miss Raphael of the Birmingham City Museum. She reports that there are several types of cloth present, both felted and woven wool, and that there are some original colours left, rusty red and green.

The bones appear to be those of a ground living bird such as a small chicken, according to R.T. Jones.

DISCUSSION

These hurriedly assembled results from the first sample of barrel material to be processed show that it is, as already suspected, almost certainly a midden. These are fairly well known, although not always investigated in much depth. One was found at York which was lined by large round boulders, and material from another at Exeter revealed a similar assemblage of cornfield pollen types such as cereals and cornflowers. The Worcester barrel would appear to merit intense study because of the information that is already being retrieved about medieval life and times. In both the Worcester and the York case the midden pit must have needed plenty of work to construct which implies that they were used for a long time in order to justify the amount of work. The Barrel would have acted as a soakaway through its base, and the York midden would have soaked away through the gaps between the

boulders, which would have prolonged the usefulness. It is possible, too, that middens were periodically emptied as well, and then re-used.

It is very difficult to tell which of the plant remains passed through a human gut. Strawberry seeds are an obvious case, and possibly the seeds of plants which could have been taken as herbs, the fennel (Foeniculum vulgare) and Coriander (Coriandrum sativum), for instance, or for medicinal purposes like the henbane (Hyoscyamus niger) perhaps. It is very hard to do more than guess at this aspect of medieval life until there is much more evidence, for in those days almost every recognisable plant had a medicinal use, whether effective by our standards or not. In Chaucer, the story of Chanticleer is quite explicit on the contents of a good purge, and other remedies are listed in herbals. However the presence of the remains of plants that have a medicinal use is not the same as evidence that the plants were actually used for this.

The abundant plant remains suggesting hay and straw could be taken to indicate that some sort of wadding was put into the barrel to minimise the offensive aspect of the contents and to discourage the flies, but the amount of domestic refuse in the form of plum and cherry stones and bird bones may be a sign that the plant matter was used as flooring first, and then put in the barrel. The use of such floor material is well known from documentary evidence (the rushes in which King John reputedly rolled, foaming at the mouth) and from the study of preserved medieval deposits as at York and Dublin, and appears to have been a medium which could receive all kinds of rubbish which gently rotted away with the aid of insect activity without becoming too offensive. The cloth would appear to have been dropped into the barrel after being used in the same manner as toilet paper,

The plant remains are rather perplexing in that Worcester is a prime fruit-growing area now and probably has been for a very long time, hence the city coat of arms, yet the plum type stones found are those of virtually wild plants. There is certainly great scope for further work on the material from this site, and hopefully from other sites in the region if they are discovered.

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