

A NOTE ON THE CHARCOAL IDENTIFICATIONS FROM MARC 3 R27.

790 samples containing wood charcoal were examined from R27.45 of these were completely unidentifiable due to the extent of charring or because the charcoal was knot wood. Most of the samples were very small and seemed to originate from one fragment of charcoal (and therefore only one taxon was represented.) Less than 3% of the samples contained more than one taxon.

The following tree types were identified (in approximate order of frequency of occurrence):- hazel (Corylus avellana L.), oak (Quercus sp.), "hawthorn-type" (Rosaceae, subfamily Pomoideae), ash (Fraxinus excelsior L.), c.f. blackthorn (Prunus sp.), maple (Acer sp.), elder (Sambucus nigra L.), buckthorn (Rhamnus catharticus L.), willow (Salix sp.), holly (Ilex aquifolium L.), "poplar" (Populus sp.), alder (Alnus glutinosa (L.) Gaertn., one sample), hornbeam (Carpinus betulus L., one sample). Most fragments were identified to genus level, but specific names are given when there is only one native species. Willow and poplar are difficult to separate, but it seemed likely that both types were present.

It appears that sufficient samples were identified from this site to provide a full picture of the tree types represented in the deposits. The number of taxa identified increased as the first 300 samples were examined, but after that point no new types were recorded.

It may be of some interest to compare the R27 identifications with data from 100 lowland sites examined at the Ancient Monuments Laboratory (Keepax, 1977). The five generally most common species (hazel, oak, "hawthorn", ash, blackthorn) are also the most common within the R27 site. In contrast, alder, birch and willow are usually fairly common but are virtually absent from R27.

It is extremely difficult to interpret these results because most of the charcoal from this site was scattered in pits and ditches and therefore the original context is unknown. It is likely that much of the wood utilised on the site could ultimately have been used as fuel.

A simple "fuel selection" hypothesis could however be used to explain the charcoal results from R27. The four most common species (oak, ash, hazel and hawthorn) provide good fuel (Edlin, 1949) and therefore may have been preferentially selected. Alder and willow (present in only a few samples) are poor firewoods unless well seasoned (Edlin, 1949). However oak, hawthorn, hazel, blackthorn and ash are all very common species of mixed oak forest, scrub, hedges etc on many soil types (Clapham, Tutin, and Warburg, 1962) and their abundance on R27 might equally reflect their availability. Alder and willow generally prefer damp conditions and their virtual absence could also be interpreted as relating to environmental factors.

If a desired tree was not available locally, this could have been imported into the site. The taxa identified were therefore not necessarily present in the vicinity of the site. However, none of the tree types identified at R27 are obvious imports. Field maple and buckthorn both occur mainly on calcareous soils today (Clapham, Tutin, and Warburg, 1962).

The results probably represent the selective activities of man, largely within the local environment. Without supporting evidence (eg. pollen analysis) it is impossible to establish the extent to which these results are influenced by man or the environment.

References

Clapham, A.R., Tutin, T.G., Warbury, E.F., 1962. Flora of the British Isles. University Press: Cambridge.

Edlin, H.L., 1949. Woodland Crafts in Britain. Batsford: London.

Keepax, C.A., 1977. Identification, Preservation and Interpretation of Wood in Archaeological Deposits. Ancient Monuments Laboratory Report No 2277

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