making sense of heritage

Mythe to Mitcheldean Mains Reinforcement, Gloucestershire

Animal Bone

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MYTHE TO MITCHELDEAN, GLOUCESTERSHIRE (84960): ANIMAL BONE

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Introduction

The total assemblage comprises 2506 fragments (or 34.685kg) of animal bone. This report is concerned with the bones from Late Iron Age and Romano-British (Phases 1 and 2) contexts in Areas D1 and D2 (Table 1), which comprise 1867 fragments or *c.*75% of the total.

The assemblage was analysed following standard methods, a detailed account of which can be found in the site archive together with additional tables of summary information.

Results

Phase 1 – Iron Age

A small quantity of animal bone was recovered from Iron Age ditches, roundhouse gullies and pits. Most of the identified bones belong to cattle and sheep/goat, while pig, horse and dog bones are rare. Body part data suggests that livestock were slaughtered locally and that there was little or no separation of waste from different processes in the carcass reduction sequence. In other words butchery waste and domestic refuse were disposed of in the same way, resulting in mixed deposits of bone waste. Age information is limited but suggests that most cattle were slaughtered when fully mature, while most sheep/goat were slaughtered between the ages of one to four years. Most of the horse bones are from the head and feet, and these skeletal elements are generally removed with the hide. The dog remains include a fragment of maxilla from ditch section 632 in Area D2, and a mandible from ditch 321 in Area D1.

Phase 2 – Romano-British

A modest assemblage of animal bone was recovered from Romano-British features, mostly ditches, in particular 310, 315 (which is part of 316), 340 and 341. Cattle bones and teeth are common, followed by sheep/goat, then horse and pig. This pattern of relative importance is repeated at a number of contemporary local sites in the Upper Thames Valley (for example Dobney and Jaques 1998; Levine 2004; Sykes 2007).

Body part data indicates that livestock were slaughtered locally and that there was little or no separation of waste from different sources. Butchery marks were noted on a small proportion of cattle and sheep/goat bones, the evidence suggests that cattle carcasses were extensively butchered using a cleaver, the preferred tool for this job during the Romano-British period. Cattle were generally slaughtered as adult and senile animals, and this suggests that secondary products (e.g. milk, traction and manure) were more important than meat production. The slaughter pattern for sheep/goat indicates a peak in mortality (48%) amongst two to four year old animals, with a smaller peak amongst older animals aged between four to eight years. This evidence suggests that the flock was also managed for secondary products (e.g. wool) but that meat was also important.

Of note amongst the cattle bone assemblage is a sawn fragment of proximal tibia shaft from ditch 317, Area D1. The proximal articular surface and most of the *crista tibiae*, a triangular-shaped crest forming part of the anterior proximal shaft, had been cleanly removed using a saw, while on the posterior proximal part of the shaft were two 5.7mm circular holes. It is assumed that the holes are where nails were used to

fit the bone to a solid surface so that it could easily be sawn into small pieces for object manufacture.

Horse bones and teeth are more common than pig bones in the Romano-British assemblage. Based on the presence of some juvenile horse bones it would appear that these pony-sized animals (wither heights between 11.1 and 14.1 hands) were bred and reared locally. Butchery marks were also noted on two horse bones, a humerus and metacarpal. The location of these cut marks suggests that they result from filleting and skinning.

Less common species include dog and red deer. Dog is represented by two mandibles, while red deer is represented by a proximal radius fragment, and a charred fragment of antler, all from separate features.

Conclusions

The animal bone assemblage suggests that during the Late Iron Age and Romano-British periods the local rural economy was based primarily on cattle-farming, and this seems to be consistent with evidence from contemporary local sites. Cattle appear to have been managed primarily for secondary products rather than meat, and this could be linked to the need to maintain older animals for traction and manure to aid arable cultivation. Certain types of animal husbandry regime are more complimentary to arable cultivation than others, and this might explain why pig bones are under-represented in the assemblage.

In addition to raising livestock for secondary products and meat, horses were also reared at the farmstead, and were no doubt used as traction animals to take surplus produce to market. The presence of red deer post-cranial bones further suggests that deer were hunted to supplement the diet.

References

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Photo index

Context 919 – right cattle tibia

IMGP5656	anterior view
IMGP5657	medial view
IMGP5658	lateral view
IMGP5659	posterior view
IMGP5660	lateral view (detail proximal end)

Table 1. Number of identified specimens present (or NISP) by phase.

Phase 1 = Iron Age, and Phase 2 = Romano-British.

Species	**Phase 1**	**Phase 2**	**Total**
cattle	64	211	275
sheep/goat	61	146	207
pig	10	16	26
horse	6	41	47
dog	2	3	5
red deer		2	2
Total identified	**143**	**419**	**562**
Total unidentifiable	**337**	**968**	**1305**
Overall total	**480**	**1387**	**1867**


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