

Suburban life in Roman *Durnovaria*

Additional specialist report



Environmental
Marine shell

By Sarah F. Wyles

Marine shell

Sarah Wyles

The marine shell assemblage from Dorchester County Hospital comprised 1258 shells (minimum number of individuals) retrieved from 259 contexts. These shells were retrieved from six phases of the site, with the majority (70%) coming from the Romano-British periods (Table MS1).

The marine shells were recorded by species and context, in an Excel spreadsheet, with the oyster shells being sub-divided into measurable and unmeasurable left and right valves. Even when contexts were amalgamated at group level, there were no suitable deposits of marine shells for detailed analysis (statistical viability recommends 100+ measurable shells per group).

The predominant species of the assemblage was oyster (*Ostrea edulis*), representing 85% of the minimum number of individuals, with cockle shells (*Cerastoderma edule*) forming 6% and a further nine species making up the remaining 9% of the assemblage. These were, in order of abundance, carpet shells (*Venerupis spp.*), limpets (*Patella spp.*), prickly cockles (*Cardium echinatum*), great scallops (*Pecten maximus*), mussels (*Mytilus edulis*), periwinkles (*Littorina spp.*), whelks (*Buccinum undatum*), razor shells (Solenidae) and a small scallop (*Chlamys sp.*). These are all generally common species with a wide distribution. There were no significant changes in the assemblage species composition, other than those changes reflected in the number of shells retrieved by phase.

The proportion of left to right oyster valves was recorded to see if any specific areas of preparation and consumption could be ascertained. There were, however, no significant differences. Around half of the oyster shells retrieved were unmeasurable, an indication of the degree of post-depositional damage and wear, and some were worn and flaky, so it is likely that a significant amount of the shell was not disposed of rapidly.

Although the oyster shells were not analysed in detail, evidence for various infesting organisms was observed. Traces of infestation left by the polychaetic worms *Polydora ciliata* and *Polydora hoplura*, the sea sponge *Cliona celata* and the sea mat Polyzoa were all present. All these infesting organisms can be found on the South coast.

The oyster shells varied in physical condition, the level of infestation, size, thickness and shape, with a number of misshapen shells being recovered.

The species range of marine molluscs recovered may be an indication of the exploitation of a number of different coastal areas, as at Alington Avenue (Winder 2002) and Greyhound Yard (Winder 1993). The relatively low numbers of marine shells, however, would suggest that this was not a significant activity at any phase. The oyster shells do not appear to be particularly large or selected, as those recovered from Alington Avenue were, and may therefore be more likely to have come from natural uncultivated beds, like those from Greyhound Yard.

The marine shell assemblage retrieved from this site represents an augmentation to the basic diet rather than a significant part of the diet at any period of the site as was the

case with those shells recovered from Alington Avenue and Dorchester Bypass (Wyles 1997).

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Table MS1: Marine shell by phase

Species/Phase	Phase 0	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5	Total
Oyster (<i>Ostrea edulis</i>) left valve	1	54	128	39	96	1	319
Oyster (<i>Ostrea edulis</i>) um left valve	2	51	180	57	129	14	433
Oyster (<i>Ostrea edulis</i>) right valve	1	61	231	78	175	6	552
Oyster (<i>Ostrea edulis</i>) um right valve	4	41	158	63	107	7	380
Oyster (<i>Ostrea edulis</i>) mni	7	127	446	169	304	22	1075
Cockle (<i>Cerastoderma edule</i>) mni	4	11	39	10	10	2	76
Carpet shell (<i>Venerupis spp.</i>) mni	0	8	17	1	2	2	30
Limpet (<i>Patella spp.</i>)	0	11	4	4	7	1	27
Prickly cockle (<i>Cardium echinatum</i>) mni	0	3	10	2	6	0	21
Great Scallop (<i>Pecten maximus</i>) mni	0	0	1	0	7	1	9
Mussel (<i>Mytilus edulis</i>) mni	0	2	3	3	0	0	8
Periwinkle (<i>Littorina spp.</i>)	0	1	0	4	0	0	5
Whelk (<i>Buccinum undatum</i>)	0	0	2	2	0	0	4
Razor shell (Solenidae) mni	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
Small Scallop (<i>Chlamys sp.</i>) mni	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Total	11	164	523	196	336	28	1258

um = unmeasureable, mni = minimum number of individuals, total = mni

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