

Human skeletal remains

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Introduction

Unburnt disarticulated bone from two contexts (113 and 2204) was submitted for analysis. Context 113 is the fill of middle Iron Age ring gully 20 (Phase 2); context 2204 is a fill of Early Roman ditch 2266 (Phase 3). The bones were found co-mingled with faunal remains. The two contexts belong to different sites phases but the contexts from which they derive were also located in separate excavation areas (A and C respectively). Thus, it is unlikely that the contexts, and hence the two deposits of bone fragments, are in any way related to each other.

Methodology

Recording of the unburnt disarticulated human remains was undertaken with reference to Brickley and McKinley (2004) and Mitchell and Brickley (2017). The remains were scored for their surface condition (Grade 0-5+, after McKinley, 2004: 16). The MNI was determined based on the presence/absence of repeated skeletal elements, the comparative size of the bones (i.e. adult versus juvenile size), and the presence of fully mature versus unfused skeletal elements (O'Connell, 2004: 18). Observations pertaining to age were made, as appropriate, using relevant standards (Scheuer and Black, 2000). The incompleteness of the remains precluded sex estimation and metrical and non-metrical analysis. All bones were inspected for pathology with reference to standard texts (Aufderheide and Rodríguez-Martín, C. 1998; Ortner, 2019).

Results

Bone from context 113 comprised one fragment of unsided femoral head and numerous (100 plus) small fragments of bone. It was not possible to identify the numerous small fragments – they could be non-human animal or human. These will not be discussed any further in this report.

The surface condition of the fragment of femoral head was scored at Grade 4 (all of the bone surface affected by erosive action; McKinley, 2004: 16). The size and robusticity of the bone was in keeping with that of an adult individual aged over 18 years (Scheuer and Black, 2000). Additionally, the femoral head was fully fused. Fusion of the femoral head occurs approximately between the ages of 12-16 in females, and 14-19 in males (Scheuer and Black, 2000). Thus, this bone fragment derives from an individual aged at least 12 years. No evidence of pathology or anthropogenic modification was observed.

Bone from context 2204 comprised one fragment of distal right humeral shaft, one left (either second or third) metacarpal, one fragment of unsided pubis and eleven fragments of femur which represent a pair (left and right) of femoral shafts. Surface condition was scored at Grade 1 (slight and patchy surface erosion; McKinley, 2004: 16). The size and robusticity of the bone was in keeping with that of an adult individual aged over 18 years (Scheuer and Black, 2000). A more specific age estimation was not possible due to lack of joint surfaces and the absence of skeletal elements typically utilised in adult age estimation. No evidence of pathology was present. Observed breaks were again post-mortem, with no evidence of anthropogenic modification.

The overall size and robusticity of the observed elements suggests that these fragments all belong to the same individual. It is unclear whether they represent the remains of a highly truncated and disturbed burial, or whether the fragments are intrusive.

Summary and discussion

A minimum of two individuals were present, based upon the number of discrete deposits and non-repetition of identifiable skeletal elements. They include the remains of one individual aged >12 years and one unsexed adult aged >18 years. Given that the margins of the observed bone fragments are clearly post-mortem and not fresh (i.e. the edges of the breaks are taphonomically eroded), this bone is unlikely to have been found in its place of primary deposition. As such they are likely to be residual within the two deposits.

Fragmentary, disarticulated human remains are frequently recovered from ditches and other features of Iron Age date, and are commonly co-mingled with faunal remains (Madgwick, 2008: 100). Although not found as frequently in the Roman period as the preceding Iron Age, fragmentary disarticulated human skeletal material is nevertheless noted from Roman period non-funerary contexts (Pearce, 2013: 146). Thus, both contexts should be considered as relatively typical for their respective time periods.

It should be noted that the above human remains were discovered co-mingled with animal bones post-excavation – human remains were thus not identified on site and therefore no licence for the exhumation of human remains was obtained from the Ministry of Justice. The Ministry of Justice takes a pragmatic view where incidental findings of small quantities of human remains are identified post-excavation (as is the case here), and the legality of holding such remains is not affected (Mays and Payne, 2006).

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