

Archaeobotany Working Group Meeting

Durham University, Archaeology Department, March 23rd 2013

Present:

Rosie Bishop (Durham University), Gill Campbell (English Heritage), Mike Church (Durham University), Rachel Fosberry (Oxford Archaeology), Lisa Gray (Freelance Archaeobotanist), Allan Hall (University of York), Lisa Lodwick (Oxford University), Hayley McParland (University of York), Charlotte O'Brien (Archaeological Services Durham University), Don O'Meara (Durham and Wardell-Armstrong Archaeology), Erica Rowan (Oxford University),.

Due to adverse weather conditions (and ensuing travel chaos) many attendees were unable to make it to the meeting on the day, thereby confirming that the north is indeed a cold and inhospitable place. However, many thanks to all who had intended to travel. At the very least it shows that the AWG still maintains an active interest which we can hopefully build up with meeting in the future. Regards to:

Denise Druce (Oxford Archaeology North), Alison Foster (Palaeoecology Research Services), Elizabeth Huckerby (Oxford Archaeology North), Jacqui Huntley (English Heritage), Lisa Kennedy (Pre-Construct Archaeology), Catherine Longford (Sheffield University), Lynne Lowrie (Northern Archaeological Associates), Gemma Martin (Sheffield University), Lisa Moffett (English Heritage), Patricia Shaw (Freelance), Michael Wallace (Sheffield University).

The day began with an introduction to the current research activities of the attendees. Rosie Bishop was in the process of completing her PhD thesis on Mesolithic and Neolithic plant use in Scotland. Rosie has subsequently passed her PhD viva and is a post-doctoral research assistant on Dr Mike Church's Uig Landscape project <https://www.dur.ac.uk/uig.landscape/>. Her review of Neolithic plant use in Scotland (with Mike Church and Peter Rowley-Conwy will be of interest to those working on Scottish prehistoric material; Bishop, R. R. , Church, M. J. & Rowley-Conwy, P. A. (2009). [Cereals, fruits and nuts in the Scottish Neolithic](#). Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland 139: 47-103.

Gill Campbell discussed some of the current English Heritage projects, with the new Stonehenge visitors centre featuring many inputs from the EH Environmental Archaeology Team. She is also working on material from Silbury Hill, Wiltshire.

Mike Church discussed his Uig Landscape project, as well as his currently developing experimental archaeology project based at the botanical gardens of Durham University (<https://www.dur.ac.uk/botanic.garden/>). This will include work on the growing of cereals and wood coppicing/pollarding. It is hoped that in the future this will make reference material grown in the garden available to archaeobotanists. Mike's current research involves survey and excavation of sites relating to the Neolithic of Lewis.

Rachel Fosberry from Oxford Archaeology East mentioned a number of projects which Oxford Archaeology is currently working on. Their work in Northern England includes both dry and wetland sites dating from the Mesolithic to the Early Medieval Period along the route of the Carlisle Northern Development Route. Further west work continues on material from Ronaldsway Airport on the Isle of Man where there are extensive remains dating from the Mesolithic to, and including, the Bronze Age. Other current archaeobotanical analyses and assessments include multi-period sites along the route of the Easington to Paull pipeline in East Yorkshire, sites along a pipeline at Nether Wasdale, Cumbria, a Roman and Medieval site in Middlewich, Cheshire and a medieval and post-medieval site in Derby. The finds from Carlisle are particularly interesting and include excellent wood preservation such as a number of wooden 'tridents'. A series of photos can be viewed here: <http://cndr.oxfordarchaeology.com/content/gallery-3-stainton-west-palaeochannel>

Lisa Grey works as a Freelance Archaeobotanist based in Kent and has ongoing projects, including excavation work for Canterbury Archaeological Trust on the Iron Age site at University of Kent. She has also been working on charcoal samples from a 14th century burial site in France. She is currently in the process of assessing samples I processed for Kent Archaeological Field School recently. During the past summer (2013) she ran elements of a community outreach program offering the environmental archaeological aspect at 'Faversham in the Making' on the 20th of July.

Allan Hall was undertaking a number of smaller archaeobotanical projects, but one of his recent Northern projects involved the examination of charcoal from a lime kiln located in Cumwhinton, near Carlisle. This has subsequently been dated to the 17th century. His research interests on turf construction in archaeology were also noted. Recently some of this work has been detailed in the journal *Environmental Archaeology*: Kenward, H., Hall, A.R. & Jones, A.K.G. 2012 'Turf roofs and urban archaeological build-up' *Environmental Archaeology*, vol 17, no. 1, pp 66-79.

Lisa Lodwick of Oxford University discussed some of her recent work on Iron Age and Roman Silchester. Among the interesting finds from this site are increasing numbers of olive stones from pre-Roman Iron Age contexts, or as The Guardian newspaper chose to report it: "The stone, combined with earlier finds of seasoning herbs such as coriander, dill and celery, all previously believed to have arrived with the Romans, suggests a diet at Silchester that would be familiar in any high street pizza restaurant". For a more nuanced view of this topic the following can be consulted: Lodwick, L. 2013 'Condiments before Claudius: new plant foods at the Late Iron Age oppidum at Silchester, UK' *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany*, published on-line June 2013, 1-7.

Hayley McParland discussed her work in East Africa on the Songo Mnara project. As part of an AHRC funded project she will be exploring interior, exterior, public and private space through phytolith analysis. Her work on creating a phytolith reference for East Africa being undertaken as part of this project reminds us how much 'basic' botanical work still needs to be undertaken. More information on this project can be found here: www.songomnara.rice.edu

Charlotte O'Brien mentioned a number of ongoing projects being undertaken by the Archaeological Services Durham University but of particular interest will be the recently published remains from a Roman salt making site in Nantwich, Cheshire, which a number of Durham based environmental archaeologists, including Charlotte, contributed to: Arrowsmith, P. and Power, D. 2012 *Roman Nantwich: A Salt-Making Settlement Excavations at Kingsley Fields 2002*, BAR 557

Don O'Meara discussed his work at Wardell-Armstrong Archaeology, as well as his on-going research in Durham (supervised by Mike Church), on the cesspit deposits of Northern England).

Erica Rowan discussed her work on the mineralised remains from Herculaneum. This includes samples from the sewerage system of the Roman town and is being studied as part of her PhD project "Roman Diet and Nutrition in the Vesuvian Area: A study of biological remains from a sewer at Herculaneum".

After the introductory session Allan Hall presented a discussion on the use of botanical terminology in archaeobotany. Discussion focused on the need to be accurate with our descriptions on one hand, while also not making reports accessible to a non-archaeobotanical audience. This could be achieved by including a disclaimer in the introduction such as: "For the purposes of clarity the references to 'seeds' identified here refer to the seed or fruit structures unless

otherwise stated; that is to say the propagule or disseminule structures. Certainly confusion could be caused if archaeobotanists started using terms like "dandelion fruits", when many would understand what is meant by seed. However, care should be taken to distinguish terms such as grain and caryopsis, which have specific technical differences in what they refer to. In a time of increasing data production, and where researchers might be entering data onto computer databases the need for accuracy is all the more important to avoid duplication, or vague terms.

As an interesting aside Allan pointed out that the decline in the macro-plant study of botany is not a recent phenomenon and was evident when he began his studies in Cambridge.

During the discussion after his presentation the group discussed how changes in the archaeobotanical profession mean many now come to the field via archaeology, whereas in the past many researchers started out studying botany, and then made the move across to archaeology. This is now creating something of a 'disconnect' between the archaeo- element and the –botany element; something which the AWG tries to address with its meetings. The following article is a timely reminder that it is becoming increasingly difficult to study this at a University level:

<http://www.rhs.org.uk/Plants/RHS-Publications/Journals/The-Garden/Past-Issues/2012-issues/January/PDFs/Death-knell-for-botany-degrees>. DO'M mentioned that when undertaking the Kew Wood Identification course the course director, Peter Gasson, mentioned that the archaeobotanical field is becoming an increasingly important source of new wood anatomy research due to the shift to genetics within the plant sciences.

After the lunch break Rosie Bishop presented some details of her PhD research on the utilisation of plants in the Scottish Mesolithic and Neolithic. This work is based on the collation of published and grey-literature reports relating to this period. This will in many ways seek to rebalance discussion on the 'British Neolithic' which is often heavily in favour of sites located towards the south/south-east of the island of Great Britain. She also outlined some experimental work she has undertaken on cereal and hazelnut charring. This paper is **freely accessible to download from the ADS website** <http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/psas/volumes.cfm> Rosie hopes to publish a similar paper on her review of evidence from Mesolithic Scotland review in the coming months.

Don discussed his research on the cesspits of medieval Northern England (as defined by the English Heritage Northern Region). The survey has revealed large gaps in our knowledge, both in terms of certain chronological periods and certain regions within Northern England; i.e. a heavy bias in favour of Anglo-Scandinavian York, and a heavy eastern bias for the region. The survey did however reveal over 350 species of plant recorded from the region. In light of Allan Hall's discussion on the usage of botanical terminology this reminds us of the broad base of knowledge which might be needed when working on urban sites.

In the evening the usual identification session was undertaken. Among the positive identifications was a heavily charred *Rosa* species from the Isle of Lewis, identified by Allan Hall. Lisa Lodwick brought a waterlogged cone of *Cupressus sempervirens* from a mid/late Roman well excavated at Silchester Insula IX in 2012, the earliest example identified from Roman Britain. Lisa also brought a caraway seed from Insula IX, which is also the earliest one from Roman Britain, more evidence of the range of imports brought to the region. Alison Foster (Palaeoecology Research Services) who was unable to make it to the meeting, had promised to bring some waterlogged teasel heads from Beverley. Hopefully we will be able to see these at a future meeting.

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