

A summary of an assemblage of bones and a pot sherd found in Wookey Hole cave, Mendip Hills, Somerset. By Vince Simmonds.



Introduction

An assemblage containing an assortment of animal and bird bones and including a single pot sherd was found during clearance works to enable an adventure caving route in Wookey Hole cave. The location where the bones were collected is to the right of, and above the main entrance into the show cave in a narrow passage that eventually widens and leads into Wookey Hole cave.



It should be noted that the assemblage was not recovered during a systematic and controlled excavation but were received by the author as a random collection of bones and sediment.

The assemblage was contained within sediment consisting dry and friable reddish-brown sandy silt with occasional sub-angular fine and medium gravel of limestone and fragments of calcite; there was some organic matter content, mostly of fine roots.

Method

The assemblage was initially sorted as received and the larger bones were separated from the assemblage, this process included the pot sherd. Where possible smaller bones such as small mammal skulls and mandibles were also separated and any coarse granular material removed. The remaining sediment and bone were wet sieved over a 63-micron mesh sieve to remove the silt and clay fraction, the sample was then air dried. The larger bones, small mammal skulls and mandibles were washed and dried separately. The dried sample was then dry sieved using a 710-micron wire mesh sieve to separate the bones from the sand fraction. Small mammal skulls and mandibles (lower jaws) were the selected for basis of this summary analysis as they were easier to identify, there are a lot of very small bones in a shrew.

Results

The small mammal bone assemblage contained numerous skull and mandibles of smaller rodent species mostly mouse, vole and shrews, as seen in the photograph below, along with a myriad of tiny bones that were not identified as part of this analysis.



These bones were then separated into two groups comprising shrews and mouse/vole.



The 9 skulls and 22 mandibles of shrew species include both common shrew, *Sorex araneus*, and pygmy shrew, *Sorex minutus*. Common shrews are the more abundant species in the shrew bone assemblage, but pygmy shrews are represented.



There are numerous skull and mandible bone specimens from both mouse species, *Mus* or *Apodemus*; and vole species, *Microtus* or *Myodes*; these appear to make up a large part of the bone assemblage. There were also numerous fragmented remains that were not identified.



The larger bones included bovid (sheep/goat) three metacarpals and a phalange with other unidentified fragments. There is more than one animal. None of the bones showed any sign of

butchery although one bone, a metacarpal, did have some evidence of gnawing probably by rodent. The damage to the bones occurred post-mortem most likely during excavation.

The three metacarpals, with varying completeness, have an undulating surface at the distal end that is typical of an unfused epiphyseal junction, the phalange is also unfused. This indicates these specimens originated from immature animals less than 18 months old (O'Connor, 2000).



The assemblage also contained a small number of bones from an unidentified bird species, but probably corvidae (perhaps jackdaw).



The pot sherd has been identified as Black Burnished Ware perhaps originating from Dorset during the Roman period.

Conclusion

The small mammal bone assemblage is interpreted as an accumulation of bones deposited by a predator in a favoured rest spot after hunting and feeding. The species that are identified in the assemblage suggest a raptor, most likely a barn owl. Barn owls are creatures of habit taking prey to a preferred perch to consume and digest their catch. Pellets containing fur, claws and bone are regurgitated and if these are undisturbed quickly become incorporated into a forming sediment, the more robust constituents, such as bones, might survive as a closely packed clump of material (O'Connor, 2000). It is possible that this accumulation later becomes incorporated into material taken into the cave for nest building.

There are no butchery marks or significant evidence for gnawing identified on the larger bovid bones so these are unlikely to have been transported into the cave by a scavenger, such as fox. It is suggested that these might have been picked up by jackdaws, perhaps as nest material and carried into the cave.

The pot sherd has been identified as Black Burnished Ware, this is one of the major types of coarse pottery used for the dating of Roman sites (Gibson, 2002). The sherd was not a diagnostic piece, i.e. part of a rim or base, hence a wider date range of 1st to 4th century AD. It is likely to be a residual find, as with the bovid bones, perhaps carried to the location by corvid species. There is documented evidence for Romano-British occupation at Wookey Hole beginning around the early second century and continuing into the late fourth century AD. This phase of occupation appears to be domestic as the pottery includes cooking and eating vessels (HER 24355).

However, the assemblage was not recovered during a systematic and controlled excavation; therefore, any potential relationships cannot be established or suggested with any certainty.

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