Human Remains from the Winter Camp at Torksey

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The material discussed in this report was principally surface collected during monitoring of metal detecting over a period of three seasons (2012-2015), with a small proportion recorded as out-of-context small finds from excavations in December 2012 that did not otherwise encounter any *in situ* material. The following assessment of the human bone was undertaken in accordance with standards for skeletal assessment outlined by the IFA (Brickey and McKinley 2004), supplemented by more specific research where appropriate. The poor condition of the material – extensive fragmentation, taphonomic destruction and weathering – has severely limited the amount of information that can be obtained from skeletal analysis. Nonetheless it has been possible to conclude that the material represents at least two adult individuals aged 18-25 and 25-35 years at death respectively. At least one individual is male. Assessment of pathological conditions was hampered by condition, however periosteal reaction was identified in one fragment. One fragment provided evidence of peri-mortem sharp force trauma.

Inventory and condition

In total, 21 fragments of bone could be conclusively identified as human. An additional 25 fragments were faunal and a further 49 could not be assigned to either human or faunal. The 25 faunal and 49 unidentifiable fragments are not discussed further in this report.

Disturbance and exposure to the elements has resulted in a collection of human skeletal material that is represented by numerous small fragments. Plough damage is likely responsible for a significant part of this destruction. Evidence of bleaching and weathering was also identified, suggesting exposure of material above ground for some time. A single fragment of vertebra presented signs of burning, however this fragment was not definitively human. The material presents extensive fragmentation and signs of taphonomic degradation consistent with the higher grades of 4, 5 and 5+ quantified by Brickley and McKinley (2004: 16), which has routinely obscured morphological features and altered normal bone texture. Poor preservation has significantly undermined the degree to which useful osteological information can be obtained, and is the key reason for the attribution of a designation of possibly human to such a large proportion of the material.

The 21 fragments of human material derive from a range of skeletal locations. They included, primarily, elements from the cranial and axial skeleton (skull and long bone fragments) but also represented were a single clavicular shaft, two vertebral fragments, a section of the cuboid (a tarsal bone from the foot) and four teeth. The complete skeletal assemblage presented no repeat elements, and therefore cannot permit the identification of more than one separate individual using conventional means of calculating minimum number of individuals (e.g. see Ubelaker 2002). However, the wear patterns on the four teeth would suggest at least two individuals are represented. The first individual is represented by a right mandibular 2nd premolar and 1st molar, which remain *in situ* in a single fragment of mandible, and a mandibular left 3rd molar. The latter tooth presents a wear stage consistent with the two *in situ* teeth, and therefore could belong to the

same individual. The final tooth, a left maxillary 2nd molar, presents wear consistent with a younger age at death. Overall, therefore, the minimum number of individuals for the human material is two. The high degree of fragmentation, the low rate of successful identification to element and side, alongside the wide area across which the material was found all suggest that this value is likely a severe underestimation of the number of individuals the material represents.

Demography

A small amount of data concerning age at death and biological sex can be obtained from the human material. Two fragments provided observable sexually dimorphic features: a right temporal bone with a preserved mastoid process and supra-meatal crest; and a frontal fragment with a left supra-orbital margin. Both of these elements were robust and consistent with adult male/s (Rogers 2005). Assessment of occlusal wear on the four teeth discussed in the MNI calculation above provided ages at death of 18-25 years (the single 3rd molar) and 25-35 years (the group of three teeth) (Brothwell 1965: 69; Miles 1963; 2001). No immature human material was positively identified, but given the lack of demographic information derived from the collection as a whole, no significance should be attached to this.

Pathology and trauma

A single long bone fragment, likely from a tibia, presented healed periosteal reaction. This condition is likely the result of inflammation deriving from infection or trauma during life and is commonly encountered on the tibia (Weston 2008).

One fragment provides evidence of peri-mortem sharp force trauma. Skeleton series ID 94 (at 83338 80376) is a small fragment of occipital from the mid-point of the cruciform eminence of a texture, thickness and form consistent with the human cranium. There are two cut marks located perpendicular to each other, one orientated vertically and the other horizontally. They must derive from separate blows of a sharp implement. The clean, sharp, polished surfaces with no traces of healing are both of a form consistent with peri-mortem trauma.

Conclusions

In summary, the bone from Torksey is a challenging collection of material from which to derive even the most basic osteological data. Nevertheless, it was possible to positively identify 21 fragments as human. These represent a minimum of two individuals, at least one of which is likely male. Both are adults aged 18-25 and 25-35 years at death. As the material was disturbed and scattered, there is little that can be inferred from burial context or funerary rites. The cut marked cranial fragment, if we accept the fragment to be human, provides compelling evidence for a violent, and probably fatal, encounter. Further investigation is warranted in this case.

References

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