

- PLANT REMAINS

1.1 Assessment of the Charcoal

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Introduction

- 1.1.1 A total of five samples were taken during the excavation from the deposits of five cremation urns, which were sampled in their entirety for the recovery of charred plant remains and cremated bone. The cremation urns were dated to the late Iron Age and early Roman period. The purpose in sampling was to examine the evidence for change and continuity in burial practices between the late Iron Age and the Roman period.

Methodology

- 1.1.2 All five of the samples taken were processed and assessed. The volume of soil processed ranged from 1 litre to 7 litres. The samples were processed by flotation in a modified Siraf-type machine, with the flots collected onto a 250µm mesh. The flots were air-dried and divided into fractions using a set of sieves. Fragments of charcoal were randomly extracted, fractured and examined in transverse section under a binocular microscope at x10 and x20 magnification. Fragments caught in the >2mm sized sieves were quantified as identifiable. In the case of large flots, a sample of *circa* 20% was examined. The flots were also scanned for the presence of any other charred plant remains.

Quantification

- 1.1.3 A total of five samples was assessed, of which four produced identifiable wood charcoal (Table 12). Two taxa were identified - *Quercus* sp. (oak) and Maloideae (hawthorn, apple, pear etc.). Ring-porous taxa, and particularly *Quercus*, are easily recognisable at low magnification, although the identification of Maloideae is tentative. It appeared from the way in which the charcoal had fragmented that most of the flots contained only *Quercus* charcoal. Indeed, non-oak charcoal was noted in only one sample (context 39). No other charred plant remains were present.

Provenance

- 1.1.4 Most of the cremation urns were dated to the early Roman period and one was late Iron Age in date, although the close spacing of the features suggests that the cremation urns were more or less contemporaneous. Certainly, the evidence from the charcoal suggests continuity in burial practice. The preservation of the charcoal was reasonable, but the concentration was low, which is to be expected in burial urns where the bone has been carefully removed from the pyre remains. The charcoal fragments were too small in size to provide information on activities such as woodland management.

Conservation

- 1.1.5 The flots are in a stable condition and present no problems for long-term storage and archive.

Comparative material

- 1.1.6 The predominance of a single taxon in prehistoric cremation assemblages, indicating the use of a single tree or specifically selected species in ritual activities, has been noted at Radley Barrow Hills (Thompson 1999, 352) and at Rollright Stones (Straker 1988). It has also been suggested that the abundance of oak or ash in

cremation deposits, compared to other species, is a result of the pyre structure; the timber from these trees providing the supports in a central position, less likely to have been totally reduced to ash (Gale 1997, 82). There has been little publication on Iron Age and Roman charcoal from cremation deposits (Gale 1997, 77) so there are few comparable sites, although other excavations along the CTRL are likely to provide a wealth of comparable material.

Potential for further work

- 1.1.7 Full analysis on these samples is unlikely to provide more information on the nature of their composition than was ascertained at the assessment. Nevertheless, a full discussion of the charcoal from these cremation deposits will allow valuable comparisons to be made with other sites, both regionally and nationally. Therefore, it is important that the results are included in any future publication.

Bibliography

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Thompson, G B, 1999. The analysis of wood charcoals from selected pits and funerary contexts, in A Barclay and C Halpin, *Excavations at Barrow Hills, Radley, Oxfordshire, volume 1: the Neolithic and Bronze Age monument complex*, Thames Valley Landscapes, 11, 247-253, Oxford

Table 12: Summary of charcoal from cremations

Sample details					Flot details		
Pit	Context	Period	Sample no.	Sample size	Flot size (ml)	Charcoal	Taxa
39	39	AD 70-200	1	1 litre	5	++	<i>Quercus</i> sp. Maloideae
	40	AD 70-200	2	1.1 kg	18.5	+++	<i>Quercus</i> sp.
43	45	LIA-AD 70	3	1 litre	3	+	<i>Quercus</i> sp.
	44	AD 70-200	4	7 litres	40	++	<i>Quercus</i> sp.

+ = 1-10; ++ = 11-50; +++ = 51-100