

St. Thomas Street, Southwark

Environmental Work:

interim report

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ENVIRONMENTAL analysis of soil samples from the St. Thomas Street excavation has so far been concentrated on the contents of the large timber-lined pit (f on plan, page 269/70), probably filled c. A.D. 160-180. This subrectangular pit measured approximately 2.00m x 2.20 (extent excavated) and the depth of the surviving deposits was 50-60 cms.

Within each of the four internal compartments the layer of deposit varied only slightly and the general sequence was:

- Top Brown-green clayey earths.
 Dark brown more humic layers, becoming sandier towards the base.
 Sandy earths and gravels with many oyster shells.
- Bottom Disturbed and discoloured sand.

The organic remains were mainly confined to the humic and upper levels. Due to the damp conditions prevailing within the pit this material was in excellent condition, and included seeds, wood fragments, animal bones (fish, mammal, bird etc.), shellfish and insects. These have been extracted by wet-sieving large samples of each of the pit layers, which should enable us to see how the assemblages varied from one layer to another. For the purposes of this report, however, the contents of the pit will be considered as a whole.

Research on this material is still in an early stage, so the following report on the findings is only a preliminary one.

Food Remains

The most prolific materials obtained from analysis of the pit contents were the seeds. A preliminary examination of these shows an assemblage which consists almost entirely of stones, pips and seeds from edible plants and fruits. The most common of these is the fig, which was probably imported to this country; stones of cherry, sloe and plum were also abundant, as were pips of apple, pear, blackberry, strawberry and grape (the latter need not

necessarily have been an import) A few legumes (pea family) were also preserved.

The lack of nuts (such as hazel and walnut), grain and weed seeds (one sedge seed was noted) suggest that most of the material derived from human faeces and will thus give an indication of diet. A number of seeds of the *Rosaceae* family so far preclude accurate identification. (This family includes such plants as briar, hawthorn and agrimony).

Examination of the fish bones and scales has proved equally interesting. The majority of the bones are those of small individuals (under 15 inches in length) of freshwater, marine and estuarine habitat. This indicates that the fish were being supplied from various sources; there was no dependence on any one particular area, such as the freshwater Thames.

The commonest species are the common eel (freshwater or marine habitat) and the smelt (marine inshore and estuarine). Other species include members of the *Cyprinidae* (carp, tench, bream, roach, etc.) which are exclusively freshwater, and the mackerel and haddock (both marine species).

Shells of the edible oyster and mussel have also been extracted from the pit deposits. Large quantities of oyster shells occur in the lower sandy levels, but elsewhere shellfish are generally infrequent and probably represent only a small proportion of the food remains.

A number of large animal bones were extracted in the initial excavation, and some smaller ones in wet-sieving. These included bones of cow, sheep, pig (adult and juvenile), birds (some of which are probably domestic fowl), several dogs, cat, rabbit, house-mouse (first known in this country in the Roman period), frog and lizard. A more detailed examination of these bones will allow calculations as to the number of individuals represented here, their possible size and age distribution.

Pests

Insect remains found in the pit include pupae of the common housefly and the lesser fruit or vinegar

Insect remains from pit (f) at St. Thomas Street, including pupae of house-fly and fruit-fly. (see above p. 270)

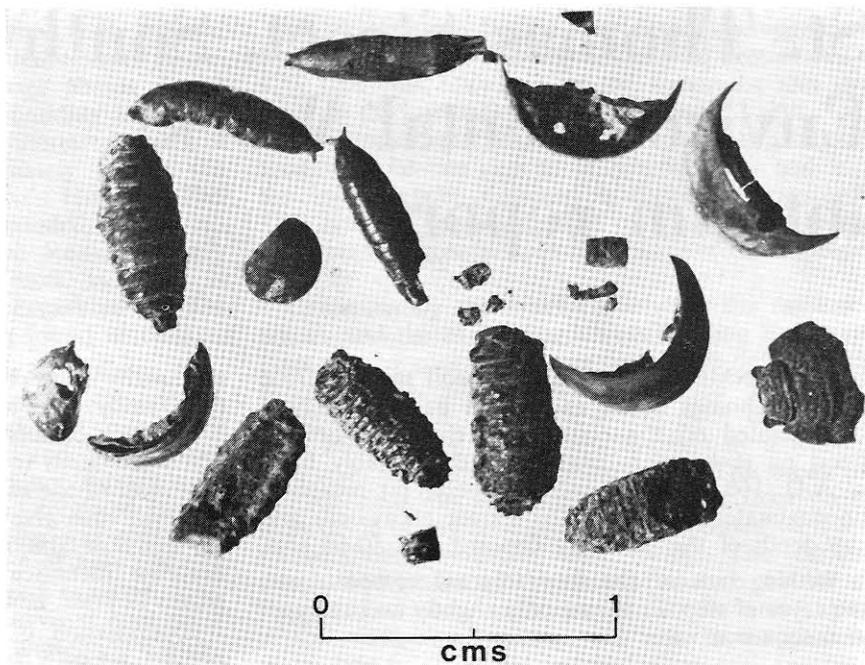


Photo: John Earp

fly (*Drosophila*). House flies have a large variety of breeding habitats, which include compost heaps and any accumulation of decaying organic matter, while species of *Drosophila* normally lay their eggs in decaying or over-ripe fruit or vegetables.

A number of fragments of beetles also recovered from the pit have not yet been identified.

Conclusions

The majority of the organic material from the pit should be more correctly termed "cultural" rather than "environmental" evidence, in that the food remains tell us more about the diet of the Southwark inhabitants than about the environment.

These food remains probably derived from a combination of cess and other food debris, which, together with the pottery, writing tablets, etc., show that the pit was finally used for the deposition of domestic refuse. From this we can infer what the environment within the pit was like, but the insects provide the only direct evidence of these conditions.

The house-mouse would have probably been attracted to the pit by the food remains, while the presence of a frog is explained by the proximity of the Thames. (Alternatively the frog may represent more food).

It can be seen that a varied diet of meat, fish, oysters, vegetables and fruit was being enjoyed in Southwark in the late 2nd century A.D. Work on similar deposits in other pits at St. Thomas St. indicates that they also functioned as rubbish pits,

and is revealing a similar variety of food.

Much of this food will have been produced on land around Roman London. Evidence suggests that some form of agriculture was being carried out in Southwark in the later Roman period, and there is no reason why this should not have been true in the 2nd century also.

Cherry, plum, apple etc. may have been grown in nearby orchards, and grape may also have been cultivated under more sheltered and favourable conditions. This latter fruit may, however, along with the fig, represent some trading with the Continent.

Further work outside the City and Southwark may enable us to pinpoint the main areas of food production, but until such a time, we can only make broad deductions from the type of foods found in areas of consumption.

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