

◆ Evidence for Romano-British bear skinning from Westward House, Fishbourne, West Sussex

By Lewis Busby

Recent re-analysis of the zooarchaeological assemblage from Westward House, near Fishbourne Roman Palace, has identified butchered brown bear (Ursus arctos) remains. Cut marks across the first phalanx indicate that the animal had been skinned. This finding is significant, as literary and zooarchaeological evidence for brown bear in the Roman period indicates that the animal was usually exploited for entertainment purposes; evidence for the skinning of the animal is rare.

INTRODUCTION

Evidence for brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) is rarely seen in Britain after the Iron Age, causing some authors to believe that the species went extinct here towards the end of the Romano-British period (Hammon 2010, 100). Analysis of the site of Westward House by Allen (2011, 161) identified the presence of brown bear but, because little was known about the dating and function of the site, the evidence could not be placed in the context of the wider environment. Recent re-analysis of the zooarchaeological assemblage has now provided further information regarding the site's dating and function, allowing for the interpretation of the presence of brown bear for the first time.

WESTWARD HOUSE

Westward House is located between the village of Fishbourne, West Sussex, and the city of Chichester. Excavations were originally conducted in 1992, when several pits and ditches were discovered (Kenny 1992, 33). However, due to difficult excavation conditions (Kenny 1998, 2), little interpretation could be made; the site was roughly dated to the Late Iron Age and early Romano-British periods through pottery evidence (Manley and Rudkin 2005, 55).

Westward House lies between the site of the high-status Roman palace at Fishbourne and the Roman *civitas* capital of Chichester, and this raises several different possibilities regarding its date and function. The presence of Iron Age objects such as funerary urns (Allen 2011, 87), suggests an Iron Age

date. Another possibility is that it dates to the early Romano-British period, following the discovery of objects and features including a Romano-British military style belt buckle and a timber-framed building (Kenny 1998, 1).

To assess the likely dating and occupants of the site, a re-analysis of the zooarchaeological assemblage was undertaken (Busby 2016, 1). This focused on the butchery styles and breakage patterns of the animal bones, as these differed in the Iron Age and Romano-British periods (Maltby 2007, 59). The analysis showed butchery and breakage consistent with the Romano-British period, with notable similarities between Westward House and Fishbourne Roman Palace (Figs 1a and 1b).

These results show that the Westward House site was occupied by individuals who followed Romano-British customs. Furthermore, due to the similarities between their zooarchaeological assemblages, it is likely that the Westward House site was linked to the occupation of the palace at Fishbourne.

THE EVIDENCE FOR BROWN BEAR AT WESTWARD HOUSE

The evidence for brown bear is represented by a single first phalanx from context [108], a fill of a large ditch that ran east-west through the site. Although the context has not been securely dated, associated contexts within the ditch are dated to AD 40–79 through pottery evidence, indicating that the feature may have been backfilled at this time. This information, coupled with the analysis of the overall assemblage, which showed that it was likely to date to the early Roman period (Busby 2016, 1),



Fig. 1a. Chopped-through cattle femur from Westward House (L. Busby).



Fig. 1b. Chopped-through cattle femur from Fishbourne Roman Palace (L. Busby).

suggests that the bear phalanx is likely to be from the transitional period between the Iron Age and Romano-British periods, around AD 40–79.

The re-analysis of the phalanx found three cut marks towards the distal (toe end) articulation of the bone, on the medial/lateral surface (Fig. 2). Due to the anatomical location of the cut marks, the cause for the butchery is most likely to have been the skinning of the animal. Cut marks on phalanges

have often been interpreted as evidence for skinning on medium and large mammals (Fairnell 2008, 57). Furthermore, this interpretation has been applied specifically to brown bear remains at the site of Hazendonk in the Netherlands, where cut marks on a second phalanx have been interpreted as being caused by the separation of the hide (Zeiler 1987, 261). The presence of the knife cuts also suggests that the phalanx represents butchery waste, rather



Fig. 2. Side view of the bear phalanx, showing cut marks towards the distal end (L. Busby).

than one of the animal's skeletal elements which would have remained in the skin, which would not have been butchered to preserve the condition of the hide.

DISCUSSION

The re-analysis has shown that brown bear skinning occurred in the Romano-British period. However, it is not known whether the bear was wild, and indigenous to the British Isles, brought in from abroad for the deliberate processing of its hide or brought in as an already processed skin.

A number of brown bear remains from the Romano-British period have previously been found, indicating that bears were likely to have been wild in the British Isles at the time (Hammon 2010, 100). These include remains found in Colchester, which is believed to have been a bear used for entertainment (Luff 1985). A scapula, humerus and ulna have also been identified at the Romano-British site

of Fullerton, Hampshire; no butchery was noted on the remains, but some areas of burning were identified (Hammon 2010, 100). Evidence for bears in the British Isles also comes from written sources, which indicate that bears were exported from the British Isles for entertainment in Rome. According to the Roman poet Martial, Caledonian bears were fought in the Coliseum in Rome (Yalden 1999, 111).

Another possibility is that the bear was not captured and skinned as a wild animal in the British Isles, but was imported from abroad as a skin which had already been processed; bears may have gone extinct in the British Isles around 2,000 years ago (Yalden 1999, 112), around the time the bear at the Westward House site would have been exploited. However, when sites showing evidence for the presence of bears are mapped (see Fig. 3), a wide distribution of sites is shown. Furthermore, several show evidence of exploitation, for example Fullerton in Hampshire, where areas of burning were noted on the remains (Hammon 2010, 100).

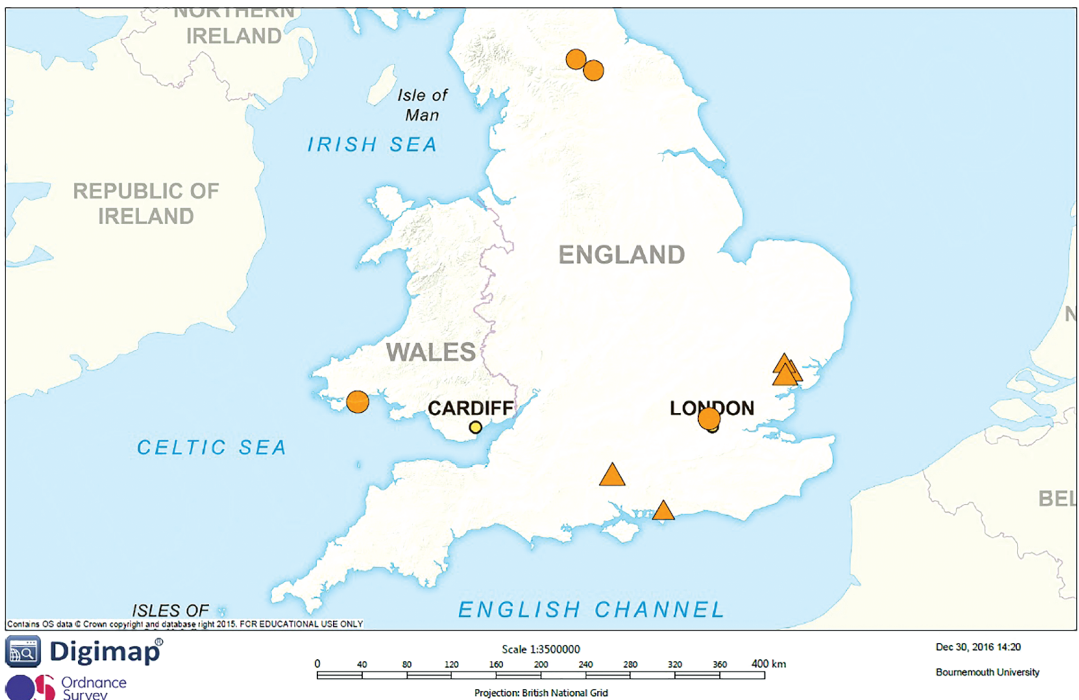


Fig. 3. Map of brown bear remains found in the British Isles. Triangles indicate sites with evidence of exploitation, circles indicate sites with no evidence of exploitation. Sites include: Sheepen, Colchester (Luff 1985), Little Hoyle, Pembroke (Yalden 1999), Catterick Bridge, Yorkshire (Meddens 2002), Fullerton, Hampshire (Hammon 2010), Courage Brewery, London (Hammon 2010), Richmond, Yorkshire (Yalden 1999), Balkerne Lane and Butt Road, Colchester (Luff 1993) and Westward House, West Sussex. (Image: L. Busby).

The evidence from Westward House is unique, as no other direct evidence for bear skinning has been found in the British Isles for the Romano-British period. Other evidence for exploitation comes in the form of the burning of remains (Hammon 2010, 100), or for use as entertainment (Luff 1985). More common, however, is evidence for the use of bear skins in the Iron Age. Excavations at Welwyn and Baldock revealed bear phalanges associated with Iron Age cremation burials, interpreted as a specific rite relating to the cremation of an individual before burial with bear skins (Schonfelder 1994, 217). However, these are third and second phalanges, rather than the first phalanx, with no butchery being noted, and are likely to represent complete bear skins (Schonfelder 1994, 224).

The Westward House remains show evidence for butchery waste created during the processing of the hide and may point to a typical Iron Age, rather than Romano-British, practice being undertaken in the area surrounding Fishbourne Roman Palace. Literary and osteological evidence for the Romano-British period usually points to bears being exploited for entertainment, rather than their skins, while prehistoric evidence points to a similar exploitation pattern as that seen at Westward House, with bear skinning more common. The exploitation of the animal for its hide in the Late Iron Age has led to the interpretation that the brown bear in this period was viewed as a high-status animal, not hunted for conventional purposes, but for the creation of high-status goods, including its pelt (Schonfelder 1994, 222).

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CONCLUSION

The bear phalanx at Westward House represents skinning waste from a Romano-British site close to Fishbourne Roman Palace. However, when put into the wider context of brown bear in the British Isles in the 1st and 2nd Centuries AD, further interpretation can be made showing the importance of the discovery.

The evidence from other British sites raises the possibility that the phalanx may have belonged to an indigenous bear, rather than one imported from the continent, as bears were still wild in the British Isles in this period, and listed as an export. The phalanx is also unique as, to date, it is the only evidence of bear skinning to be discovered in the British Isles in the Romano-British period and may represent a more typical Iron Age style of bear exploitation. Furthermore, since the bone is a first phalanx, usually removed during the skinning process (Schonfelder 1994, 222), the remains found at Westward House may represent evidence for the processing of the hide in the local area.

Therefore, although it was found in an area containing typical Romano-British settlements, such as Fishbourne Roman Palace and the Roman *civitas* capital of Chichester, the phalanx suggests the Iron Age practice of exploiting the bear for its hide was retained here, and that the brown bear remained a prestigious wild animal, rather than an animal that could be used for entertainment.

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