

DEAD DEER AND ANCIENT CATTLE: A DAY IN THE LAB

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A day in the life of an archaeologist can consist of many things. My own experiences have ranged from digging in ice filled holes in freezing midwinter to throwing projectiles at hay bales in some attempt to experience prehistoric technologies. A rather less active pursuit involves processing excavated material in the lab.

This summer most of my days are spent working on an assemblage of animal bones which were excavated in the late nineteenth century and have been sitting in a museum store house without much work done.

Working with this sort of material is a little different to working with material which might be excavated today, because the recording methods have developed so much over the past hundred years of archaeological investigation. Much material which was stored in museums in the 1800s was not always deposited with proper plans and diagrams, which make it rather difficult to piece together the exact story of what, went on on-site.

My work involves looking at the bones in detail, starting off with basic identification of the species which were present on site, and moving on to look closely for evidence of human use of the bones, in the form of cutmarks from butchery, as well as evidence for what happened to the material after the prehistoric people who used and ate these animals threw the bones away.

The material I'm looking at mainly consists of cattle remains; these seem to be of domestic animals, though there are also remains of now extinct aurochs, an ancient form of massive wild cattle. We also have red deer, with some absolutely huge antlers from them present on site. In addition there are horse bones, and some from wild boar and wolves.



Closely inspecting an ulna in the lab. This is where the magic happens.

There are claims that much of what I'm looking at is from the Mesolithic period, which dates approximately between the end of the last Ice Age, and the arrival of agricultural practices in Britain, when the main form of subsistence for the human occupants was hunting and gathering, but I compare a lot of the specimens to reference material, and it looks to me like there are a lot of domestic animals, especially cattle and horse, possibly dating to the Bronze Age, which is rather later, as well as earlier Mesolithic material.

These zooarchaeological studies allow archaeologists to piece together the story of what past people were doing with animals, their diet and their economy. What I'm hoping to do is to be able to tell the story of the site and shed some light on material which hasn't been looked properly in the modern period. For me it involves sitting in the lab working through boxes of sometimes rather crumbly bones and Excel spread sheets where I record the data. Once this is finished I should be able to write it all up in a stylish report.