



DUSTY MUDDY STUFF (“I THINK YOU WILL FIND ITS CALLED ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATEEEERIAAAL!”)

July 29, 2011 sodiumjones Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2011, Digital Archaeology, Excavation, Finds, Museum Archaeology, Osteology, Prehistory Anatomy, ancient and threadbare office swivel chair, Archaeology, arthritis, Assistant Registrar/Registration Assistant, Bone, British Museum, Bronze Age, Burial, Charles French, Department of Prehistory & Europe, Elena Jones, Etton Landscape, Europe, Francis Pryor, http, Human Remains, museum Registration, Neolithic, Norfolk, online digital record, osteology, particular site, Post-excavation, Registrar, Registration, tooth ache

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Today I am sitting down in an ancient and threadbare office swivel chair at my bubble-wrap and acid free tissue covered desk. I am in a British Museum office – away from the main Bloomsbury site – that has been little changed, by my reckoning, for 25 years or so.



To fill you in on what I do, my current work here is on the same project it has been Monday to Thursday for over a year now. It involves the registration of an archaeological assemblage from an excavation of the Eton Landscape in Norfolk (if you want to know more see <http://www.eaareports.org.uk> No.109, 2005: Archaeology and Environment of the Eton Landscape, by Charles French and Francis Pryor ISBN 0 9520616 2 7).

This site, of late Neolithic and Bronze Age features has delivered to us, in the department of Prehistory & Europe, a large assemblage of flint implements, pottery sherds, animal bone and human remains. It has been my privilege (and my job!) to sort, identify, photograph and document the finds, working from the finds themselves and the site publication.



All this, often very repetitive work, eventually culminates in a well-organised collection of objects properly housed in long-term storage and marked with a unique registration number which refers to a detailed online digital record which can be found on the [British Museum website](#)

But back to today! and this snap shot into the world of museum Registration. I am 'registering' the last of ten Etton Bronze-Age human burials. I have a particular interest in human remains and as such I take my time to carefully identify, side (is it from the left or the right side of body?) and individually bag each bone of this skeleton. The burial in question is of a young male with relatively good preservation and no apparent health problems. It is quite common for me to come across the bony growths, spurs and polished surfaces of an individual with arthritis or the carious lesions on the teeth that tell me this person probably had tooth ache. Moreover, after working with so many burials from numerous sites you soon come to appreciate the splendid variations in the dimensions of people's facial bones. Beetle brows, high cheek bones and prominent chins are all in the mix!

The burials from this particular site are taking a little longer than one might expect because, although they have been given a burial number, many of the bone fragments have also been assigned an individual field number. This means that I must transcribe the full site details onto the new bag for each of these pieces of bone rather than just noting down the burial number.

After accurately transcribing the site details from the original, and now rather ropey, finds bags I group bones and fragments within larger bags and label them with general skeletal parts such as "pelvis", "ribs", "skull" or "right foot". I hope that when someone- probably a student- comes to study this individual, my careful bagging and labelling will speed up their task and reduce any possible confusion. To those of us who work in registration and documentation it is always essential that things are well ordered, accurate and above all, make sense.

Throughout this packing process I keep a detailed list, for the database description, of the various pieces of bone I come across and the proportions that have survived. I also use a visual method of recording the burial and colour in, on a schematised drawing of a skeleton, the portions of each bone we have, annotating the number of fragments or loose teeth and any oddities or pathology. Finally, the burial and this skeleton sheet are carefully packed into archival boxes, with bubble wrap and acid-free tissue for protection, which are marked in permanent marker with their individual registration number and the number of boxes for that particular number.

It will be a very satisfying day when the last of this Etton Landscape material is marked and placed in its cabinet or on to its shelf, the table is stripped of its cushioning bubble wrap and I begin to consider how to tackle the next- and there always is a 'next'!- dusty unregistered archaeological assemblage. Any day now!