

An Assessment of the Plant Remains from the Bermondsey Abbey Sites.

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The following report is based on the assessment of plant remains recovered from sites making up the Bermondsey Abbey Project. The potential of the botanical material for providing information on the character of the local environment and economic/human activities in the area will be considered and any recommendations for further analysis (including costings) presented.

The Sites and Samples

Environmental soil samples were collected from three of the five sites making up the project; no samples were recovered from either LWK92 (Long Walk) or TWB94 (Tower Bridge Road/Long Walk). A total of 230 samples were collected from the three other sites, the vast majority (221) coming from the main excavations at Bermonsey Abbey (BA84). The other nine samples were collected during two phases of work at the Trocette Site, from TRE91 (two samples) and TOB95 (seven samples). An assessment report has already been prepared on the environmental samples from TOB95 (Giorgi 1995).

The size of the samples varied between sites. From the Bermonsey Abbey excavations, the sample size was generally very small; thus, while the range extended from 0.01 litres to 30 litres, the average size was only 2.2 litres, 105 samples containing less than one litre of soil and only eight samples containing ten litres or more. Ten litre samples were collected from TRE91, while the samples at TOB95 were also mainly ten litres with the exception of two very large samples of 50 and 70 litres. All the bulk samples from BA84 and TOB95 were processed by flotation using a 0.25mm and 1mm mesh for the recovery of the flot and residue respectively; the two samples from TRE91 were mainly floated (nine litres), but also partly wet-sieved (250g) through a 0.25mm mesh in order to recover organic waterlogged plant remains. Unprocessed soil remains from the two TRE91 samples. The residues were sorted for both environmental and artefactual evidence and the flots scanned using a binocular microscope. The results will be discussed by site.

Bermondsey Abbey, Long Walk (BA84)

The 221 samples from this site came from a wide range of features and periods. However, no flots were produced from any of the samples, and the only botanical material in the residues was a small number of charred grains in three samples and low to moderate quantities of charcoal flecks in just over 50% of the samples. The three samples containing grain were from a mid-Saxon silt deposit [3211] in a drain, and two, as yet, undated deposits, the fill [2436] of a ditch cutting natural, and a pitfill [4437]. The mid-Saxon drain fill [3211] contained three grains, one of hulled barley (*Hordeum sativum*), and one possibly of wheat (cf. *Triticum* sp.) and oat (cf. *Avena* sp.). The samples from [3211] and [2436] yielded two grains of free-threshing wheat (*Triticum aestivum*) and one wheat/barley (*Triticum/Hordeum* sp.) grain respectively.

The virtual absence of botanical remains is surprising, although it could be attributed partly to the very small size of most of the samples, and partly to the soil conditions at the site, with the well-drained natural sands and gravels precluding the possibility of preservation of plant remains by waterlogging.

The Trocette, Tower Bridge Road (corner with) (TOB95)

Seven samples were collected from this site; from a Roman ditch [98] and pit fill [44]; from the fills [117] and [141] of two possible Saxon pits; and from two 12th-century drain fills, [39] and [70]. However, no botanical remains were recovered from either the residues or flots, although other biological material, eg. animal bone, was present (Giorgi 1995).

The Trocette, Tower Bridge Road/Bermondsey Street (TRE91)

The two samples from this site were both recovered from the fills, [3] and [18], of post-medieval cesspits. The dry and wet flots contained a range of waterlogged and mineralised plant remains, consisting mainly of fruit seeds, eg. grape (*Vitis vinifera*), fig (*Ficus carica*), plum (*Prunus domestica*), apple/pear (*Malus/Pyrus* sp.), elder (*Sambucus nigra*), blackberry/raspberry (*Rubus* spp.), although wild plants were also represented, eg. goosefoots (*Chenopodium* spp.). Wood and charcoal fragments were also present. The samples contained faunal remains - puparia (mineralised), beetle, mollusc, animal bone fragments, - and the residues of domestic and possibly industrial activities, eg. brick/tile, pot, glass, metal, slag, cloth, pipe stem fragments, suggesting that the pit was being used both for the disposal of faecal remains and general rubbish.

Recommendations

The paucity of plant remains from the Bermondsey Abbey project sites is such that it cannot add to our understanding of either the environmental and economic character of the area and how it may have changed over time. Of the two sites that yielded some botanical material, the few grains from BA84 will add virtually nothing to our knowledge of crop husbandry and no further work is recommended on this material. On the other hand, the frequency and diversity of the plant remains from TRE91 could provide some interesting data on diet, with mineralised remains being strong evidence of food consumption (Green 1979). The range of foodstuffs could also be increased by wet-sieving the remaining soil from the two samples. The insects from these samples could possibly provide information on the conditions and contents within the pit, and the character of the local environment.

Costings (for TRE91 samples)

Botanical remains

Processing remaining soil	0.5 days
Sorting, identification of plant material	1.0 “
Computer input, table compilation	0.5 “
Preparation of Report	<u>2.0 “</u>
Total	4.0 DAYS

Insect remains

Consultant rate 1 sample @ 2.5 days	5.0 DAYS
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John A. Giorgi 19.2.97

Bibliography

- Giorgi, J. 1995, The Environmental Samples from Tower Bridge Road, SE1 (TOB95). (MoLAS Environmental Archive Report).
- Green, F. 1979, Phosphatic mineralisation of seeds from archaeological sites. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 6, 279-84.