

Faunal Remains from Oakington Cemetery excavations, 1993

Clare Rainsford

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Introduction

The Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Oakington was initially excavated over two weeks in 1994, as a rescue excavation in advance of the development of a children's play-area (Taylor et al. 1998). 26 burials were recovered, of which three were recorded to have deposits of animal bone included as grave goods. The animal bone from the 1994 excavations was minimally reported in the 1997 publication, with only the bone recovered from graves identified and described. Even then, these deposits were described in very general terms ("cattle bone" "sheep femurs"), and this lack of detail led to difficulties in incorporating these results both with results from later excavations at Oakington (Nottingham 2015) and overarching surveys of animal remains from graves in the region (Rainsford 2017). Reassessment of the animal bone from the 1994 excavations was therefore clearly a priority.

Methodology

The Oakington archive is held by Cambridgeshire County Council and access was arranged through their archive service. Animal bone was contained in a single archive box, representing material excavated both from graves and from features on site. The material had previously been loaned to Oxford Archaeology East, who had provided a catalogue, detailing context numbers and bags, of the box contents.

All material was identified to the lowest taxonomic level possible. Where identification to taxon was not possible (eg. for ribs, vertebrae, and shaft or cranial fragments without identifiable features), fragments were counted as unidentified, and rib, vertebrae and shaft fragments were assigned a size category (small / medium / large) where possible. Basic age data (fusion / tooth eruption and wear) was recorded for each identifiable bone, and any further taphonomic information, including butchery, was recorded by means of notes for each context. For each context, the overall assemblage condition was recorded using a qualitative scale (very good / good / reasonable / poor / variable). Brief taphonomic descriptions, including colouration and weathering, were also made for each context.

Bone was kept bagged by context following analysis. Data were stored as Excel spreadsheets. NISP (Number of Identified Specimens) has been used as a descriptive quantification method throughout.

Results

General Results

An assemblage comprising 167 fragments of animal bone was present from the 1994 Oakington excavations. Of this, the majority was unidentified, or identified only to size class, with only 47 fragments identified to taxon (28%). Three Associated Bone Groups (hereafter ABGs, Morris 2011) were identified, all deriving from grave deposits, and in addition to one further element recorded as a grave deposit, indicate four burials at Oakington which contained offerings of animal remains. These are discussed further, below.

Disarticulated bone was present both in grave fills and in other, non-funerary, contexts, including pits, ditches, and topsoil/subsoil layers. Non-funerary bone forms the majority of the assemblage (Table 1). However, there is no apparent difference in species composition between funerary and non-funerary contexts, with the bone derived from burials appearing as a dilute version of that from the remainder of the site. The disarticulated bone within grave fills appears to be in poorer condition than that from elsewhere on the site, with condition more often described as “reasonable” or “poor” than “good” or “very good”, and surface damage often noted.

Species diversity in the Oakington animal bone was restricted, with only the most common domesticates identified to taxon (sheep/goat, cattle, pig and horse) (Table 2). Three elements of bird were also identified, although they could not be speciated with the resources available. Sheep/goat is the most common taxon, followed by cattle and pig; and medium mammal remains are similarly more common than large mammal remains. The proportions of taxa are consistent between grave and non-grave contexts (Figure 1), again indicating a degree of homogeneity across the site. Minimal information was present to indicate the age of animals, aside from in the ABGs, with only ten elements across the whole assemblage providing fusion evidence and no mandibles present.

Knife and chop marks were noted on both cattle and medium mammal bones (9 elements, c.5% of assemblage), consistent with disarticulation of carcasses and meat removal. All of these derived from either the ditch or a pit feature. Dog gnawing was present in a similar proportion of cases (10 elements, 5% assemblage), and from a variety of contexts including grave fills. Burning was effectively absent, and the only instance noted was from context [76], where a single shaft fragment was charred black.

Identifying Grave Offerings

Three Associated Bone Groups were identified from the Oakington assemblage, all of which derived from grave contexts. All three represented a single articulated sheep/goat front foot, with metacarpal and phalanges present (Table 3; Figure 2). In graves 9 and 12, the distal metacarpal and proximal epiphyses of the phalanges were unfused, but the unfused epiphyses were present in the grave, indicating that the foot entered the grave articulated and therefore fleshed.

The articulated feet from graves 9 and 18 were identified as grave deposits in 1994, and their location in the grave given (Taylor et al. 1998; Table 3). However, both were misidentified in the original report and were published as “sheep femur” or “sheep femurs”. The drawings of the graves also would appear to show that the feet were found articulated on excavation. It is possible, therefore, to say with some confidence that these feet were deliberately included within the graves as an offering.

The articulated foot from grave 12, by contrast, was not recognised as an offering in the original report; nor was its location within the grave recorded, nor is it evident within the plan of the grave. However, the presence of unfused epiphyses, and, particularly, its similarity to the offerings in graves 9 and 18, makes it highly likely that this was a grave offering. Additionally, local waterlogging in grave 12 led to distinctly poor preservation of the human skeletons within the grave, and this poor preservation is also reflected in the animal bone offering. Some phalanges were clearly absent from this foot which would originally have been present, and it is likely that these were either missed on excavation, or too poorly preserved to have been successfully excavated.

All three sheep feet are included with burials of either children or adolescent females (Table 3). Both right and left forefeet are included, with no particular indication of preference. Only one of the three – from grave 18 – is fully fused, indicating that it came from an adult animal; the others derive from immature animals of less than 16 months of age (based on Silver 1969). The fused metacarpal is also from the only grave which does not contain a child, although the sample size is far too small to consider this significant. More notably, all three graves – 9, 12 and 18 – are located in close proximity in the cemetery, along the line of Ditch 12, potentially suggesting a connection within this small group.

One further bone, from Grave 23, was recorded in the 1994 report as a grave offering. This was reported as a “cattle bone”, and is the distal half of a cattle left humerus. The element is fully fused, and the breakage mid-shaft is a spiral fracture, indicating it was done while the bone was relatively fresh. There is little clear evidence of subaerial weathering. As with the other deposits, this was included in the grave of a child, who was buried in a prone position, and the bone was found between the child’s legs. No other animal bone was present in the grave, excepting a single small fragment of shaft from a medium mammal. However, it is not impossible that this bone was an incidental inclusion into the grave, instead of a deliberate offering.

Other ABGs / Special Deposits

Animal bone from the recent excavations at Oakington has been reported by Nottingham (2015). In light of the reanalysis described above, it is possible to revisit Nottingham’s results and, from them, to suggest a further three grave offerings. Nottingham noted six potential “special deposits”, based on taphonomy and possible articulation, and these are described in detail. Only three of these are convincing grave offerings, as they represent articulated groups of elements with minimal taphonomic transformation, indicating that these were put into the ground fleshed (Table 3). One articulated duck wing (Grave 56) is included with an adult male. However, the other two deposits follow the pattern of sheep/goat remains placed with children or females, including a further offering of an unfused metacarpal (Grave 78). Unfortunately, location within the grave is not available for any of these deposits.

In addition to these smaller grave offerings, recent excavations also yielded the remains of two semi-complete horses, neither in association with a human burial; and a complete cow skeleton, included with an adult female burial (Morris pers. comm., Sept 2014). The latter is particularly interesting in light of the pattern emerging from the other grave offerings, of animal remains being placed preferentially with females and children in this particular cemetery.

Discussion: Oakington in Context

Oakington is one of a small number of early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in East Anglia and Eastern England which have yielded evidence for animal bone placed in inhumation graves. Animal remains are a more common occurrence in cremation burials, and are relatively rare in inhumations: in a survey of 46 cemeteries, 10 contained inhumation graves with animal bone, and in these cemeteries, animal offerings were typically present in less than 5% of graves (Rainsford 2017). The small number of deposits at Oakington is consistent with these overall patterns.

However, beyond quantity, there is considerable variation in practice between different cemeteries. Only two other cemeteries in Eastern England have yielded upwards of five graves with animal remains as grave goods: Lakenheath, Suffolk (O'Connor unpub., Rainsford 2017) and Castledyke South, Lincolnshire (Nicholson 1998; Rainsford 2017). At Lakenheath, 11 burials contained animal offerings including single or multiple meat portions of sheep, chickens, or portions of cattle ribs. These were included predominantly with young adult male burials, with the exception of one meat portion included with an elderly female. Two horse burials were also found at the site, both also included with young adult males. Context codes indicate that the burials were spread across at least three different areas of excavation. At Castledyke South, 10 burials contained animal offerings. These again were predominantly meat portions of sheep or complete chicken skeletons, but they were in this cemetery included with adult female burials, in five out of the six cases where sex was identified. There is some indication that a number of these burials, particularly females with chickens, are clustered in a particular area of the cemetery (Lee 2007).

The animal offerings at Oakington, like Lakenheath and Castledyke South, again show a distinct patterning which is unique to the cemetery. Animal offerings at Oakington are included with females and/or children in the majority of cases; and at least three of the burials with animal offerings occur in a specific cluster. The practice of placing sheep forefeet in graves at Oakington is unparalleled elsewhere to date. Sheep forefeet contain little meat and are perhaps less evidently a "meat portion" than joints of rib or shoulder included at Lakenheath and other cemeteries. The specific inclusion of a single forefoot in a burial may indicate a more abstract symbolism. Among Mongolian pastoralists, the sheep tibia bone is considered sacred, and can be used for medical purposes or as a means of foretelling future events, and the tibia bone from the sheep sacrificed at the birth of a child is retained as a sacred object, considered to be linked to the child's security (Fijn 2011: 229; Szykiewicz 1990). The Oakington forefeet, as they are articulated, are likely to derive from sheep killed as part of funeral proceedings; but it is likely that similarly specific beliefs were associated with the forefoot as an offering. However, at Oakington, as at the other cemeteries discussed, the rarity of these grave inclusions suggests that these beliefs were relevant only to a small sub-community of the population buried within the cemetery.

References

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FIGURES

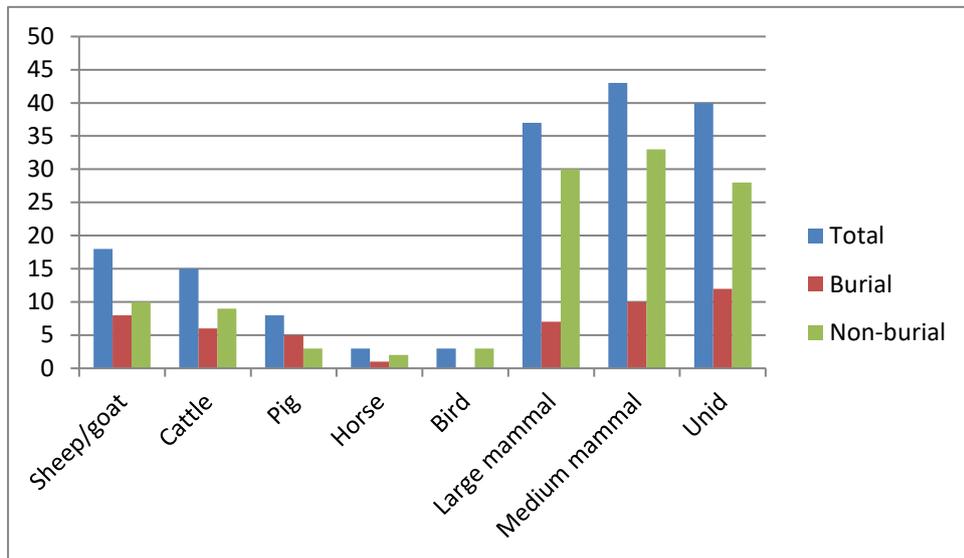


Figure 1: Species representation in burial and non-burial contexts from 1993 Oakington excavations.



Figure 2: Sheep feet from grave 9 (left) and grave 18 (right).

TABLES

	ID	Unid	Total
Burial	20	29	49
Non-burial	27	91	118
Total	47	120	167

Table 1: Quantity of bone from Oakington 1993 excavations.

Taxon	Total
Sheep/goat	18
Cattle	15
Pig	8
Horse	3
Bird	3
Large mammal	37
Medium mammal	43
Unid	40

Table 2: Species representation from 1993 Oakington excavations.

Grave	Species	Portion	Elements	Age	Location	Person	Record
9	Sheep/goat	Left forefoot	Metacarpal, 2x P1, 2x P2	<16 mo	Left side of skeleton	Child (7-12)	Rainsford 2018
18	Sheep/goat	Right forefoot	Metacarpal, 2x P1, 2x P2	>18mo	By left leg	Female (18)	Rainsford 2018
12	Sheep/goat	Right forefoot	Metacarpal, 1x P1, 1x P3	<16mo	unk	Child (8) + female (15)	Rainsford 2018
	Cattle	Foreleg	Distal humerus	>18mo	Between legs of prone skeleton	Child (6)	Rainsford 2018
54	Sheep/goat	Left foreleg	Humerus	10mo - 3.5yrs		Child	Nottingham 2015
56	Duck	Wing	Humerus, radius, ulna, carpometacarpus	adult		Adult male	Nottingham 2015
78	Sheep/goat	Left forefoot	Metacarpal	<24mo		Adult female + child	Nottingham 2015

Table 3: Associated Bone Groups included in graves from Oakington 1993 excavations and from Nottingham (2015).