Marcham animal bone assessment

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The excavations at Marcham produced a substantial animal bone assemblage. The material assessed and recorded by project volunteers is in excess of 16,000 specimens. This assemblage is associated with both the later prehistoric, and particularly Iron Age archaeology, as well as extensive assemblages from a range of Roman period structures, features and deposits.

This is a well preserved, if fragmented assemblage, with 49% of fragments assessed as being good (on a four-point scale from poor to excellent), and 42% fair. There are examples of gnawed (both canid and occasionally rodent) and burned bone throughout the assemblage.

Unsurprisingly the majority of the material relates to livestock and the other main domesticates. Both sheep and goat are present in the assemblage. Sheep/goat are the most abundant by number of specimens in both the prehistoric and Roman deposits, generally by some distance, with cattle next most abundant and pig a minority taxa. There are smaller amounts of dog and equid (horse/donkey) and the occasional cat bone. Wild mammals such as deer (red and roe) occurred across the site in low numbers, and there were also smaller mammals such as hare, mustelids, micromammals (e.g. voles, shrews, mice etc., including some concentrations) and amphibians (e.g. frog). Bird bone also occurs regularly in the prehistoric assemblage but more commonly in the Roman material. There are domestic fowl (chicken) present but also ducks and wild taxa of various types including small passerines as well as larger wild birds. There are some contexts with notable concentrations of bird bone. In some cases groups of bird and small mammal bone may represent associated bone groups (ABGs) or perhaps owl pellets. There are also a few fish and possible reptile bones present.

A significant number of specimens are more than 50% present; there are also plenty of epiphyses available which provide opportunities to understand the age structure of livestock herds. There are also a substantial number of assessable mandibles for the livestock species, as well as loose teeth. The condition of the assemblage is such that measurement of many bones is possible. Cut marks associated with butchery have been noted on many fragments. Consequently, this assemblage has the potential to inform on the production (and possibly sourcing) and consumption of livestock and patterning in the disposal of their remains. The bone condition is also conducive to the identification of pathological conditions which could inform on husbandry practice and the treatment of animals; some morphological changes or those probably associated with non-specific infections have been noted. Because the material has been recovered from a wide range of features and location there is also potential to look at structured disposal of material across the site in different periods. Certain features are of particular interest, specifically pits associated with possible Roman sacrificial practice. Some of these areas are those with elevated numbers of bird specimens.