

IN BRIEF

A TIME CAPSULE OF A TIME CAPSULE: A CHARCOAL FILLED PIT WITHIN POULTON CHAPEL GRAVEYARD

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The Poulton Project is a research excavation founded with the purpose of identifying the location of a short-lived Cistercian Abbey, recorded in historical documents as being established during the civil wars of Stephen and Matilda in the twelfth century. After only six decades, it was translated to Dieulacres in Staffordshire, offering archaeologists the unique opportunity to study a monastic complex in its initial form. Although the location remains unidentified, the search led to the investigation of a late medieval chapel (centred on SJ 40092 58513) first discovered by the landowner in the 1960s. Systematic excavation has revealed this to be the burial ground for the lay folk and their families who farmed the land for the Cistercians. In 2017 a pit was discovered beneath several burials in the graveyard, which provided our first glimpse of the monastic landscape. A stone capping had preserved a single charcoal rich backfill event of domestic hearth waste. Environmental analysis has provided extensive information on land-use, trade, and the local environment during this enigmatic period in Cheshire's history.

Site History

The hamlet of Poulton in Cheshire is located 8 km south of Chester, comprising an agricultural settlement with surrounding field system. At the eastern limits is the 55 acres of Chapel Field on the west bank of the River Dee. The underlying geology comprises boulder clay, which is

characteristically mildly acidic. Significant quantities of calcite, however, were deposited during the last glaciation, resulting in a near neutral environment. This has resulted in unusually good conditions for the preservation of human and animal bone, providing insights into the past not usually possible in north-west England.

Chapel Field has been investigated archaeologically since 1995, when the Poulton Research Project was formed with the aim of identifying the location of a short-lived Cistercian Abbey, founded between 1146 and 1158. The monks relocated to Dieulacres in Staffordshire *c.* 1214-20, with several remaining to manage the estate. An accompanying chapel and grange are recorded from 1250 and 1315 respectively, although their construction dates are unknown.¹ The identification of the abbey offered archaeologists the rare opportunity to investigate such a structure in its initial form. In comparison, the earliest record of the chapel was a generation after the monks' relocation.² The foundations of this structure and associated graveyard have been the focus of a student training and community orientated project (Plate IX). 826 skeletons have so far been excavated, comprising the remains of the lay folk and their families, who worked the land for the monks after they departed. Radiocarbon dates and datable finds sealed under skeletons indicate that the graveyard is primarily late medieval in date, spanning the thirteenth-fifteenth centuries. In comparison, however, few artefacts have been recovered from the time of the Cistercian Abbey. This changed, however, with the discovery of an unexpected feature which provided our first glimpse of monastic activity.

The Pit

The densest concentration of burials currently occurs in the southern graveyard. Two infants in this area had been placed directly upon compact building material. Further investigation revealed a pit *c.* 1m in diameter, with a maximum depth of 0.42 m, sharp break of slope, flat base and well-defined sidewalls. The location is shown in Plate IX.

Contained within were two distinct fills, the uppermost comprising sandstone and small glacial boulders which covered and sealed the feature (Plate X). The arrangement indicated that they had formed a solid foundation, possibly for the siting of a Christian cross. The sandstone blocks were heavily weathered but demonstrated cut and tool marks indicating they had originated from a demolished structure. Both the sandstone and glacial boulders were consistent with the local geology.

Removal of the stone fill revealed the upper portion of a juvenile burial which partially truncated and therefore post-dated the feature. This indicated that the grave diggers had disturbed the foundation to accommodate the body. Instead of cutting into the natural clay, the building material sealed and protected a single charcoal rich backfill event of domestic hearth waste (Plates XI and XII). Excavation and sampling revealed it to be rich in artefacts and palaeoenvironmental information. A charred bean fragment provided an AMS radiocarbon date of cal AD 1038-1203 at 2δ (SUERC-87141. 905+/-24), which covered the late Saxon to high medieval periods.

Analysis of the material assemblage enabled the radiocarbon date to be refined. The recovery of a 'West Midlands' type cooking pot from the pit belonged to the late twelfth-early thirteenth centuries,³ during the life of the abbey. The recovery of a copper-alloy buckle, iron horseshoe, and bodkin/quarrel confirmed a later date but contradicted the radiocarbon result. Comparison of the diagnostic finds within closed contexts in London, and unstratified material from Meols on the Wirral produced consistent dates of c.AD 1270-1350.⁴ The Meols data, however, relied heavily on the London publication. An earlier chronology for these items cannot therefore be ruled out.

The recovery of over 600 animal bones including mammals and fish provided an insight into medieval diet and life at Poulton. The remains were fragmentary, and many were calcined demonstrating exposure to high temperature burning. Equid (*Equus* sp.

horse/donkey/mule), cattle (*Bos taurus*), pig (*Sus domesticus*), sheep/goat (*Ovis sp./Capra sp.*) and red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) were identified within the mammal remains. Carnivore gnawing on some examples attested to the presence of dogs and/or further evidence for foxes. The assemblage was dominated by fish remains identified as Atlantic herring (*Clupea harengus*), with European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) forming a minor component. The faunal assemblage was typical for a British medieval site, representing evidence for transportation, traction, food production and consumption. Herring was a wide-scale and important dietary resource, being preserved and traded in barrels,⁵ whilst the freshwater eel could have been procured locally from the River Dee.

Palaeoenvironmental analysis further enabled reconstruction of the local environment and land-use practices. Cultivation was identified by the common occurrence of cereal grains, comprising bread-type wheat, barley, oats, pea, bean, and occasional cereal chaff. Weed species comprised cleavers, vetches, docks, grasses, and a stinking chamomile achene. Hazel nutshell fragments indicated that wild foods were collected. The local woodland was similarly well presented. A variety of species were identified, with alder, willow/poplar, and oak dominating the local environment. Hazel, ash, Maloideae (hawthorn, apple, whitebeams, pear), cherries (including blackthorn/wild plum), and elder occurred to a lesser extent.

The occurrence of bread wheat, oats and barley alongside other economic foodstuffs such as hazel nutshell and pea/beans is typical for medieval England.⁶ The further presence of vetch seeds (*Vicia sp.*) indicates they were cultivated as a fodder crop,⁷ a practice widely attested in later medieval Cheshire.⁸ Significant human impact on the local landscape is indicated by the presence of elder charcoal, a light demanding shrub associated with hedgerows, scrub, and general anthropogenic disturbance.⁹ As only c.15% of England was covered in woodland by the eleventh century,¹⁰ the mixed utilisation of locally

gathered wood types of varying quality for domestic fuel is unsurprising.

Discussion

The discovery of a stone capped pit within the chapel graveyard at Poulton has provided a time capsule of life for the Cistercian monks, and further dates to a period which is under-represented in Cheshire's archaeological record.¹¹ The evidence indicates they grew a variety of crops, utilised domestic species for traction, food and possibly protection (dogs), whilst importing herring. The collection of wild and woodland resources demonstrates that they were utilising all that the area had to offer, practising a mixed economy that made most houses self-sufficient.¹² The low numbers of mammal bone prevent further conclusions, for instance the well-attested monastic use of sheep for wool.¹³ Even the recovery of a bodkin/quarrel is not out of place, as the adjacent border with Wales made this dangerous territory during the twelfth/thirteenth centuries: the very reason cited for the abbey's translation to Dieulacres.¹⁴

One of the most interesting aspects of the pit, however, is its very existence. The sandstone cap is consistent with the foundation for a wooden cross: a well-attested practice in medieval parish churches.¹⁵ The location within the southern graveyard would have been ideal to optimise visibility, whilst the clustering of burials in this area may be a direct result of its location. We can further postulate that the chapel was in existence a full century before the earliest dated burials. There is also the exciting possibility, however, that it was initially used by the monks as a place of worship when they arrived at Poulton, handing it over to the lay community when they began construction on the abbey.

The charcoal rich fill is problematic to explain, as the author has been unable to find any parallels. It could simply be that it was a convenient receptacle for domestic refuse that required disposal. That would have created issues, however, with the weight bearing ability of

the stone capping. Currently, a more suitable interpretation has yet to be reached, although this small time-capsule indicates that more extensive remains await discovery.

References

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