Finds Research Group 700-1700

DATASHEET 29

The possible use of fish and cattle bones as rosary beads

by

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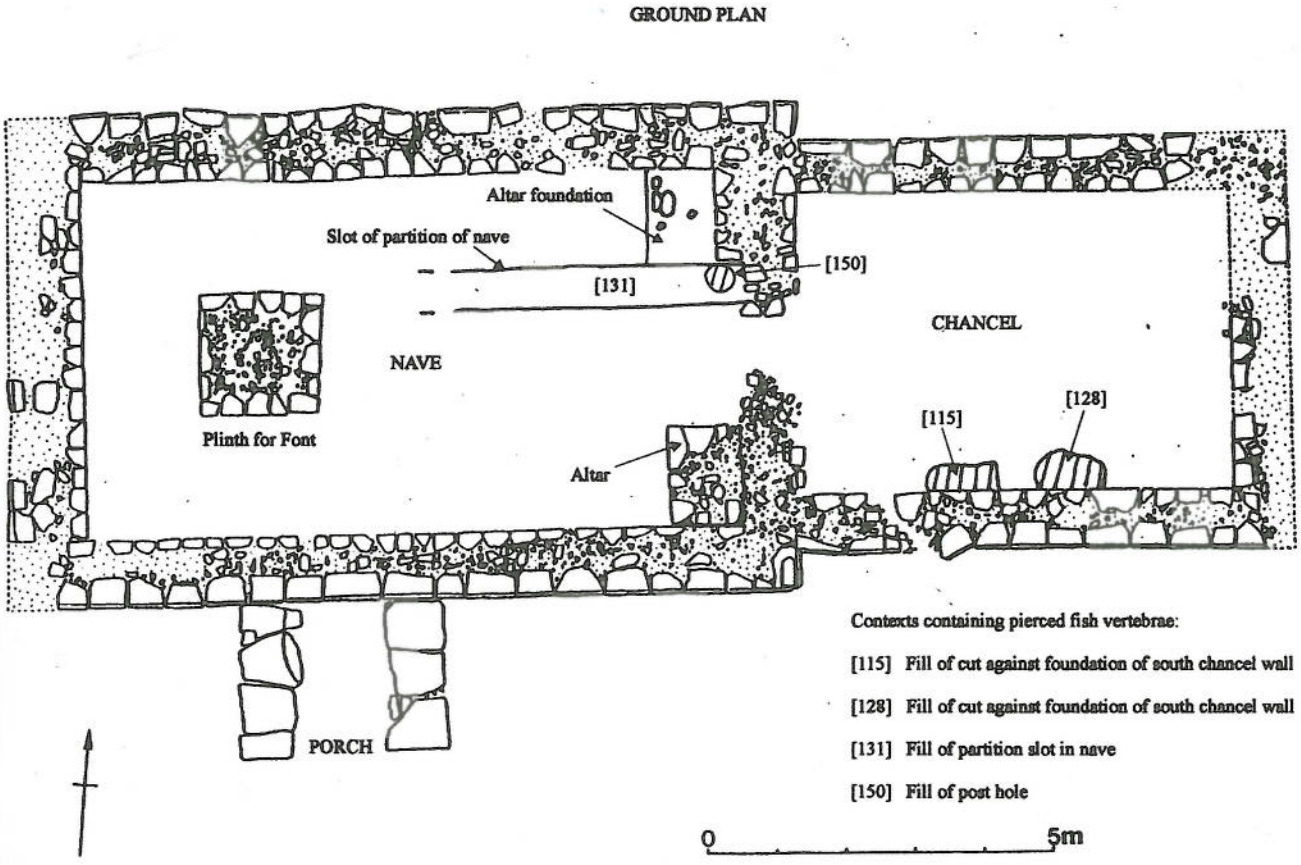
The site of a demolished medieval chapel at Chevington, Northumberland, was excavated in 1997 by the Archaeological Practice of Newcastle University in advance of total destruction by open cast coal mining. The site lies 5 km from the coast of the North Sea.

The chapel was in use in the 13th and 14th centuries. The excavation produced some two boxes of animal bone, including a minority from pre-chapel deposits. Some of the medieval animal bones appear to be ordinary domestic food and butchery waste, despite being recovered from contexts associated with

Fig. 1: Major concentrations of fish bones in Chevington chapel



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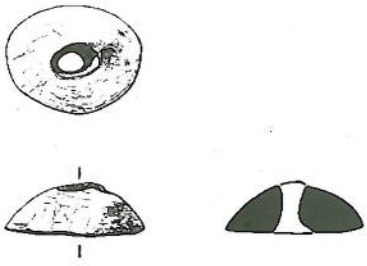
Datasheet Editor: Rachel Tyson

ISSN 0962 2217

a chapel. Perhaps we may think of them as the remains of food consumed at wakes or on saints' feast days, or they may relate to the use of the site for shelter and/or refuge during the Anglo-Scottish wars.

Inside the chapel, concentrations of fish bones were found in small 'post holes' close to the south wall of the chancel, or associated with the east wall of the north 'aisle' of the nave, where a subsidiary altar is thought to have been located (Fig. 1). These appear to be contemporary with the 13th- to 14th-century use of the chapel. Some were also recovered from 19th/20th-century disturbances of these deposits, including a pipe trench. In three instances, a group of fish bones was associated with a worked cattle bone. Two of these are the heads (ball joints) of cattle femora. Each had been cut off transversely and then perforated through the centre (see Fig. 2), much like a spindle whorl. The third cattle bone is the distal end of a humerus - a similarly solid and rounded piece of bone, again, perforated through the centre.

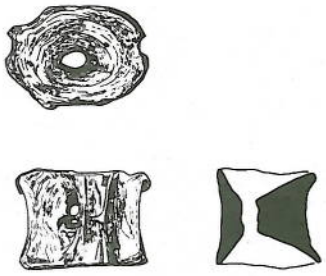
Fig. 2: Head (ball joint) of a cattle femur. Cut off to form a hemisphere and perforated through centre. Max. width 44 mm.



The fish bones are exceptional. They were kindly identified by Alison Locker. They are all vertebrae. With one exception (an elasmobranch [shark-type] vertebra) they derive from members of the Gadidae - the cod family. Most of them are from ling (*Molvus molvus*). Every vertebra comes from the upper or middle end of the spine. These are the vertebrae that are typically removed during filleting prior to curing (smoking, salting or drying). The tail vertebrae are usually left in place. This area of the North Sea is well known for deep-sea fishing of cod-type fishes and these vertebrae are probably the remains of fish caught locally and prepared for storage and/or transport to inland markets. But what were they doing in 'postholes' inside a chapel?

Apart from the elasmobranch vertebra, which naturally lacks spines and is naturally perforated, every one of the fish vertebrae has been modified into a kind of bead (Fig. 3). All of the spinous projections have been broken off, and the edges smoothed over. Every vertebra has been perforated through the centre. No tool marks could be observed under a binocular microscope; they appear to have been smoothed off, presumably by the polishing action of something persistently passing through the perforation, like a cord of some sort. Could these be the remains of rosaries, or paternosters? Towards the west end of the nave, a font was found buried beneath the plinth for its successor. Perhaps the fish bones and their associated worked cattle bones were not discarded but were also deliberately buried in purpose-dug pits within the sanctified area.

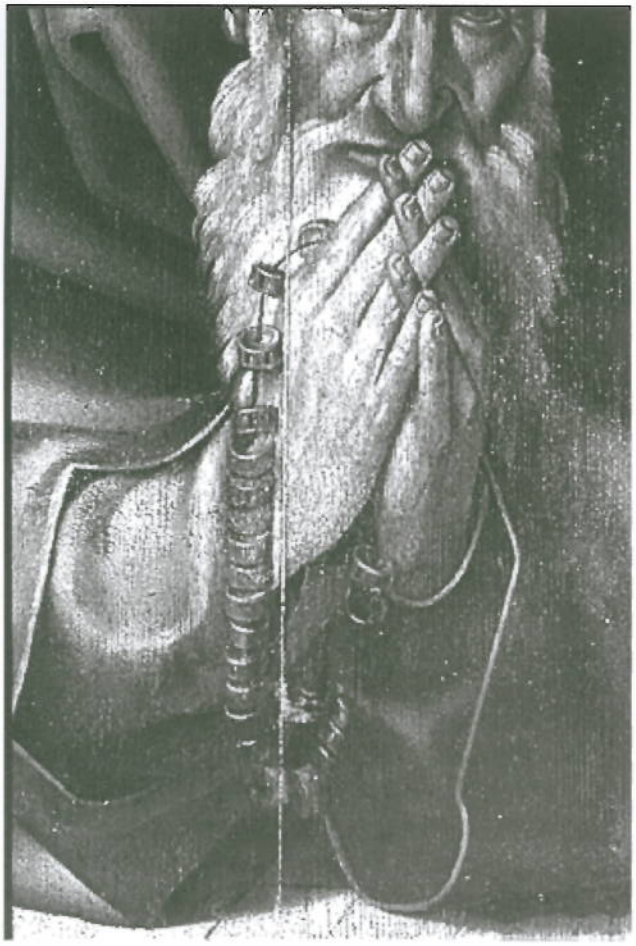
Fig. 3: Cod family (ling) vertebra perforated through centrum. All projecting spines broken off and edges smoothed. Max. width 30 mm. (N.B. This is one of the largest vertebrae in the group)



A plea for help on the International Council for ArchaeoZoology fish bone working group web site raised a response from Omri Lernau in the U.S.A. who was aware of the 15th-century St Vincent polyptych by Nuno

Gonçalves in the Lisbon Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, which depicts a fisherman with a rosary of fish bones (Fig. 4). The Museum was extremely helpful and sent colour slides showing the detail, which confirms the identification of fish bones as 'beads' on the rosary. The accuracy of detail in this polyptych, which depicts real people, is so acute that the painting of the beads can be taken to be accurate, and not a case of 'artistic licence'. Black-and-white reproductions can be seen in the Royal Academy's 1955 exhibition catalogue of *Portuguese Art 800 – 1800.*

Fig. 4: Detail of fishermen panel in St Vincent polyptych by Nuno Gonçalves (active 1450 – 1467) held in Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon



Lindsay Allason-Jones has researched rosaries for the site report and has found that they became increasingly associated with superstitious beliefs by the laiety, who used them to ward off the Evil Eye, or as a cure for diseases. They could be offered when in need, by being placed on or under an altar, or hung on a statue in the church. The location of the fish vertebrae 'beads' at Chevington are strongly reminiscent of such a practice. The larger, perforated cattle bones appear to be exclusively associated with the fish bone beads, and are presumably some other part of the same item - perhaps the spacer towards the bottom of a rosary, from which a cross might hang. If found individually they would probably be identified as spindle whorls.

Alternative explanations of these groups of fish bones and worked cattle bones have failed to satisfy simple considerations of practicalities. If they were spacers on nets, they would have been smashed to pieces when being hauled over the sides of the boats. They are too small and ineffectual to have been used as floats. If they are simply the remains of fish filleting, then why are they found exclusively in 'post holes' in the chancel/altar area of a chapel? What would explain the smoothing, and why the connection with spindle whorl-like pieces (one of which - the distal humerus - would have been a total failure as a spindle whorl)?

The use of fish bones as 'beads' raises the general topic of the use of natural items (bones, teeth etc) as ornaments and decoration. Shark vertebrae, with their naturally smooth symmetry and central perforation, lend themselves perfectly to use as beads and decorations. This is a subject for future consideration.

An interesting feature of the Chevington assemblage is its demonstration of the interlinked nature of all aspects of life. For people living in this area, particularly those associated with deep-sea fishing (an inherently dangerous activity), life, work and beliefs would have intertwined. The fish caught would have been brought home where they would have been filleted for storage and consumption, or for trade. Some of the waste bones removed during filleting were then transformed into rosaries, with which people

used to count their daily prayers. Then, perhaps to ask for help, or to give thanks for a life preserved at sea, a rosary was donated to a saint, to God or to the Virgin Mary in the sanctified area of the chapel.

The author would like to thank the following for their help with this research: the project and site directors Alan Williams and Phil Woods, and the illustrator Adrian Bailey (all of The Archaeological Practice, Newcastle University), Lindsay Allason-Jones (Hancock Museum, Newcastle University), Alison Locker, Foss Leach (the FishNet web site manager) and Omri Lernau whose email response was so valuable in leading to contact with José Alberto Seabra Carvalho at the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga who kindly supplied the excellent colour slides of the 15th-century polyptych.

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