

Bone Fragments, St Leonard's Church, Sunningwell

August 2011

The excavation of drainage channels at the south side of St Leonard's church in Sunningwell, uncovered a large selection of human bones, many in broken condition, which gave rise to concern that formal church burials had been disturbed.

The bones actually reveal what are most certainly old breaks as well as new, and would seem to represent the bones of more than one individual, both of which indicators suggest that what we are looking at is the disturbance of a re-burial of older remains.

(New, and old bone break examples: fig.DSCN1443)



It is notoriously difficult to date, to age, or even to sex human remains which are out of context and not associated with any artefacts, as was the case here.

Some helpful indicators amongst the bones however, are the completely fused sacrum, probably therefore a mature adult, certainly male:

DSCN1435, sacrum front



DSCN1436, sacrum rear



There was one large though incomplete skull bone, a right parietal, which showed quite prominent 'arachnoid granulations' - the indentations on the inside near the upper seam - which again suggests mature years in this individual:

DSCN1454, skull interior



DSCN1453, skull exterior



Important indications that we are dealing with more than one skeleton are the presence of the lower sections of two humerus bones, both from right arms:
DSCN1437, DSCN1433 humerus



and what seem to be the upper sections of two, very dissimilar tibias, one of which is broken:
DSCN1434



There was the lower section of a femur, of a mature adult: DSCN1445



As is often the case, skulls are represented mostly by disarticulated fragments, but the thickness of the bone again suggests mature/ late adulthood: DSCN1438, skull fragments



There was also what seems to be the upper section of a very narrow radius which may be from a child's skeleton, as well as bone joints whose brittle condition might represent osteoporosis, suggesting considerable age: DSCN1440, decayed bone



Another interesting factor though, is the presence also of a couple of large animal bones from the context - perhaps scapulae from cattle - which show signs of cutting or sawing, which is to say they have been butchered:

DSCN1447, DSCN1448



All in all, without the attention of an expert in human remains and perhaps some scientific analysis, I would be inclined to think that we are looking at the disturbance of a bone pit, whose presence may not have been recorded, which itself represents the re-burial of older remains dug up during later burials - until at least the late 19th century, these were often treated with scant respect (cf. Hamlet, Act 5, Scene 1) but could always be guaranteed re-burial within consecrated ground.

The presence of the animal bones must be regarded as having been an accidental inclusion in the burial pit - it would be highly unusual to intentionally bury animal bones on consecrated ground, so this would seem to have been an oversight.

Records of burials during the 16th - 19th centuries at Sunningwell do exist at the London records office, under the county of Berkshire (in which Sunningwell belonged until 1974) which could shed more light on the discovery.

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