

Assignment 1: Archaeological Project Assessment

With reference to a specific archaeological project, critically assess the methods of archaeological investigation employed, and the nature of the archaeological materials/ data recovered.

This is the first of four equally weighted (i.e. each 25% of total mark) assignments for this module. The aim is to choose an archaeological project, which you might have been directly involved in or have prior knowledge of, and consider how the research was undertaken. Were the methods employed well-suited to the project's objectives? Did they prove effective in generating meaningful archaeological data? What new data were produced? Did this produce research outcomes with significant impact (for a variety of 'beneficiaries' such as the local community, heritage protection, academic community?)

The project to be assessed for this assignment will be a mitigation undertaken at Park Street Cambridgeshire by Headland Archaeology in 2021/2022 with the dataset in question being the metalwork finds assessment written by the author of this assignment.

The project's objectives in line with the Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) follow those of the East Anglian regional framework. (Medlycott, 2011)

Specific objectives involve mitigating impact on archaeological remains at the site, implementing a programme of geoarchaeological sampling, filling gaps in the regional Iron Age chronology via methods such as sampling iron age deposits, establishing the nature and character of Romano-British contexts, investigate and sample the post romano-british "dark earth" horizon, focus on the medieval presence / absence of the Kings Ditch on site, investigate use of Post Medieval space and finally deposit a well structured archive with an appropriate repository. (Towel, 2021, pp. 12-13)

For the iron age this is to alleviate the lack of representation in East Anglia compared to other regions which has led to the character of iron age settlements in the area being generally less understood compared to those in other regions. The gap in chronology for the iron age highlights the difficulties of radio carbon dating and the acquisition of stratified pottery groups that span the period. (Brown, 2000, p. 14)

The regional research framework does not seem to directly specify investigation of the romano-british "dark earth" horizon in filling regional gaps of knowledge though there is a substantial gap in regional knowledge for the Romano-British period from the interpersonal relationships between rural and urban environments to Roman burial practices and their differences in rural / urban environments. (Brown, 2000, pp. 19-20)

Although the Kings Ditch isn't mentioned specifically in the regional framework, the study of medieval towns in East Anglia remains a substantial gap in regional knowledge especially

with regards to data gathering and the construction of chronologies which has gone amiss as the role of towns within society has not gained appropriate attention from urban archaeologists. (Brown, 2000, p. 28)

The post medieval interest within the regional research framework appears to be a struggle due to a lack of regional expertise for the period however it has been broken down into fortifications, parks and gardens and industrial archaeology with an emphasis on the agricultural revolution going so far as to stress the importance of post medieval floral and faunal assemblages due to their drastic underrepresentation. Given the WSI's aim to investigate space usage within this period this seems to follow the regional framework's desire to see how space is used within the above contexts. (Brown, 2000, p. 33)

Methods of collecting, processing and packaging material for this project follow those from the First Aid for Finds third edition (Watkinson, 1998) which is still in use and its guidance followed despite the most recent edition being published 25 years ago although an updated fourth edition is expected to be soon released (Institute of Conservation, n.d.)

Further to this is the 2014 CIFA guidelines for collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials ((CIFA)) which goes into greater depth explaining the process of handling archaeological material from the moment a program of work is established all the way to long term deposition with an archive, this is in addition to the use of the specialist toolkits which are also employed by CIFA.

The project also employed metal detecting to aid with the recovery of artefacts both prior to and during excavation as part of a metal detecting survey using two metal detectorists who had previously worked on infrastructure projects in East Anglia. Equipment used for this purposes was not set to discriminate against iron. (Towel, 2021, p. 30)

Stratigraphic data for the project was accumulated using pro-forma headland archaeology context sheets.

In normal circumstances the methods utilised would have been suited towards the project's objectives however frustratingly a large amount of metal artefacts recovered from the site were from unstratified contexts and as a result distribution patterns and dating becomes more difficult and this contributes a minimal amount to our understanding of the status of the site (within the context of metalworking finds). The WSI contains no specific brief pertaining to how and where metal detecting was employed, only that a 'metal detecting survey' was undertaken: were features specifically targeted? Was it exclusively just spoil heap recovery of metal artefacts?

From the material recovered it is assumed mostly the latter as 55 of a total of 198 metal artefacts were from unstratified contexts, a further 33 were marked as 'unknown' and a further 10 from made ground / levelling layers making nearly half of the total metalwork assemblage of minimal use from a stratification point of understanding the wider site. A further 129 of 137 iron artefacts were undated, knowledge of stratigraphic context could assist with lowering this number and providing further clues as to the date of a number of artefacts without resorting to x-radiography.

The PAS code of practice for metal detecting mostly relates to ethics and specifically covers issues such as landowner permissions (P.A.S, 2017) which, although useful, is not applicable within the context of a commercial project where such permissions are dealt with much earlier on. Currently there are no guidelines in either CIFA or on the Heritage England guidelines that pertain to metal detecting on a commercial site following a topsoil strip.

Some of the material was recovered from sealed contexts which contributed to dating evidence (roman coins in pits / construction layers etc) however many items have their location restricted to either topsoil / spoilheap contexts or just a general association with the site as a whole separate from the stratigraphic sequence which other than an interest in the finds individually the data generated is less meaningful when the finds in question cannot be tied into site formations. Whilst individual finds may be of fascination to members of the public, their usefulness from an academic / research point of view becomes extremely limited without stratigraphic context.

The BAJR guide to metal detecting surveys however does emphasise a difference in metal detecting surveys going so far as to split them into three categories:

Level 1 Speculative Search: stipulates scanning the field in whatever way you are used to and only mentioning a very basic coordination with other detectorists present to maximise coverage.

Level 2 Gridded Analytical Survey: employs a 10-20m grid system for sites considered 'productive'

Level 3 GPS located intensive survey: suggests the use of either a hand held or differential GPS system for sites of archaeological interest going so far as to consider research questions before being undertaken. (Connolly, 2007, pp. 5-7)

Whilst useful at face value on a site that has not had topsoil stripped off it, there is little guidance available for metal detecting on archaeological projects where features are present and visible and so it seems that metal artefact recovery on commercial excavations is restricted to one of the following:

1. *Hand collected artefacts*: This is material recovered by field archaeologists through hand excavation be it from fully excavated features (graves, postholes etc) or larger features that are excavated by 'intervention' slots (ditches, larger pits etc) and are purely chance finds based on where the intervention slot is selected spatially
2. *Spoilheap finds*: when metal detecting is undertaken on spoilheaps usually to aid in recovery of finds missed by field archaeologists though these are almost always considered 'unstratified' and of minimal contextual value.
3. *Topsoil finds*: when metal detecting is done in advance of site being 'stripped' of topsoil. This can be useful for investigating activity on sites that may leave no features below the topsoil archaeologically such as fayres or temporary markets but otherwise offers little to tie in to features following the stripping of site.

A fourth method aimed primarily towards commercial archaeological sites should include targeting features following the topsoil strip of a site, this will allow for a more informed

decision with regards to selecting intervention slots for archaeological features to aid in recovery of metal finds and more importantly will allow for metal finds recovered by a metal detector to be assigned a context number.

The data within the context of the metalwork assemblage however would not be considered 'meaningful' as it contributed little towards the regional research framework questions though the methods chosen do highlight problems with regards to the collection of metalwork finds on commercial projects.

The metalwork assemblage has sadly produced little in the way of new data. Although not strictly 'data' the methods employed bring into question as to how metal detecting is utilised on archaeological projects. Metal detection should be undertaken targeting stratified features so that material recovered from them can be either be dated or offer further information to archaeological sequences and contribute further to overall site data. This can even contribute to excavation methods by highlighting ideal locations for targeted feature interventions where the likelihood of recovering metal artefacts is higher.

The material gathered is such that there is not enough (stratified) material to be representatively analysed. Artefact groups, object types and manufacturing processes can only be analysed on a sufficiently large enough scale to be of use for further research purposes. (Bayley, 2008, p. 15)

The research outcomes for this project did answer a number of research outcomes and contributed towards discussions of ritual and funerary behaviours.

With regards to impact on the local community, the project did have a community outreach element in the form of a website to relay the information of the archaeology and other aspects of the project to the general public (Marik Real Estate, 2022) though despite there being mention of a wider reaching public outreach element to the archaeological excavations there is little to indicate this in any headland documentation surrounding the project.

Further exploration of park street's roman settlement and its duration as well as development can be undertaken through further analysis including radio carbon dating, stratigraphic analysis and environmental data. Settlement economy and function can be investigated through analysis of structural remains as well as further combined analysis of artefactual, zooarchaeological and archaeobotanical evidence where spatial plotting of data can define key zones of activity on site.

Analysis of ritual behaviours can be undertaken through further work on the sites 'shaft' deposits, regional comparisons as well as identification of patterns of deposition of animal burials, human burials in addition to disarticulated remains.

Ultimately the data produced has the potential to contribute to our wider understanding of changing pattern land use in the Saxon and medieval periods as well as earlier expansion of extra mural areas of Roman Cambridge (Scholma-Mason, 2023, pp. 117-120)

With regards to the impact of research outcomes of the project, the assignment specifies 'significant' impact for beneficiaries however fails to specify what qualifies as significant within this context as this is a highly subjective term. There is little to indicate that the site is of national importance if this is what is considered 'significant' and the regional research framework does not highlight what sort of sites found would be considered 'significant'.

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