GRAPPLING WITH THE GRANARY: CONTEXT ISSUES AT DICHIN

Pam Grinter

Abstract

This paper summarises the evidence of plant remains discovered in buildings at the Late Roman site at Dichin, Bulgaria, with a focus on the context and location in which they were discovered.

At the outset of the excavations of the Late Roman site at Dichin, Bulgaria, a programme of routine sampling for plant remains was initiated. During the excavation each sealed context was sampled for charred plant remains, where the context size permitted. Between 40 and 60 litres of soil were taken per sample. Records were made of the details of the context number, context type, location, and position of each sample taken. Over the course of the excavation 567 samples were taken to be processed for charred plant remains, using a flotation tank of the York design, with a mesh size of <500 mm to catch the flot during the flotation process. Of the original 567 samples processed, 37 flots (from the 1997 and 1998 seasons) have so far had the crop component identified and counted. These samples were sorted, and material identified on morphological criteria, under a low power binocular microscope at magnifications of ×10 and ×40, with the help of a modern comparative collection housed at the University of Sheffield and by use of various seed identification manuals.¹

Flotation of the soil samples regularly produced high volumes of many crop types. These included: peas, (Pisum sativum) beans, (Vicia faba) lentil, (Lens culinaris) millet, (Panicum miliaceum) wheat, (Triticum sp.) barley, (Hordeum vulgare) rye, (Secale cereale) and bitter vetch (Vicia ervilia). All of these crops were common in the Roman period but their presence at Dichin, along with bones from a range of animal species, reveals a


L. Lavan, E. Swift, and T. Putzeys (edd.) Objects in Context, Objects in Use (Late Antique Archaeology 5 – 2007) (Leiden 2007), pp. 707–710
picture of a wide and varied diet for the occupants of the fortification. No attempt has yet been made to separate different species of wheat, because of similarities in morphology between some examples of spelt and bread wheat (*Triticum spelta* or *Triticum aestivum*). But the fact that very little chaff (the waste from cereal processing) has yet been found with the grains may mean that the wheat so far identified is bread wheat, as spelt wheat was commonly stored in the spikelet, and therefore the glumes (which tightly grip the grains) would be present along with the grains once charred.

It became clear from the finds and architectural observation that many of the buildings or rooms on the site were used for storing crops. This is especially the case in Area E, which has produced fully processed crops from 5 of the buildings in the area. Some of these had raised floors, the supports for which were made of reused stone blocks or were purpose-built with mud bricks, to aid in the ventilation of the buildings and prevent the spoiling of foodstuffs by mould and rotting. Following the fire, which destroyed the buildings in the 5th c., the area was levelled, preserving the contents of the rooms either *in situ* or immediately below their original location in the void below the raised wooden floor. There appears to have been no later disturbance of the deposit, which lay protected by a layer of mud-brick demolition.2 Given the sudden destruction of the fortress, and especially the violence associated with it, we can treat these deposits as reflecting primary occupation, though that as experienced at the moment when the fort was sacked. The objects found in many rooms were rich and included vast quantities of pottery together with some metal finds (see A. Poulter this volume) But here I will focus on the significance of the evidence of recovered plant remains, and especially what it tells us about the macro-spatial organisation of the site.

The ecofactual analysis so far undertaken has been limited, and a full picture of the crop storage and use will not be known until a full programme of analysis has taken place. However, one exciting result has been made possible by the stringent and accurate recording methods employed by site staff during excavation. These records have enabled me to plot the position of the stored crops within each building (this kind of information is usually lost during excavation or is not possible to produce because of low numbers of preserved grains).

2 Poulter (1999), 174.