Public Abstract

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Title:A STROLL THROUGH THE PARK: EVALUATING THE USEFULNESS OF PHYTOLITH AND STARCH REMAINS FOUND ON MEDIEVAL SHERDS FROM WICKEN, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE, ENGLAND

Survey artifacts are used by a variety of archaeologists studying any number of interesting topics. The focus of this masters thesis is to test the usefulness of plant remains found on artifacts recovered during archaeological survey and to study food consumption and production patterns in medieval England. Specifically phytolith, a type of microscopic silica body, and starch grain analysis was used to determine the level of environmental contamination on survey and excavated artifacts from the medieval period in the parishes of Wicken, Northamptonshire, and Wyton, Cambridgeshire, England. In addition, a comparative collection of phytolith and starch grains found in medieval foods and weeds was created. Particular emphasis was placed upon looking for wheat, barley, oats, rye, and legume phytoliths and starch grains. The usefulness and level of contamination was determined by comparing survey artifacts and surface soil samples from Wicken with non-contaminated excavated artifacts from nearby Wyton, Cambridgeshire. The plant residues from the artifacts and soil samples were examined under a microscope using standardized processing and counting methods devised at the MU anthropology lab. In addition, the phytoliths and starch grains found in the soils and artifacts from Wicken and Wyton were compared to the medieval historical records for Northamptonshire and Cambridgeshire so as to better understand human consumption patterns in medieval England.

The results of the research can be applied to general archaeology if in fact the survey artifacts do not show a great degree of environmental contamination because they can be used as another source of information for archaeological research. The results of the study will also shed light upon the local diet of medieval peasants in several small villages in the heart of England.

The results of this study indicate that survey artifacts have undergone some degree of contamination because the residues found on the artifacts match those found in the surrounding soil. However, the results are inconclusive because the origins of the residues on the artifacts cannot be determined with absolute certainty. The historical record for medieval Northamptonshire does not match the microfossil record found at Glebe Cottage in Wicken, Northamptonshire. The historical record for Cambridgeshire does match the microfossil record found on the artifacts from Durley Cottage, Cambridgeshire. The end result illustrates that although the historical record can be used to interpret overall food production patterns in a region, subtle variations still exist as seen with the archaeological residues found on the artifacts and in the soils.