sent to B.M.(N.H.) Bot. Dept. for ID by Bulleid G.C.H.
- Pot with included grain, EIA, Øster Leu, Jutland, Dk. G. Hatt 1936.

[un-numbered tubes]
Old Kilpatrick
Glenluce
Forth & Clyde
Fifield Bavant
Castle Cary
Salisbury
Birrlus—*Cenococcum gramiforme*
Barhapple Rock etc.

[un-numbered petri-dish displays]
Falmer, Sussex
Fifield Bavant
Great Weldon, Northants
Itford Hill, Sussex
Lamb Lea, East Dean, Sussex
Wickbourne, Sussex
Lullingstone, Kent
Woodcuts, Dorset
Verulamium, Herts
Great Casterton, Rutland
Rotherly, Wilts
Glastonbury Lake Village, Somerset
Meare Lake Village

What shall we call these organic pit fills?
(A stercoraceous miscellany)

I have been engaged in a gentle match of wits with one of the editors of *Circaea* during the last few years over a subject dear to the hearts of many of us who work on urban archaeological sites—namely what (in a respectable scientific journal) to call pit fills which, on the basis of their suite of food remains and intestinal parasite eggs, clearly contain human fæces. It is a subject clothed very modestly in swathes of euphemism and I hope that unravelling some of them here will not offend the reader.

The way in which I shall tackle the problem is to go back through the shifting sands of linguistic evolution and look at the history of some of the words which were or are used in this context, and to consider some others which *might* be. Words to be used in a scientific context such as environmental archaeology should be precise, clear and easily understood (or easily looked up in a dictionary) by non-native speakers of English. I hope I can provide some suitable terms. Etymology is a tricky area for a botanist to tread, and I have been glad of the help of Dr C. C. Dyer of Birmingham University, as well as that of the Editors of *Circaea* and an anonymous referee. I cheerfully admit that any gross blunders will probably be mine.

I have used two main sources of information: *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1978 edition) and *The Middle English Dictionary* (Kurath and Kuhn 1954–), hereafter abbreviated to *OED* and *MED*. The written record prior to the fourteenth century is sparse and most of this medieval documentary evidence is about financial transactions or litigation, so that references to such a personal subject as defecation are naturally somewhat rare, and citations in the *MED* are therefore especially useful.

The story starts with *privy*, which is one of the terms still understood today in its original medieval sense as a private (place) and, by extension, as a place where various bodily functions could be carried out in private. Most of the other words for this are as indirect as modern ones: one such is *easement*, used by Chaucer in *The Reeve's Tale*, among others. An example of its use dated 1513 instructs: '... and se the house of *hesement* be swete and clene' (*OED*). The word was still used in its more general sense (the process of giving relief), too.

Latrine (and the more modern *lavatory*) derives from Latin *lavatrina*, itself from *lavare*, to wash. In its Latin form it was very commonly used in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in official documents, and this probably led to its adoption by the English language. The English word *latrine* is recorded only from 1642 (*OED*). With such a pedigree, it seems a not entirely unsuitable word to use in the context with which we are dealing; it is one of many examples of euphemism in which words meaning 'a washing place' are used to describe a place of defecation and/or urination.

Another old word in regular use was *garderobe*. Its use, to signify a privy within a house, is almost exclusively a sense adopted by historians, for example Ernest Sabine (1934), who used the term extensively, but always italicised. Garderobe really means a place for storing clothes (from French *garder*

and *robes*), and is still used in this sense in modern French and German (and in modern English *wardrobe*). I caused confusion to one of my continental colleagues by using the term innocently (along with most of the other words of the title, as it turned out) in the article *Garderobes, Sewers, Cesspits and Latrines* (Greig 1982). A search of the *MED* has failed to produce any clear quotations suggesting that garderobes were anything other than clothes stores, and the stercoraceous meaning is probably a nineteenth century euphemism (C. C. Dyer, pers. comm.). Garderobe, then, seems a bad word for us to use for a medieval privy.

The material deposited into privies and easements often went directly into flowing water which would carry it away (as in medieval London—see Sabine 1934), but in towns the shortage of space often made other means of disposal necessary—in pits, for instance—and the preservation of the contexts of some of these has provided archaeobotanists and archaeozoologists with excellent study material. It is also an area of linguistic difficulty which I shall attempt to clarify a little.

The basic process of waste disposal was simple, as shown by a statement from 1387: 'þey wolde make hem a pitte ... whan Þey wold schite, and whanne Þey hadde i-schete Þey would fill Þe pitte agen'. Such pits are commonly called *cesspits* or *cesspools* in archaeological reports. The origin of this term is obscure according to the *OED*. Some have suggested derivation from French *souspirouelle*, as in the context: 'avoir nettoyé toutes les groise et ordures ... et nettoyé le souspirouelle', translating as 'having cleaned all the filth and ordure ... and cleaning the cesspool' (from accounts of works from May 1412, Godefroy 1892). The word seems to appear in the 1583 quotation 'Cesperalle to be made for stopping the filth by the brooke' (*OED*). The original bone of contention which I raised with my York colleague was that the dictionaries do not have the word *cess* for the contents of a cesspit in the way that *cess* had been used in archaeobiological reports. This is made clear if the origin of the word is as given above, and has nothing to do with pits. I therefore considered the word *cess* to be incorrect in this context. I still do. Now I find that *cesspit*, which I had been using myself, is somewhat suspect as a good medieval term, although perhaps this and *cesspool* are permissible, since both are so widely understood (though their derivation remains obscure).

The contents of these pits has been described in medieval documents by the Latin word *putredines*, literally 'rotting matter', which Sabine (1934) has translated as 'filth'. The word 'ordure' seems more commonplace according to my limited searches. It has come from Old French, derived in turn from Latin *horridus*, meaning 'that which makes the hair stand on end'. I have seen a sign in a town in France forbidding the deposition of 'ordure' and assumed it just meant 'rubbish' in French, but the dictionary tells me that it still retains its medieval sense, as illustrated by a quotation from the Wycliff Bible of 1388: 'The Lord smyte the part of the bodi wherby ordures ben voyded... ' (*MED*). In the context of medieval pit fills, it is very descriptive, since it covers a wide range of foul waste products, including those of the human digestive system, as shown by the quotation. Another word used in medieval writing is *drit*, which has since changed its spelling to *dirt*, though it remains *dríta* in Icelandic (Cleasby 1957). Its principal meaning was 'human waste', as in a quotation from 1387: 'Arrius sched out his bowels and his lyf wiÞ Þe *dritt* Þat he schat' (*MED*). Otherwise, it just meant dirt in the modern sense.

The most direct word used for the main component of these pit fills—*shit*—has strong folk, if not literary, use today and is of Germanic origin. As in the case of *drit* (see above), the degree of foulness conveyed by the word *shit* varies with place and time. From the Middle Ages to the sixteenth century in Britain *shit* was used as a generic term for dirt, as well as having its present-day connotations (C. C. Dyer, pers. comm.). This generic meaning exists today in mainland Scandinavian *skitt* (with *sk* pronounced as *sh*), which can also just mean 'dirt'. In English, however, words of French or other non-Germanic origins have been regarded as being more refined or polite than their 'rude Anglo-Saxon' antecedents, so that words such as *shit* and *snot* came to be avoided in polite conversation and writing. The 'dirty' meaning is also retained in the most conservative Scandinavian language, Icelandic, in the word *skitur* (Cleasby 1957).

The word *shit* has been recorded in Anglo-Saxon as the verb *scitan* and the *OED* gives a quote from a leechbook of about AD 1000:

'Wiþ þon þe men mete untela melte & gecire on yfele wae & *scittan*'. This is the alternative meaning of the word, now modified to *shits*, i.e. diarrhoea. In 1118, Florence of Worcester recorded that 'Lues animalium quae Anglice *Scitta* vocatur, Latine autem fluxus interaneorem dici potest', which can be loosely translated as 'the flow from the animals which the English call *Scitta* could however be called diarrhoea in Latin'. The modern versions of these words are perhaps more often heard 'on the Clapham omnibus' than seen in print or heard in broadcasts. Maybe in Middle English the distinction between the spoken and the written forms of the language had not developed in this way. Chaucer could use the word and in 1484 Caxton, in his *Fables of Æsop*, could have: 'I dyde *shyte* thre grete toordes' (*MED*). Shakespeare, however, does not seem to have had occasion to use this word, but this may be because the whole subject was by then generally one that was avoided.

The next most direct word has been relegated to dialect by the lexicographers, though widely known (if not understood) for its true meaning in the expression 'cack-handed' or 'cacky-handed' (for left-handed, or just clumsy). The word has a long history, however, and the Saxon word *cac-hūs* (Bosworth 1882) should need no explanation. *Cack* has appeared less often in print, but one quotation from 1600 given by the *OED* is: 'Hee hath a face like one that is at *cack*'. On the whole, this word seems a little rarer, or perhaps more local in English than *shit*; it is certainly very much used in certain regions, such as the Black Country of the West Midlands. It is also present in German and Dutch as a noun and a verb (*kacken*) in almost identical form to English. I am given to understand that it is more usual there than the equivalent words for *shit*, and this is confirmed by its presence in modest-sized Dutch and German dictionaries, but not in English dictionaries of equivalent size. Skeat (1882a) traces it back through Latin to Greek.

Of the words that are regarded as acceptable in polite company today, most are strongly euphemistic. *Fæces* is an official, written term now. Originally it came from the Latin *fæx* for 'dregs', and still had that meaning in the medieval period, as can be seen from a quotation from 1460: 'Rotun *fecis* of wiyn', and this usage continued into the eighteenth century, although increasingly the word came to be used for human wastes, from abscesses as well as from the bowels. Another relatively acceptable word in written English, *excrement*, also derives from Latin and originally meant 'that which had been sifted out', later meaning waste matter (including fæces), as is clear from a quotation from 1533: 'Breade haueing moch branne doth fylleth the body with *excrementes*' (*MED*). The present meaning is a comparatively recent use of the word.

I have also used the word *sewage* and, on receiving a caution from York, I checked and was horrified to see that this meaning (as *shit*) is only recorded back to 1834. The word *sewer* originally applied to any drainage channel (C. C. Dyer, pers. comm.); the word *sewage* now means 'flowing contents of a sewer', and that is no good for describing medieval pit fills, I am afraid, so I retract this term.

There are many other words which have been used for our present purpose. The Latin *stercus*, as in the subtitle of this piece, is but one, as shown by some Middle English and Latin equivalents given in the *MED*: 'esyn, or cukkyn, or schytyn: *stercoriso*, merdo, egero'. The Latin *merdo* is alive and well in modern French, but in English another cognate word *to mute* refers specifically to falconry. Similarly, the word *fumet*, which is mainly remembered from Lewis Carroll's poem *The Hunting of the Snark*, was applied to the droppings of animals that were hunted, deer especially; the word *crotty* was also used in this way.

'Coprolite' is more a purely geological term that has been applied to archaeological material, but is more appropriate to hardened and more or less mineralised sediment rather than the softer and unconsolidated pit fill with which we are largely concerned here.

A number of other words seem to have been used either in the farmyard or domestic sense. *Turd* (as in the Caxton quotation, above) comes from the Old English *tord* (=dung), and survives from the Old Norse in the word *tord-yfill* for dung-beetle. Turd seems to be one of the few more-or-less acceptable words for written use today. *Dung*, another Old English word with Norse origins, was mainly used (as now) for the products of farm animals, so it could be written in 1534 that sheep should be folded on the fields so that they would 'pyss and *dung* there' (Skeat 1882b). Its second meaning is for human fæces (*MED*). Amongst the Scandinavians, Norwegians now prefer the

work *møk*. The English language has retained all these words, the last in the form *muck*.

In conclusion, many of the words mentioned here have been used (by myself, as well as by others) either wrongly or without due regard for their history. *Latrine* seems a perfectly good, if rather euphemistic, word that has hardly changed its meaning over the years. Likewise, *cesspit* has a fairly clear meaning in English nowadays, though its ancestry and medieval use are rather uncertain. *Rubbish pit* is equally apt, but dare we allow *shit pit* (or *shitpit* or *shit-pit*)?

Words such as *fæces* and *excrement* are perfectly correct and well understood now, although they have only taken on their modern meaning fairly recently. *Turd* appears to be the only English word of clear meaning that is even partly 'respectable' (though the 1944 edition of the *OED* (corrected and revised to 1978) states that it is not now in polite use!). The most apt and ancient word that has been used in England, at least from Saxon times—*shit*—is, unfortunately, widely considered unprintable in full, although such words are now occasionally to be seen in 'quality' newspapers.

The fills of medieval pits contained a mixture of remains—of human turds, perhaps animal dung, and a range of household rubbish, including flooring material and larger bones. It is very difficult to find a word that covers all this accurately. Sabine used *filth*, which is quite descriptive, but *ordure* is what the stuff was actually called in the Middle Ages. Is this, then, what we analyse?

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[Editors' note: James Greig sent us the text on which this piece is based an extremely long time ago and we apologise for the delay in getting it into print. With regard to the spellings *fæces* and *defecation*, we have followed the first spellings in the citations used by *OED*, even though the ligature *æ* seems archaic and the latter spelling has the ring of American English.]

[Editor's aside: mere millimetres beneath the *OED* entry for 'shit' comes another very interesting and useful word: *shive* (to rhyme with English sieve), whose plural means 'the refuse of hemp or flax'. Here is the word we have been looking for to stand for the German *Scheben* in wide currency in Professor Körber-Grohne's reports on the Feddersen Wierde, for example; no doubt *shives* is a survivor in English from a common Germanic ancestor. — **Allan Hall**]