Duck fleas as evidence for eiderdown production on archaeological sites

Véronique Forbes

University of Aberdeen

Eiderdown is known to have been an important trade community in Medieval Northern Europe. With the exception of a handful of studies that identified down feathers in Scandinavian Medieval and Late Iron Age burials, eiderdown has largely been neglected in archaeological enquiries. Nevertheless, feathers and egg shell fragments are a relatively common component of archaeological sediments in northern Iceland, hinting at eiderdown production. Using this as a point of departure, this study presents an enquiry into the possibility of finding an archaeoentomological indicator for such an activity. Pitfall trap and hand collecting surveys in modern buildings used for the storage, drying and cleaning of eiderdown at Æðey and Vatnsfjörður in northwest-Iceland collected high numbers of the duck flea *Ceratophyllus garei.* The recovery of more than a hundred specimens of bird fleas, some of which were securely identified as *C. garei*, from archaeological floors at 19th-century Vatnsfjörður, suggest this insect could be a reliable indicator for eiderdown production sites in Iceland and elsewhere.