Aylsham Roman Project

Ceramic tile with animal marks - Julie Curl. December 2016.

Methodology

The tile was examined with a hand-lens and a series of digital photographs were taken in different light settings to show shadows and contrast to enable prints to be identified. Prints of the photographs were examined on a light box to further clarify the marks. The clearest marks on the tile were drawn to try and determine species prints and the sequence of animal movements. Shrinkage of the tile after drying and firing of about 10% was taken into account when identifying prints and trails.

Prints and trails were identified using a variety of sources, primarily using a Hamlyn Guide for animal tracks and trails (Brown, *et al*, 2004).

Completeness of prints

Most prints on this tile are incomplete and many factors can affect the completeness of surviving prints. Some marks may be obscured by other tracks. Others might be affected by vegetation around the drying tile and if an animal steps partly on a leaf, then only part of the print is left. Dampness and rain can damage prints while the tile is drying. The presence of any slugs and snails on the tile while it is drying might also affect prints. Adverse soil conditions and weathering can further erode the surfaces of the tile.

Prints identified

The initial interest in this tile had been a possible rodent track with a possible tail drag. On examination and comparison with known tracks this is most likely to be the trail of a newt, the size suggesting a Great Crested Newt. There are deep furrows where the body and tail have dragged through the wet clay. Accompanying the drag marks are small foot prints, many light, blurred or worn; some of the foot prints have clear toes and there are some that show webbing, which distinguishes these prints from a lizard. The newt had been walking across the centre of the tile in one direction and coverers approximately two thirds of the length of the tile and stops without any evidence for the trail continuing in any direction.

In the opposite direction is one clear fox cub print and several partial prints, some with claw marks visible. The main print can be distinguished from cat by the shape of the pads and presence of claws. The features that identify the prints as fox rather than dog are that the two central toes that point inwards, a feature of fox, while a dog print would show outward pointing central toe pads. The size suggests a fox cub.

The main fox cub print, clearest as it might have been put down with some force, joins with the trail left by the newt, appearing to stop the newt. It is most likely that the fox cub had seen or heard the newt and was probably play hunting with it.

There are a few quite obvious rodent prints, the size suggesting a probable Water Shrew, several probable rodent prints were seen, but most mixed and barely visible.

Discussion

The drying tiles are likely to have attracted a variety of creatures. A variety of invertebrates would have been attracted to the moisture, shade and cover. Invertebrates would have also been present on any vegetation used for drying or underneath the tiles.

Newts eat a variety of invertebrates, such as snails, insects and woodlice, which all could have been on or around the damp tiles. Similarly, Water Shrews can be found some distance from water and they will also feed on invertebrates, including spiders. Both the newt and shrew could have been on the tile while hunting or looking for cover.

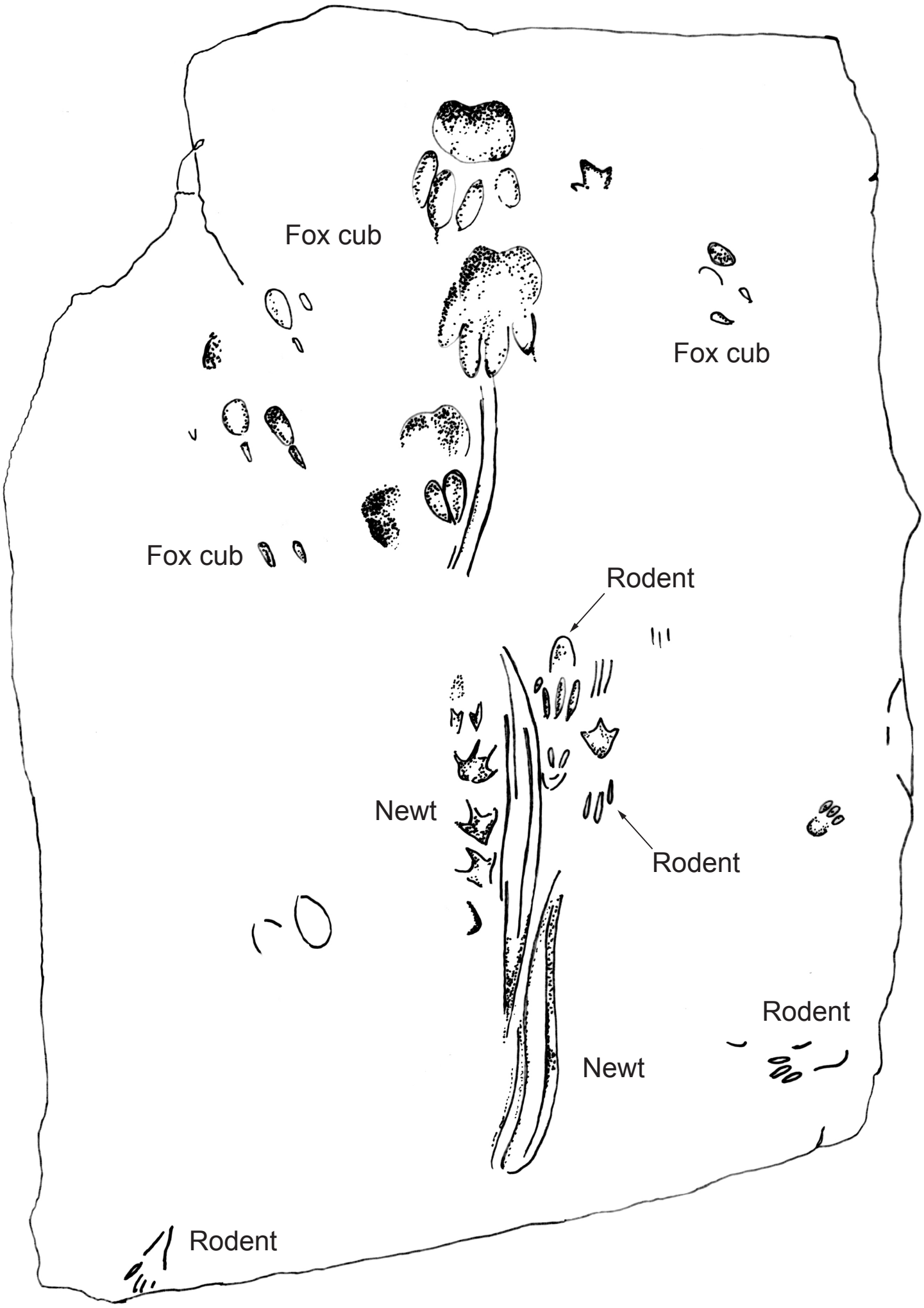
The size of the fox print and its activity of play hunting would suggest that this cub was out playing on the damp tiles in late May to July, based on the average birth time of late March, although this can vary slightly depending on weather.

This time of fox cub activity also gives a date for the tile production, indicating that they were probably made around the early summer period, perhaps for building work later in the summer.

There are many blurred prints on the tile, perhaps worn away by any rain or sharp showers while the tiles were drying.

Reference

Brown, R.W., Lawrence, M.J. and Pope, J. 2004. *Animal Tracks, Trails and Signs.* Hamlyn Guides.


Fox cub
Fox cub
Fox cub
Rodent
Newt
Rodent
Rodent
Newt
Rodent