

# Beef in Roman Italy

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The purpose of this paper is to re-examine the production and consumption of meat from domesticated animals in Roman Italy using zooarchaeological and textual evidence. The focus is on the proportions of meat from the three main domesticates (cattle, pig, sheep/goat<sup>1</sup>) and their chronological changes.

The most important livestock meat eaten by Romans is traditionally considered to have been pork. Certainly there is much more literary evidence for pork than for beef or mutton/goat meat. Such apparent Roman preference for pork is typically seen in Apicius' *De re coquinaria*,<sup>2</sup> where the preference for pork (11 references) over mutton (2), goat meat (1) and beef (2) is obvious;<sup>3</sup> likewise, the number of references to meat from young animals is much larger for suckling pig meat (22 references) than for lamb (10), kid meat (7) or veal (4).<sup>4</sup> K. D. White considered that "meat was not a prime article of diet ... and beef was less important within this restricted range than pork ...".<sup>5</sup> J. M. Frayn believed sheep were reared primarily for wool, not for meat or cheese, and that lamb was eaten only exceptionally.<sup>6</sup> Beef and mutton/goat meat are thus considered to have been of much less importance than pork in the Roman diet.<sup>7</sup>

However, literary sources, on which most of the arguments have been based, were written by and for the élites and are not informative about the middle and lower class diet(s); we cannot easily dismiss the possibility that ordinary people may have consumed meat in some quantity, including even beef and mutton/goat meat. Zooarchaeological evidence, which has not been given enough attention by historians, helps fill the gap between texts and the reality.

Two important collections of zooarchaeological data have been published: A. King gathered data of NISP (Number of Identified Specimens) from all Roman territory including the provinces, while M. MacKinnon, focusing on Italy, collected data of MNI (Minimum Number of Individuals) as well as NISP (for these, see below). For the period between the 5th c. B.C. and the 5th c. A.D., data from 77 sites in Italy (counting the number of phases of each site) were available to King, while data from 145 sites were available to MacKinnon.<sup>8</sup>

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1 I follow the customary practice in zooarchaeology of treating sheep and goats as if they were one species because of the difficulty of distinguishing between their faunal remains.

2 The information in this book is difficult to use as evidence; in any event, the work took its present form in the 4th c.

3 Pork (*porcinus*): 2.1.4; 4.2.13; 4.3.4-7; 5.1.2; 5.4.2; 7.6.13; 7.7.1; 8.9.1. Mutton (*oviferus*): 8.4.1; 8.4.3. Goat meat (*caprinus*): 8.6.3. Beef (*bubulus*): 8.5.2; 8.7.1 (cow's bladder).

4 Meat of suckling pig (*porcellus*): 2.2.6; 4.3.3; 4.5.2; 5.4.6; 6.8.14; 8.7.1-17. Lamb (*agnus / agninus*): 8.6.1-10. Kid meat (*h(a)edus / h(a)edinus*): 4.1.2; 7.10.1; 8.6.1-4; 9.10.10 (kid's liver). Veal (*vitellinus / vitulinus*): 8.5.1-4.

5 K. D. White, *Roman farming* (London 1970) 277.

6 J. M. Frayn, *Sheep-rearing and the wool trade in Italy during the Roman period* (Liverpool 1984) 32.

7 W. Jongman (*The economy and society of Pompeii* [Amsterdam 1991] 79), believing in the importance of pork, argued that the advantage of pork-breeding lay in its cost-efficiency: pigs could be fed with left-over food or pastured on wasteland, and they did not "compete for valuable agricultural land".

8 A. King, "Diet in the Roman world: a regional inter-site comparison of the mammal bones," *JRA* 12 (1999) 168-202; M. MacKinnon, *Production and consumption of animals in Roman Italy*: