

Reconsidering animal husbandry and diet in the northwest provinces

Rachel Hesse

Introduction: animal husbandry in Roman Britain

Considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to the relative proportions of the three main domestic species in faunal assemblages from the Roman empire — cattle, sheep/goat, and pig. Such analyses are riddled with complicating factors, from methodological concerns to biases in interpretation. Potential difficulties in interpreting relative percentages of skeletal material as an accurate illustration of the living population arise from the overrepresentation of larger animals due to the better preservation of their bones, the greater fragmentation rate of their skeletons, and the increased likelihood that field archaeologists will collect their smaller bones.¹ Limitations in site comparisons arise from variations in disposal strategies within different parts of a single settlement² and from diverse recovery standards in the field. Due to these limitations, it is only by using larger samples that zooarchaeologists can hope to say anything meaningful about the species represented at a particular site, and even then we must be cautious in our interpretations. Yet despite their complications, studies which examine relative proportions of species can provide insight into which areas, both geographically and temporally, were exploiting animals in similar ways. The present article seeks to explore the patterns formed by faunal assemblages from the Roman Thames valley, as well as their place within the broader empire. The evidence from this region calls into question the orthodox view of animal exploitation within the Roman world.

A well-recognized contribution to theories on Romano-British diet has been made by A. King.³ Following a series of earlier articles on the topic, in 1999 he published in this journal an article entitled “Diet in the Roman world: a regional inter-site comparison of the mammal bones”. Looking at the faunal reports for sites throughout the empire, he set out to “explore the notions of Romanisation, inter-site influence, and diachronic change” (1999a, 168). Demonstrating considerable differences between the faunal remains from Roman Italy and the northern provinces, he noted that, although the inhabitants of Italy enjoyed a heavily pig-dominated diet, the dietary pattern of Roman Gaul and the Germanies was dominated by both pig and cattle. While pig still ranged from an average of 25% to 48% of the total assemblages in Gaul, cattle also constituted a significant proportion of the faunal remains. Among his other observations regarding animal husbandry and diet in the Roman world, King (1999a, 178) suggested the possibility that this divergence was linked to a posited social construction⁴ of diet:

1 Maltby 1996, 156.

2 This variation in waste disposal within different parts of a particular site is seen at Cirencester (Thawley 1982) and Roughground Farm (Jones and Levitan 1993) and is thus a factor in the Thames valley during the period under consideration.

3 King 1978, 1984, 1988, 1991, 1999a, 1999b and 2001.

4 Social construction is defined here as animal exploitation as determined by cultural tastes. This is in opposition to an emphasis placed on the exploitation of animals for economic or environmental reasons.