

Animals in the urban fabric of Ostia: initiating a comparative zooarchaeological synthesis

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Situated at the mouth of the Tiber, c.30 km west of Rome, Ostia is commonly linked to Rome as its port city, the *dépôt* for commodities moving to and from the capital. In simplified terms, the site saw various phases of development; founded as the first Roman colony during the second half of the 4th c. B.C., it went through phases of relatively slow growth and urban expansion during Republican times, then an extreme economic boom in High Imperial times, before relative neglect in late antiquity and abandonment in the Early Middle Ages.¹ Archaeological attention to the site extends back to the early 19th c., first as hunts of an antiquarian nature for artifacts, progressing into operations that were more attentive to stratigraphy. Heritage protection and the site's eventual transformation into an archaeological park through the latter part of the 20th c. worked to restore and preserve many of the buildings, but also allowed for more systematic recovery and study of the array of materials unearthed in multidisciplinary explorations. While study of the more traditional categories of finds has combined with study of the textual and epigraphic evidence to shed much light on cultural life in the city, prominently missing is any synthesis of recovered zooarchaeological materials. While the available samples of collected faunal remains may be disparate and small in relation to the extent of the area excavated, sufficient numbers now exist to support some initial observations about the rôle of animals within the city's cultural framework at some spatial and some temporal levels. How did animals contribute to the economy, diet, and culture over time? What might they tell us about social class, activity, identity, and so forth? How does the accumulation of faunal materials vary among contexts? What information might this yield about issues such as waste disposal, re-use and recycling initiatives, the incorporation of materials in building projects, or the spatial organization of domestic, commercial and industrial activities? From how near or how far did these animals come? How and where were they kept, whether inside or outside the urban center? How were they treated? It is time to initiate exploration of such questions.

Zooarchaeological history at Ostia

In any synthetic venture the student is constrained by the biases that underlie the data-sets employed. Only a small subset of the many excavation projects provides zooarchaeological information. A myriad reasons affect this first stage of data-set creation and access:

- (i) Bones might not have been a priority and were not saved. This is notably a factor among earlier projects (e.g., prior to the 1990s, when zooarchaeological work was arguably less engrained within the discipline of classical archaeology);
- (ii) Contexts might not have produced any significant quantity of faunal materials;
- (iii) Limitations of storage space or scheduling among team members may have inhibited the collection, investigation, or even the eventual writing up of reports.

1 R. Meiggs, *Roman Ostia* (Oxford 1973) and C. Pavolini, *Ostia* (Rome–Bari 2006) provide further details of the historical development of Ostia.