

MISCELLANY

S. J. G. Hall and J. Glutton-Brock (1989). Two hundred years of British farm livestock. British Museum (Natural History). 272 pp., £19.50.

A coffee table book for archaeozoologists? Yes, and at coffee table prices. The BM(NH) is not cheap, but this is a very nice volume full of highly instructive pictures, for example of the Old English pig, pre-Far Eastern influence. If Great-Aunt Agatha's book-token won't quite run to it, nor one's institutional book budget, nag your public library. It won't hurt the general public to know a bit more about our agricultural past either.

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O'Connor, T. P. (1989). Bones from the General Accident Site. The Archaeology of York 15(2) (London: Council for British Archaeology). 75pp, 4 pi. Price: £10.00

The report describes and discusses the hand-collected bones from deposits at 24-30 Tanner Row ('General Accident site'), dating from the Roman to the medieval period. Bones recovered by sieving 154 soil samples from Tanner Row and 19 samples from 5 Rougier Street were also studied. The sites are located south-west of the River Ouse in York. They are situated within the area of the Roman colonia, close to the presumed location of the Roman bridge. A fine, but rather mysterious dessert is served at the end of the report by Andrew Jones, who discusses over 5000 bones of Clupeidae-(herring and sprat) found at an excavation in the cemetery of their church of St Mary Bishophill Junior, not far from the other sites.

The "nearly 20,000 hand-collected bones from the 'General Accident site' can be dated to 11 periods, from the mid 2nd to the early 13th centuries. The bulk of the material derives from two main periods: the late 2nd to early 3rd centuries and the 12th to 13th centuries AD. So far, only little research has been carried out on Roman bone from York, so this corpus of material offered the opportunity for a good characterisation of Roman livestock and husbandry practices, both from hand-collected and sieved remains. The medieval material allowed comparison with results from Skeldergate (Archaeology of York 15(1)).

The thorough study by Terry O'Connor can best be described by complimenting the completeness of the research and the way in which the material is presented. In his introduction, the purpose of the study, the documentation, and details of final storage of the archive are included. After a short introduction to the archaeology, the paragraph on materials and methods clearly indicates the procedures followed. There can be no misunderstanding, when judging the results and tables presented later on, about the way the material was studied and recorded. Towards the end of the study, the results are reconsidered in the paragraph 'Assessment of the Methodology'.

I fully agree with the author's remarks that 1-2mm residues do not add much to the information obtained by studying the remains larger than 2mm. In the case of very 'bone-rich' archaeological sites 'it is not necessary to sieve through twenty tonnes of sediment

to recover a single specimen of, for example, great-crested grebe (Podiceps cristatus L.)' when one wonders about 'the place of this species in the Roman economy or natural history' (p. 122, last line). Instead, it is better to concentrate on studying bones from other, contemporaneous, sites within York or other comparable places, in order to get a more valid overall picture for the period.

It is a pity that O'Connor's table 18 (presenting the hand-collected specimens) does not contain percentages for each of the major taxa. I always like to get acquainted with bone data for a newly-published site in this way; this time I had to put new batteries in my calculator first.

A few other short remarks, before discussing the main results: the way of presenting the absolute and relative frequencies in tables 19 and 20 seems very useful and deserves to be followed as standard in other publications. In my opinion, the abundant cattle remains (horn-cores and metapodia) should have been studied for sex discrimination. Scattergrams 11-13 clearly indicate the presence of cow, bull and steer. I fully agree, however, that the possible mix of different races within the cattle population present some danger when doing this. But sex discrimination could have presented, for instance, a better explanation for the large animals from period 7 (fig. 13). It seems logical to explain these animals as males, indicating not primarily a shift towards larger animals but instead possible different breeding or slaughtering procedures (i.e. more male animals in the population). Because of lack of time, it was not possible for me to put the measurements for horn-cores and metapodia (available on the microfiche accompanying the report) into my computer. I hope to do so in the near future.

Before discussing the more general results, it should be taken into consideration that, although the amount of bone from the General Accident site was moderately large, it only represents a tiny part of Roman York, with certainly many different activity-, production-, or consumption aspects.

The main conclusions of the study, regarding the Roman period, are closely linked to the period of the founding of the colonia. During period 5 (late 2nd-early 3rd century) there is strong evidence for the deposition of highly selected bone assemblages, the contents of which imply that certain meat products (and specifically marrow extraction?) were being handled on a commercial rather than a domestic scale. Smashed-up cattle limb bones and 'boned-out' scapulae have also been recorded from other Roman sites in north-west Europe, and thus clearly indicate a wide spread throughout the Empire. The explanation for the absence of so many of the epiphysis fragments may be that they were transported elsewhere for the manufacture of soup or broth. The Roman people living or working at the General Accident site were, perhaps, specialists in chopping up cattle diaphyses for purposes about which one can only speculate.

I don't agree with Terry's remark on p. 117 (third line) that the concentration of 'Celtic Shorhorn' cattle horncores has to be considered as a change in marketing practice. I rather interpret this in the light of the previous remark on the size of the excavation inside the very large colonia. It should be considered as a 'coincidental' occurrence, indicating that someone collected the horncores and did something with them or, better, with the horn itself.

The founding of the colonia can probably also be seen in the shift from wild goose to mallard and, almost certainly, in the luxury of abundant mice (Mus musculus domesticus) and black rats (Rattus rattus).

Particularly interesting is the story of the garden dormouse (Eliomys quercinus). Only last year the first example of this species was found in the Netherlands, near the castellum of Valkenburg. The presence of the species in the Netherlands was explained by us as importation during the transportation of some kind of nutriment (?grain). After reading O'Connor's report, a possible new item on the Roman menu may have to be considered as an alternative explanation, although the garden dormouse is a lot smaller than its edible relative (Glis) and, besides that, the numbers of bones are quite small.

The medieval bones also indicate evidence of industrial activity. Accumulations of cattle and goat horncores indicate a horn industry. The site itself gave evidence that it was used mainly for rubbish disposal, so the bones may indicate the usual domestic dump.

There are many more very digestible chunks in the report, as well as tasty desserts. I conclude with one of Terry's 'recommendations' (p. 123, third line): each animal bone requires 'different procedures for obtaining and examining the data' as long as they are well explained and 'directed towards simplicity of application and interpretation, both for practical and theoretical reasons'.

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