

BOOK REVIEW

BONES FROM MEDIEVAL DEPOSITS AT 16–22 COPPERGATE AND OTHER SITES IN YORK. THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF YORK. THE ANIMAL BONES 15/5

J.M. Bond and T.P. O'Connor, YAT & CBA, 1999.

This fascicule is the latest in the *Animal Bone* series of *The Archaeology of York* publications, although many of the sites considered were excavated 20 years ago. It is important, not because it deals with the famous site of Coppergate (whose Anglo–Scandinavian archaeology is currently immortalized in the Jorvik Centre), but because it attempts to synthesize data from several roughly contemporaneous deposits in one urban settlement. By luck, the distribution of sites is fairly well spread. Eleven lie within the walled area of the medieval city. Two others lie immediately outside the walls, and include strata associated with a Gilbertine priory on Fishergate. Some of the sites have been reported upon in earlier fascicules, and cross-references are given. For each of the 11 main sites, a useful archaeological introduction is provided (written by its excavator wherever possible), together with a list of the selected or relevant animal bone collections. Some of these have unmemorable codes, but fear not: the text usually puts in parentheses the date of each group, and the checklists can tell you if the deposits are pits, dumps, etc., if this is not also made clear. The methodologies of collection and recording are described succinctly, and the fascicule can stand on its own.

Most of the material was hand-recovered, but the authors correctly state that this does not negate their usefulness, provided that the limitations of such material are appreciated. Many of the collections were recovered by the same basic team of excavators and studied by the same suite of specialists, which helps to keep some of the expected biases relatively uniform. Sieved material is also considered where it is available.

The publication is of the usual high standard of production of this series, and is well organized. It has an index and also lists the contents of all of the *Animal Bone* fascicules published so far. Like all of those, however, it is presented at a selective, synthetic level. While this provides adequate supporting

evidence for the main conclusions and discussions, it perpetuates the frustrating lack of published detail for York's animal bone material, which severely limits comparisons with other sites. There is still a need for data to be made available, preferably in both paper and electronic forms.

The text is well written and eminently readable, and should appeal to an audience that includes people interested in medieval studies, animal bones, and the history of York. Inevitably, it invites comparisons with other attempts to synthesize data from several excavations of medieval deposits within a single town or city, such as Maltby's study of Exeter [Maltby, M. (1979) *Faunal studies on urban sites. The Animal Bones from Exeter 1971–1975*. University of Sheffield: Department of Archaeology and Prehistory]. This highlighted the lateral variation within a single city, and the problems of considering a city's food supplies without data from its rural hinterland: aspects loudly echoed 20 years on in this study of York.

Since this is the first (only?) published report on the medieval bones from 16–22 Coppergate, these receive first consideration. The other main sites are then summarized individually, following the same major topics (such as species frequencies, ages at death and distributions of body parts). The standard presentation of these topics permits the reader to spot similarities and contrasts ahead of the synthetic section, but this is still of value for pulling together the different lines of evidence. Thus, individually subtle differences can build up into a picture whereby one site, such as the Bedern, stands out for the period when it was occupied by the Vicars Choral College. These ecclesiastical songsters appear to have had a somewhat privileged lifestyle combined with an emphasis on self-sufficiency (including their own dairy herd). Their trading network linked in with some sources not represented at the other sites, and they may have had preferential access to new types of livestock, such as polled sheep, which did not become common on 'ordinary' sites until the post-medieval period. Other ecclesiastical sites in the country (such as St. Frideswides, Oxford) had similar early access to new developments and this begs the question as to whether or not church properties were

at the forefront of experimentation along with other wealthy landowners. Not all church sites, however, shared such status: the Gilbertine priory on Fishergate produced evidence of a much more humble meat diet, and even the sociable scavenging crow family appear to have regarded them as poor company, and abandoned them in favour of other sites.

Bond and O'Connor make good use of the different lines of evidence for sourcing food supplies. These include the availability of birds in different habitats, seasons and locations; tooth wear patterns of sheep stocked at different densities or on different soil types; variations in cattle horncore morphology, and varying patterns in the relative frequencies or positions of non-metrical traits. It is a pity that shellfish are not brought into the discussions of marine resources, but the contrast between the Anglo-Scandinavian and medieval exploitation patterns of freshwater/euryhaline and marine fish is well made. The authors undersell the value of sieved material to archaeologists in their efforts to emphasize its relevance to researchers in other disciplines.

Some of the methodological aspects will be useful sources for future work, such as the comparison of cat measurements with a Noddle-nurtured tomcat, which appears to suggest that York's medieval mogs were undernourished, and the regression equation for calculating liveweights of sheep from a radius measurement. An interesting detail not discussed by the authors is the difference in estimated shoulder heights for pigs, using Teichert's figures for metapodials. The discrepancy between the estimates based on the metacarpal and the metatarsal suggest that the medieval pigs had comparatively high shoulders sloping down to relatively low hindquarters: much as they appear in contemporaneous artwork (in which they resemble wild animals with 'hogsbacks' rather than modern 'improved' breeds).

In their comparison of the material from the different sites, Bond and O'Connor search for time trends and spatial contrasts. Time trends are subtle but can be paralleled at other medieval sites. Apart from the two ecclesiastical sites, which contrast with each other as much as with the other sites, the main differences relate to the nature of the material rather than to variations in diet. That is, some collections contain concentrations of craft waste or selected body parts rather than food refuse. These 'intrasite' variations must be borne in mind when comparisons are made with other urban and rural sites in the region. Sadly, there are few published collections to compare apart from some from Beverley, which fortunately includes ecclesiastical and secular sites, and a small report from some of the earlier excavations at

the village of Wharrah Percy. These sites relate to the limestone Wolds region of Yorkshire, providing a contrast with York, which sits on the heavier, wetter soils of the lowland vale. This environmental contrast probably explains the different emphases on sheep and cattle in the two areas, with sheep more suited to the upland and cattle more suited to the wetlands. Many more sites need to be brought into consideration before trading networks, urban hinterlands, seasonal movements (including possible transhumance) can be considered for the region as a whole.

One of the most revealing aspects of Bond and O'Connor's work on the York material is that different sites within a single city appear to have had access to different sources or supply systems. These were not mixed into a uniform distribution network for the city as a whole. Why not? Who had control of the supply systems: individual merchants, guilds, the church, landowners? Did supply systems relate to specific parts of the city, or to different socio-economic groups? There is much scope here for tying in the faunal evidence with other forms of archaeological and historical data, such as structures, artefacts and documents, as well as other types of dietary information, particularly plant remains. Hopefully, this is to be attempted in the future. Bond and O'Connor suggest some priorities for future work, and these include the need to consider each site in relation to others from the city, a concentration on specific contexts with clear site formation processes to facilitate interpretation, a consideration of urban scavenger food webs (in progress) and the targeting of ecclesiastical sites. They are also concerned that methodological developments are made with respect to sieved material, which currently tends to be 'tagged on' to hand-recovered collection, but which probably requires a radically different approach.

The fascicule is attractively produced, with text, figures and tables neatly integrated. Apart from Figure 51 (which is a waste of space), the illustrations and tables are informative and most are well presented. Two presence/absence tables are marred by the use of heavy type for the absence symbols. This makes the presence symbols hard to locate (the difference between presence and absence may, of course, be a single example, but it would be easier to spot the persistent occurrences if there were a stronger contrast in the presentation). It would also aid interpretation if Tables 92 and 97, which both list collections in order of date, listed them in the same order (i.e. *either* latest at the top *or* latest at the bottom). But these are minor quibbles.

The fascicule is good value for money and provides an example of the group value of several sites linked by some common attribute: in this case, medieval deposits from a single town. As with all syntheses, its results throw up more questions than they answer, but it emphasizes the subtleties of information that animal bone studies can provide. Anyone who thinks that the archaeology of York has been done to death should read this report. It illustrates the different scales of enquiry

that are possible, from context to regional level, and should stimulate investigations of several general topics, such as ecclesiastical power, trading networks and urban hygiene, as well as the methodology of animal bone studies. These have relevance far beyond the confines of medieval York.

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