



Urban medieval and post-medieval zooarchaeology in the Basque Country: Meat supply and consumption



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 5 April 2016

Keywords:

Livestock
Meat
Town
Middle Ages
Modern era

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the zooarchaeological evidence from six Basque towns (Bilbao, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Salvatierra–Agurain, Balmaseda, Orduña and Durango), and compares it with historical written sources. The key aims are a better understanding of urban diet, the provisioning of meat to towns, and the relationship between town and country, in the 12th–18th centuries. Taxonomic frequencies, kill-off patterns, butchery practices and biometrical data are examined in a diachronic perspective. The results reveal that, although there are some signs of economic specialization, patterns of urban consumption remained fairly stable. It is suggested that the strict taxation and legislation for meat supply and the ownership of livestock by urban elites meant that urban demand for meat was too tightly regulated to bring about substantial changes in the mechanisms of livestock breeding and supply. The economic system appears to have mainly been geared towards the socio-economic needs of the countryside, despite the central role of some of the Basque towns in international trade.

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1. Introduction

Although publications of faunal remains from rescue excavations are still uncommon in Spain, medieval and post-medieval faunal analyses are becoming increasingly important in the research agendas of both academic and commercial archaeologists. However, the zooarchaeology of urban environments remains a relatively unexplored subject, despite its potential to deal with important issues such as urban provisioning of meat, social differentiation and the relationship of towns with their hinterlands (O'Connor, 1992). In order to explore these aspects, the faunal evidence from several Basque towns is analyzed and reviewed in this paper.

The historical period considered here is represented by the transition from the late medieval (12th–15th centuries) to the post-medieval period (16th–18th centuries). This is a period in history that saw the birth of modern economies and societies (e.g. Anderson, 1974; Braudel, 1996) and it is therefore especially

relevant to us. Zooarchaeological analysis is particularly suited to investigate the study of animal production and consumption, and how these were transformed as part of a progressively more complex and specialized economic system. Archaeological investigations of such processes, as well as of the late medieval roots of modern economic systems, are still uncommon in Europe (Johnson, 1996; Mullins, 2004), although a recent surge of interest in this topic has emerged (e.g. Tourunen, 2008; Thomas and Fothergill, 2014).

The European region where this process has been most intensively studied by zooarchaeologists is England. Although English post-medieval faunal assemblages are still largely ignored when it comes to analysis and publication (Broderick, 2014), the subject has received some attention in the recent past (i.e. Albarella, 1997; Davis and Beckett, 1999; Thomas, 2009). However, this has only scratched the surface of what is clearly a more complex and widespread area of investigation. Works dealing with English late medieval and post-medieval faunal assemblages have played a pioneering role and are commonly referred to even when different geographic areas are discussed (i.e. Doll, 2003; Murphy, 2007; Tourunen, 2008). Perhaps unwisely, this has led to the establishment of an Anglo-centric model for the zooarchaeology of the period. According to this

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model, most late medieval/early post-medieval changes in animal husbandry can be associated with improvements in yield and productivity in response to an increasing urban demand. Evidence of these major innovations in livestock keeping includes the following: development of new animal breeds, introduction of more sophisticated agricultural machinery, development of new foodstuff and feeding techniques, enhancement of meat and dairy production, progressive substitution of cattle with horse as the main animal for traction, and increase in size of the main domesticates (Langdon, 1986; Albarella, 1997, 2004; Davis, 1997; Davis and Beckett, 1999; Thomas, 2005, 2009; Sykes, 2006; Vann and Grimm, 2010; Thomas et al., 2013).

However, it is still unknown whether these innovations also occurred elsewhere in Europe, even in the Atlantic areas that had intensive commercial links with England during the Late Middle Ages and the Modern period. Moreover, these transformations have often been considered as necessary requirements for the development of the new manufacturing processes and, therefore, it has been assumed that the Industrial Revolution needed to be preceded by an Agricultural Revolution. Nevertheless, English zooarchaeological research shows that the process was complex, had different timings and strengths, and was therefore far from being 'revolutionary' (Prothero, 1912; Kerridge, 1967; Beckett, 1990; Thomas, 2005). This paper intends to contribute to the understanding of such topics, as well as urban provisioning and the interaction between town and country in their historical context. It is based on the results of archaeological work carried out in the last two decades in the Basque Country.

The Basque Country is an area located on the north Cantabrian coast of the Iberian Peninsula, extending approximately 7240 km² (Fig. 1). It is divided into two main geographic areas. The Atlantic area is characterised by deep river valleys that reach the sea close to the Cantabrian Mountains (provinces of Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa). Important ports such as San Sebastián and Bilbao are located near these river mouths. In the Middle Ages and the Modern period forests and common lands in this region frequently witnessed conflicts associated with the raising of livestock, agrarian practices and industrial production (ironwork and naval in particular). In contrast, the southernmost area of the Basque Country (the province of Álava), where the city of Vitoria-Gasteiz is located, is characterized by an extended plateau and medium-range mountains with abundant foddering areas, sometimes shared with communities living in the Atlantic area (Díaz de Durana, 1986; Aragón Ruano, 2006).

Between 1130 and 1383 more than 60 towns were founded by royal or seigniorial initiatives in the three Basque Provinces. Generally, these towns were small; three fourths of them extended for less than 3 ha and never developed into real cities. They represented territorial and political centers, but did not develop a fully urban lifestyle. Only a few of the Basque towns were fully urbanized, although they were still relatively small. With the exception of Vitoria (20.7 ha), all Basque towns between the 12th and the 18th centuries were between 5 and 7 ha in size. In the Late Middle Ages some of them, such as Bilbao, San Sebastián, Orduña, Bermeo and Balmaseda, were, however, linked to international trade networks. Others, such as Salvatierra and Durango, had powerful control of their territories (Urteaga, 2006).

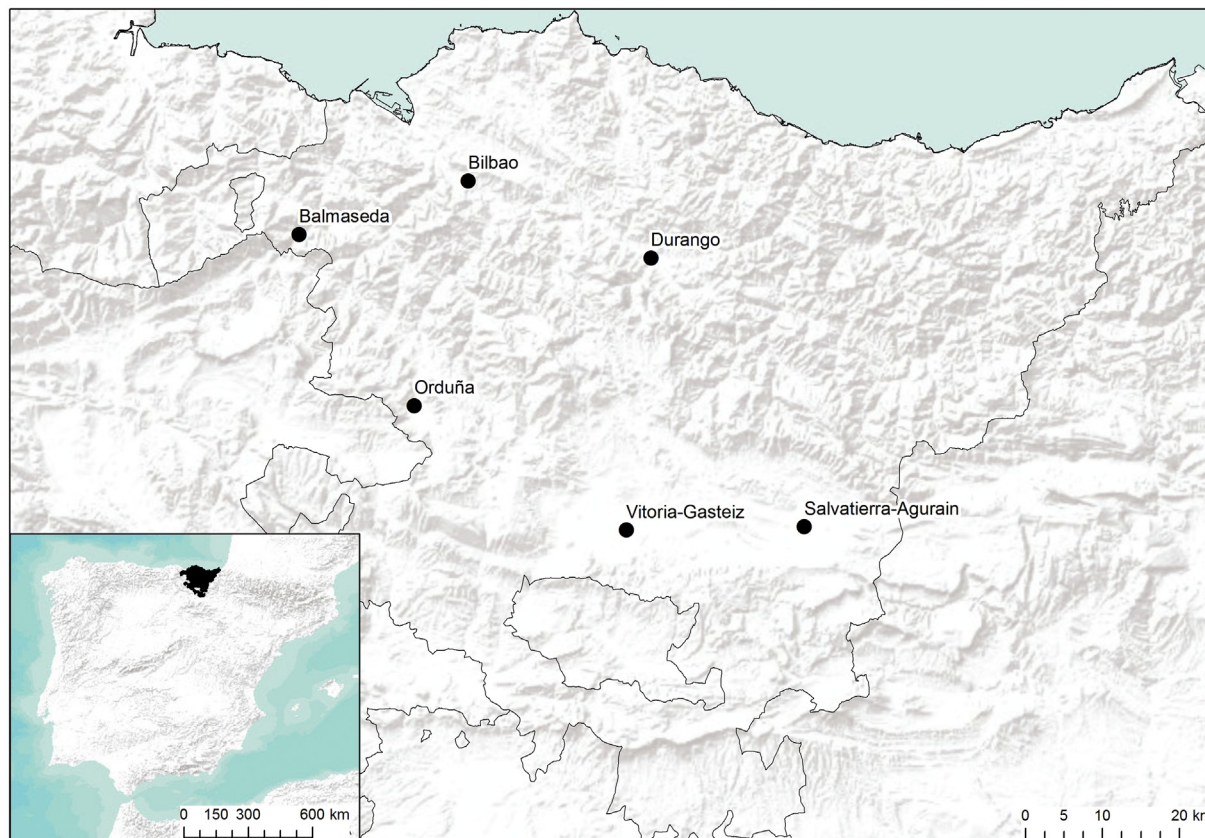


Fig. 1. Location of the towns mentioned in the text.

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