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Beef, pork and mutton: An archaeological survey of meat consumption in medieval and postmedieval towns in the southern Low Countries (Flanders & Brussels, Belgium)

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ABSTRACT

A survey is presented of archaeozoological information from medieval and postmedieval towns in the southern Low Countries (the present regions of Flanders and Brussels, in Belgium). Diachronic changes in the consumption of the three main domestic meat-suppliers (cattle, pig, sheep) in nine towns are investigated, and trends are compared among these towns. At the same time, possible geographical differences in meat consumption are traced. The observed differences in time and space are then explained as part of the economics of animal husbandry and of the interaction between town and countryside. From a methodological standpoint, this survey demonstrates that in a number of cases, information from archaeozoological contexts with varying depositional histories, often reflecting different socio-economic strata, can be combined to obtain a picture of meat consumption, and thus of the town's food provisioning, through time.

1. Introduction

Urbanisation is one of the key characteristics of the post-Roman socio-economic development of the Low Countries (see 2. for an explanation of this geographical term), starting at the end of the first millennium AD and continuing until the present day (see Verhulst, 1999; for general historical context). Few of the developing medieval towns had a strong link with a Roman predecessor (Verhulst, 1999, p. 1–23); most of these towns must thus be seen as innovations, representing a new element in the medieval economy. From the start, this novel way of social organisation presented economic challenges. Because the towns' inhabitants were not primarily involved in agrarian activities, this growing group of consumers depended upon food production that took place elsewhere. Some organisation needed to be maintained in order to ensure a steady supply of food, thereby enabling the urban merchants, craftspeople, artists and labourers to continue their core businesses. The development of urban markets, or commercial networks in general, selling products from the countryside to the towns' inhabitants, was the obvious solution, although goods were doubtlessly also transferred through other pathways. Some of the towns' inhabitants owned large estates in the countryside, while others tried to maintain food production within the town walls. Both groups can thus be seen as producers too.

The feeding of medieval (and postmedieval) towns is a research theme that has gained some interest within European archaeozoology (see, e.g., Bartosiewicz, 1995; Lauwerier, 1997; O'Connor, 2003; Albarella, 2005). The consumption of meat has usually been the focus of attention, and research has demonstrated that beef, pork and mutton have always been the most important sources of animal protein for urban households. Of course, the contribution of fish and shellfish cannot be ignored, but recent stable isotope studies suggest that these animal groups did not contribute substantially to the protein intake (Ervynck et al., 2014). Based on their low find numbers, the latter conclusion is equally true for birds or wild mammals. The main questions arising from the archaeozoological analysis of medieval and later urban archaeological assemblages, at least in north-western Europe, thus concern the way in which cattle, sheep and pig reached urban

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consumers. Did these animals represent surplus production from the herds kept in the countryside? If so, we must ask how this 'roaming off' was organised. Or, alternatively, were certain herds solely kept as meat suppliers for the urban consumers? Or, as is often stated in – mostly – popular texts, did townspeople try to breed animals within the town walls (letting them roam the streets looking for all sorts of refuse) as a means to escape their dependency on producers outside of the town's control?

A major problem for the study of food provisioning in medieval towns is that, despite this research being part of what is called 'historical archaeology', the questions asked largely escape the reach of historical studies. One can look in the towns' archives for detailed accounts of animals coming in to be slaughtered, but such accounts are rare (but see, e.g., Van Uytven, 1985) and none predate the late Middle Ages (see 2. for chronological terms). On the other side of the market economy, records documenting the behaviour of the consumers are equally rare, and these pertain only to late-medieval and postmedieval, often rich, households, which, moreover, are not representative of the majority of urbanites because they could partly escape the constraints of the urban market economy (see Dyer, 1997; Woolgar, 1992–93). It is therefore certainly useful to study such aspects as daily nutrition through the analysis of the consumption refuse excavated from medieval and later towns, although these material remains also present a wealth of interpretational problems (see O'Connor, 2003).

Around the turn of the first to the second millennium AD, the southern part of the Low Countries was a pioneering European region in terms of the development of urban economies, second only to the northern part of present-day Italy (Verhulst, 1999; Pounds, 2005) (Fig. 1). It is often noted that during the 13th century Gent was the largest town north of the Alps after Paris (e.g., Zajac and Deckmyn, 2009). These two factors make the region an interesting study area for archaeozoological analyses into the meat supply of medieval and later towns. In fact, rather early in the development of archaeozoology in Belgium, faunal assemblages from Gent were being analysed diachronically, leading to hypotheses about trends in the meat consumption of that town (Van der Plaetsen, 1985, 1986). These hypotheses, however, were criticised by Ervynck (1992). In particular, the idea that the evolution of meat consumption at Gent could be described by the German term *Verrinderung* (meaning an increase in beef consumption: Abel, 1961) was refuted. The main flaw in the initial analysis was the incorporation into the dataset of archaeozoological assemblages from households, such as castles or monastic houses, which hardly took part in the urban economy because they had possessions in the countryside. Moreover, the meat consumption within these households was strongly influenced by social mechanisms that necessitated a display of status (through conspicuous consumption; Ervynck, 2004) or by religious dietary rules (Ervynck, 1997).

At the York 'Medieval Europe' conference in 1992, a new

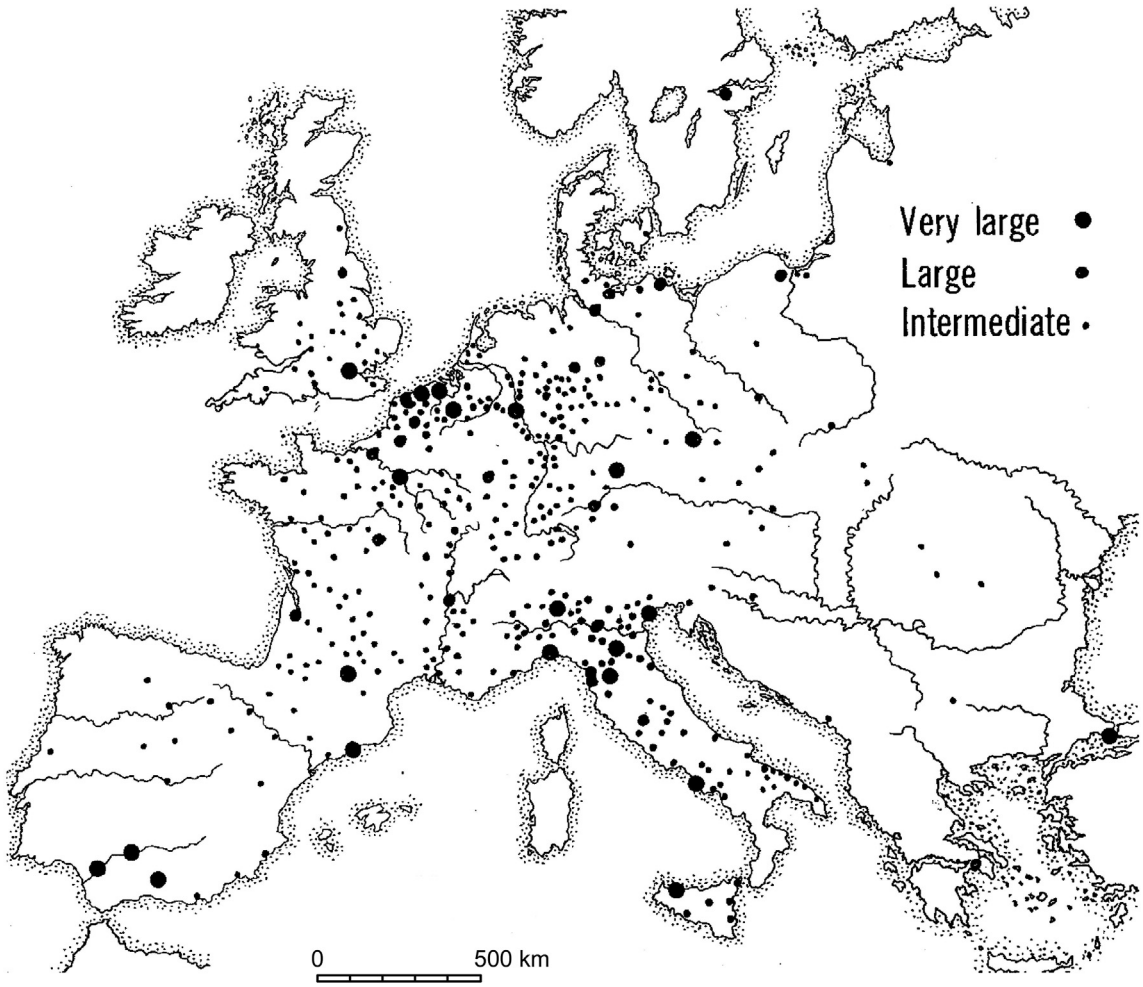

Fig. 1. The distribution of cities of large and intermediate size in late medieval Europe. Note their concentration in the Low Countries and in northern and central Italy (after Pounds, 2005, p. 76, Fig. 19).

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