

Food and status in Saxon and Scandinavian burhs

By Matilda Holmes¹

This archaeozoological-based, AHRC-funded PhD of the Wallingford project combines an investigation into the provisioning and status of Saxon sites from England dated to between AD 500 and 1100, with the animal bone analysis of material excavated from Wallingford itself.

Large quantities of animal bones from excavations at Wallingford in the 1960s and 70s have been recorded, and will be interpreted alongside bones from excavations related to the Wallingford Project. So far the quantity of bone recovered from excavations in 2005 and 2008 has been minimal. Results from the analysis of these assemblages will be reported in the project monograph, but the data will also be incorporated into the wider scope of the PhD along with other data collected from animal bone reports, both published and grey literature (where available), as well as from primary sources.

The data will then be used to answer questions relating to the animal economy of Saxon settlements: what domestic animals were present; were they important for secondary products; were they bred for meat; how were wild animals procured and what role did they play in the diet; how far can the relative social and economic status of a site's inhabitants be implied; and how were sites provisioned? The answers to such questions will then be used to investigate four aspects of Saxon settlements:

1. *How Saxon sites are classified* – both in terms of the mode of production, and how they fit into a settlement hierarchy. Traditionally Saxon sites are labelled according to rather arbitrary criteria more relevant to medieval settlements (Perring, 2002), whereas in reality many occupy a more complex niche, such as high status sites combining tax collection features of estate centres with ecclesiastical factions (e.g. Flixborough – Loveluck, 2001). By analysing similarities in the animal economies between sites, it may be possible to observe relationships based on the material culture, rather than purely structural or even just expected evidence.
2. *How urban were Saxon burhs* – amongst other features, a traditionally urban settlement will include a population of craft workers and industrial specialists providing goods and services through a market to the wider population. Areas used by craftsmen such as butchers, tanners and whittawyers, horners and bone

workers may be traced through the animal bone remains left behind and it may be possible to identify zones within burhs of such industrial or craft activity. Alternatively, burhs may have been home to a more agricultural class, who practiced small scale craft working more akin to a cottage industry, which would leave little evidence in the archaeological record.

3. *Provisioning burhs* – settlements with a large non-agrarian population mean that the inhabitants would be reliant on food supplied by others. This may require a market economy, with the provision of the consumer site with food produced by other settlements in the hinterland. Alternatively, if the early urban nature of some burhs did not require such an intensive industrial and administrative base, those involved in the production of goods and services may also have been able to work the land in and surrounding the settlement with help from their families.
4. *The status of burhs* – the last research question considers whether there is evidence the elite resided in burhs themselves, by looking for areas within the burh that are indicative of luxury diets, based on the variety of animals consumed, age of those animals and cuts of meat. If there was an elite presence within Saxon burhs, it will be further investigated with regard to continuity after the Norman Conquest. More specifically, were Norman castles imposed on areas that were previously the domain of higher status Saxon inhabitants?

The project is still in the preliminary data collection stage, and a call for relevant unpublished animal bone reports has been posted on the web-based discussion forum for the archaeozoological community. Analysis of the data will begin towards the end of the year, and if anyone reading this has any comments or relevant data, they will be gratefully received (matty@archaeozoology.co.uk).

References

- Loveluck, C. 2001. 'Wealth, waste and conspicuous consumption: Flixborough and its importance for middle and late Saxon rural settlement studies' in Hamerow, H. and MacGregor, A. (eds.), *Image and Power in the Archaeology of Early Medieval Britain*. Oxford: Oxbow, 78–131.
- Perring, D. 2002. *Town and Country in England: Frameworks for Archaeological Research*. York: CBA Research Report 134.

¹ University of Leicester.