

Note by Finbar McCormick

OBSERVATIONS by MOHC Sep 12. FM requested to advise

**Need a comparative and interpretive discussion on assemblages of similar age from monasteries and other kinds of sites in Britain and Ireland, especially Lindisfarne, Jarrow, Flixborough, Ilse of May, Hoddum, Inchmarnock, Whithorn, Nendrum, NRA sites etc.*

**Need clearer statements of the significance of butchery on calves, cattle, otter, dolphin, whale, birds.*

**Questions to address:*

**Similarity of Periods 2 and 3. How far is the Period 3 assemblage a residual version of Period 2?*

What is the evidence for skinning cattle? Was it found on neonates?

Why would you skin a dolphin? What were the marine mammals used for?

Can you make vellum from mature cattle hides?

What was the age of the animals whose bones were used to make the frames?

The activities each side of the road were closely related; why keep adult bones and not calf bones?

Initial thoughts on your observations Sept 12

Overall Distribution

Period	Cattle	Pig	SG	N
1	67	25	8	12
2	68	28	4	149
3	75	17	8	25
4	76	11	13	114

MNI Distribution %

Assuming that the material from various contexts has robust phasing I would not worry about problems of residue. What is interesting is the great consistency between periods. Slight decline in pig and rise in sheep in later periods. Sheep rise – increase in wool production (are there more whorls form later phases).

I wish to stay away from Anglo Saxon contexts as they are characterised by dominance of sheep generally – most sites are, however, on dry grassland context more suitable for sheep than cattle (lack of rivers etc – cows need rivers or ponds)

Unfortunately the sample from Inchmarnock is too small and there is nothing from Hoddum, so no comparative material there. The only two Scottish Monasteries to have produced decent bone samples are Iona and Whithorn. On Iona, cattle too dominate but sheep more important than pigs. Pigs need trees mast etc – Hebrides not much good for this (see attached [article or My article in Cormac Bourke book](#)). At Whithorn cattle generally predominate but sheep are again much more important than at Tarbat. Very low incidence of sheep is therefore most unusual feature of your site. I have the Holy Island (1985) bone report at hand but samples are rather small for reliable comparisons but sheep are the dominant species in many of the samples [O'Sullivan 198 Archaeologia Aeliana](#).

How does this compare with secular sites of roughly same period? Hard to say as there are virtually no contemporary secular sites. Edinburgh Castle Phases 3-4 are Roman IA/Dark age in date. Roughly equal distribution of main domesticates Cattle (36%), Pig (33) S/G 31 (Drisoll report P202). There are a few sites from the Orkneys of second half of first millennium date (Scaill and Buckquoy) but s/g generally in the 30-40MNI % range (Noddle 1977 and 1979). I am unfamiliar with publications during the last 15 years so do not know if there are good Hebridean secular samples. Dun Cul Bruaig Iona (Noddle 1980) again has high sheep level (Bourke Book my article). The Northumbrian settlement at Dunbar may be a good comparison but unsure of the dates (see phases on excel sheets). What is clear, however, is that sheep tend to be second (MNI 29-43%) well ahead of pig (Perry Report Page 201). Again it is quite clear that Tarbat with its low incidence of sheep stands out.

Since Anglo Saxon is sheep-dominated one could compare the distribution with Ireland (all info in McCormick and Murray 2007 which discusses all the zooarchaeological material from Ireland at the time). Outside Illanuloughan (attached article) there are a few inland monasteries. Moyne has low incidence of sheep 13% but sample is small (N=15) so cannot be trusted. At Clonmacnoise, however. Sheep/goat are third after cattle and pig but MNI percentages in the 20-24 range. This is the only other monastic site where s/g come last (McCormick and Murray 221).

On Early medieval secular sites c/g are usually third after cattle and pig but very rarely fall as low as 10% and generally in the low 20s.

All the above discussion is in terms of MNI – fragments do not allow inter-site comparisons as it can be related to fragmentation and other factors.

7 Dec 12

Following on to your queries here are some other thoughts.

Had a look at Flixborough and sheep are often the dominant species (see page 91-100 in Col 3); pig are generally the least important species.

Cattle ageing – at Tarbat mostly old animals with only a few sub-adult. This is unusual and seems to represent a consumer rather than producer – consumer site. See Soderberg article attached. A predominance of older cattle is generally an urban trait but was noted at Clonmacnoise – that it also occurs at your site is extremely interesting. There is also a discussion of this in McCormick and Murray.

Vellum is generally made from young animals. Older animals can be used if the surface needed is large (maps etc) but it tends to be thick, unsuitable for book pages. Same applies to old sheep – see Reed Ancient skins, parchments and leather. There are probably better more recent sources but I am not familiar with them. Generally very young animals chosen. The bones for such animals are not in the assemblage (young calves and sheep absent). Fresh skins imported to the site seems to be the implication.

Not sure why one would skin a dolphin except to make the meat easier to butch. On whales the skin is removed before the animal is butchered. I know of no evidence for dolphin skin being tanned – seal leather, however, noted in Iona.

Dolphins eaten – Canons of Adomnan (Bieler 1963) states that unlike other animals it was permissible to eat dead “marine animals” that had not been “bled” – as long as they were not decomposed. See Gardiner 1997 article on medieval marine strandings (in Flixborough bib.)

There is no reason why they should not keep calf bones – assumption again must be that calf/lamb/kid hides were imported to the site.

As far as butchery is concerned the report simply records cutting and butchering in great detail – no special significance except that boned were butchered. There is nothing “exceptional” in the assemblage. All carcass parts represented – animals killed and consumed on site – according to Krish. In early times the easiest way to transport fresh meat was by making the animal walk to the place of consumption.

Will get back to you if I have further thoughts and please field me any specific questions you may have. You will need to send me detailed photos of the frames to try and ascertain the age of the animals used.