Beyond the domestic: a review of the evidence for the exploitation of wild resources in the Roman South-West

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Hunting, fowling and fishing in Roman Britain

• Understudied area of late Iron Age/Roman Britain

• Small proportions of wild fauna suggest their diminutive economic importance – understates potential social/cultural significance of hunting, fowling and fishing

• Interpretations of wild animal remains of late Iron Age/Romano-British sites have altered and developed over time:

  • Supplement meat supplies (Grant 1989), and to protection farmland (Buckland-Wright 1987)

  • Iron Age taboo against consumption (King 1991; Dobney and Ervynck 2007); wild fauna only of symbolic importance (Hill 1995)

  • Consumption of wild resources linked to status or new culinary practices, i.e. fish (Richards and Hodges 1998; Cool 2006; Locker 2006)

  • Control over wild resources reflect changing cultural attitudes towards the ‘natural world’ (Sykes 2010), or are expressions of landownership and social relations (Allen 2014)
Wild fauna in the south-west region (1stC BC-4thC AD)

Distribution of animal bone assemblages with >100 identified mammal and bird specimens

Proportion of assemblages with wild fauna

- wild mammals present
- wild fowl present

Wild fauna in the south-west region (1stC BC-4thC AD)
Proportions of wild fauna by size of assemblage

No. assemblages

%NISP wild mammals

%NISP wild fowl

NISP >100
NISP >300
NISP >500
NISP >1000

0% 0.1% 1.0% 1.1% 3.0% 3.1% 5.0% 5.1% 10.0%

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80

No. assemblages

NISP >100
NISP >300
NISP >500
NISP >1000

0% 0.1% 1.0% 1.1% 3.0% 3.1% 5.0% 5.1% 15.0%

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80
Variation in the ubiquity of different wild mammal taxa

- Wild mammals found on rural settlement sites include both hunted and trapped animals, from red deer and hare to fur-bearing species, such as badger, weasel and polecat.

- Wild boar are suggested on some sites with large pig bones.

- Some records include identifications of fallow deer – an imported ‘exotica’ in the Roman period (game parks?)

*antler removed though some may remain if unspecified in report
*includes weasel, stoat, polecat and pine marten
*fallow deer also recorded in 1 non-quantified assemblage
**wild boar also recorded in 2 non-quantified assemblages
Chronological variation in wild mammal and bird exploitation
Inter-site type variation in the wild animal frequencies

- Villas stand out as sites tending to produce higher frequencies of wild mammals and birds
- Nucleated settlements also have comparative high frequencies
- Little variation between farms, religious and other rural sites – all include low frequencies
Intra-site variation in wild mammal frequencies

- Frequencies generally minimal compared to domesticates
- Can reflect natural deaths or occasional exploitation
- Slightly higher frequencies may reflect more regular hunting and trapping of wild mammals
- c.50% of villa assemblages include wild mammal frequencies above 2% NISP
- Only ‘outlier’ assemblages from farms and nucleated settlements produce >2% wild mammals
Varying proportions of deer bone and antler in assemblages between different types of site
Distribution of spear and arrowhead finds across the South-West

http://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/419674
Variation in wild fauna frequencies by site

Minimum NISP = 15
Presence and frequency of different wild fowl taxa

Ducks and waders:
- commonly recovered
- high frequencies

Corvids:
- commonly recovered
- low frequencies
Geographic variation of different taxa

**Corvid sp.**

**Anser/Branta sp.**
Restricted geographic distribution of seabirds

Guillemot

Great northern diver

Cormorant

Great auk (now extinct)
Distribution and frequency of fish remains

61 assemblages with fish bones
39 from assemblages with >100 identified specimens
Impact of wet sieving on the recovery of fish remains in south-west faunal assemblages

http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/noviodunum/2005

https://sites.google.com/site/fishlabyork/home
Ubiquity of different fish taxa, grouped by habitat
No. of faunal assemblages with fish bones by phase

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>No. of assemblages</th>
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<tr>
<td>late Iron Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>1st BC/AD</td>
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<td>1st-2nd AD</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1st-4th AD</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>2nd-4th AD</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd-4th AD</td>
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Evidence for aquaculture?

Halstock villa, Dorset

- Managed water-systems utilising natural spring from mid-2ndC AD
- System developed in 3rdC AD to supply an ornamental pond and ‘control’ tanks within the courtyard
- No environmental sieving carried out; unknown whether fish adorned the gardens
Distribution of fishing equipment finds across the South-West

Finds include:
- Fish-hooks
- ?Fishing weights
- Fish trap
Proportion of sites with marine shells by type and taxon

no. sites with marine shell (n=142)

- oyster
- mussel
- limpet
- cockle
- periwinkle
- whelk
- scallop
- carpet shell
- topshell
- other

% assemblages present

Proportion of sites with marine shells by type and taxon.
No. of faunal assemblages with marine shell by phase

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<tr>
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</table>
Geographic distributions of sites with oyster and mussels

- Oyster and mussel widespread in east
- Restricted to coast in west
- Mussel distribution more thinly spread than oyster, but follows same pattern
Geographic distributions of sites with periwinkle, cockle and limpet

- Clear coastal distribution – periwinkles restricted to coastal sites
- Restricted inland distribution compared to oyster and mussel
- Distribution focused upon the Ilchester-Dorchester access route between the Somerset levels and Portland/Poole Harbour
Inter-site variation in marine molluscs taxa frequency

- All marine shell taxa relatively well represented at coastal ‘production’ sites
- Proportions of each taxon at ‘consumer’ sites may suggest how widely each is selected for trade and consumption away from coastal settlements
- Oyster widely recovered and well represented at all types of site
- Mussel widely distributed, but less well represented
- Periwinkle rarely recovered away from coastal sites
Inter-site variation in marine molluscs taxa frequency

Scallops found at a few villas
- Highly prized?

‘Minor’ taxon recovered from a few farmsteads and villages
- Low value?
Summary points

• Large faunal dataset from the south-west, but severely biased to the east of the region

• Call for continued efforts in generating statistically-viable samples through considered excavation and recovery strategies, and reporting of standardised data

• Analysis suggests local and regional variation in wild animal exploitation practices, as well as social differentiation

• Deer hunting and venison consumption appears to be most commonly associated with villa settlements: protection of agricultural land, diversification of diet, and/or demonstrations of land-ownership?

• Evidence for the development of a ‘coastal culture’, expressed through exploitation of seabirds, marine fish and molluscs – partly economically influenced