Humans and Animals in the Early Middle Ages: Traumas, Transformations and Taboos

ABSTRACT. The period from the fifth to the eighth centuries in Europe was a time of profound crisis: political, military and environmental trauma; a transformation of the socio-cultural environment; and new religions, religious practices and taboos. In this context, the nexus between humans and animals changed in several distinct ways. The development of the new discipline of zooarchaeology over the past two decades offers new possibilities for investigating these changes. The trauma of environmental change and migrations of new groups into the former Roman Empire significantly impacted practices of animal husbandry. The migrations of these new populations from central Asia, eastern and central Europe and Arabia brought with them transformations in the socio-political symbolism and mythology associated with different animals, particularly the horse. The growth of the religion of Christianity and the spread of Christian monasteries in Europe introduced new dietary taboos associated with religious practice. Different taboos operated within the religious and ethnocultural traditions of Jewish communities in Europe, and the conquest of parts of Europe by the Islamic Empire also brought religious and ethnocultural taboos. The early Middle Ages were a time of change in the human-animal nexus in which migration, identity, religion, and ethnocultural heritage all played a central part.

KEYWORDS: early Middle Ages, early medieval migration, animal husbandry, monastic diet, Jewish diet, Islamic diet

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Люди и животные в раннем Средневековье: травмы, трансформации и табу

АННОТАЦИЯ. Период с V по VIII в. в Европе был временем глубокого кризиса: политические, военные и экологические травмы; трансформация социокультурной среды; и новые религии, религиозные практики и табу. В этих обстоятельствах связь между людьми и животными изменилась, причем изменения эти происходили несколькими путями. Развитие за последние два десятилетия новой дисциплины — зооархеологии — открывает новые возможности для исследования этих изменений. Изменения окружающей среды и миграции новых групп в бывшую Римскую империю значительно повлияли на практики животноводства. Миграции новых популяций из Центральной Азии, Восточной и Центральной Европы и Аравии повлекли за собой изменения в социально-политической символике, и в мифологических представлениях о различных животных, особенно в тех, что связаны с лошадью. Становление христианства как основной религии и распространение христианских монастырей в Европе стали причиной новых диетических запретов. Различные табу действовали в рамках религиозных и этнокультурных традиций еврейских общин в Европе, завоевание некоторых частей Европы Арабским халифатом тоже стало причиной распространения религиозных и этнокультурных табу. Раннее Средневековье было временем изменений в отношениях человека и животных, и ключевую роль здесь сыграли миграция, идентичность, религия и этнокультурное наследие.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: раннее Средневековье, раннесредневековая миграция, животноводство, монашеская диета, еврейская диета, исламская диета

INTRODUCTION

The period from the 5th to the 8th centuries in Europe was a time of profound crisis and change. Transformations in socio-political structures were brought about by the disintegration of unified Roman state systems and migrations into former Roman territories of many new populations from central Asia, eastern and central Europe and Arabia. Climatic conditions also became more variable, with intermittent colder and drier conditions in some regions and probably a significant period of cooling in northern Europe in the mid 6th century. The new Christian institution of monasticism became a pervasive element within society, while Jewish communities developed across Europe, and the Islamic Empire was extended into the Iberian Peninsula. While these changes in socio-political, climatic and religious contexts have in themselves been the subject of extensive scholarly discussion and debate, each could in addition have impacted on the nexus between animals and humans, prompting changes in husbandry practices, in diet, and in the symbolism and cultural significance of certain animals.

New possibilities for investigating these impacts have been created by the development of the discipline of zooarchaeology over the past two decades. The archaeological analysis of animal remains found at excavated sites can reveal species, sexes and their relative proportions (reflecting environment, husbandry practices and diet); age at kill and stress pathologies (indicating the purpose for which animals were kept); animal stature (resulting from breeding and husbandry practices); and the relative importance and roles of certain animals within a society (see, for example, Davis 2000; O’Connor 2000; Reitz, Wing 2008). However, the great majority of zooarchaeological studies consist of descriptions of faunal assemblages and interpretations in terms of the local geography and economic environment, usually focussed on a single archaeological site or a specific region. Only a few archaeologists have drawn on zooarchaeological remains to explore broader historical questions related to ethnicity, status, culture, or religion (notably, Sykes 2014; Holmes 2014). In this paper, I will explore how the lens of zooarchaeological evidence can be used to throw light on aspects of the changed nexus between animals and humans in 5th to 8th century Europe, in the context of the socio-political, climatic and religious transformations highlighted above.

TRAUMAS

The early Middle Ages in Europe begins with the final rupture of the western Roman Empire, in the 5th century CE. Prior to this, for half a millennium, a unified Roman state system had existed in the Mediterranean and most of western Europe. This had created an Empire-wide cultural unity, comprising a shared religious, social and dietary heritage and an economic
system based on more specialised systems of production, short and long-distance trade and food transport (see, for example, the spike in shipwrecks in the 1st centuries BC and AD: Parker 1992, updated in Wilson 2011; McCormick 2012: 81–87). Goods were produced and transported for taxes and requisitions, and this also stimulated private commerce, as did the currency system and state sponsored building of river and sea ports and roads. Quite specialised animal husbandry was practised, including raising pigs for sale and military supply of meat products, keeping large herds of ovicaprids for wool and milk, and breeding oxen of increased size, for transport and ploughing for grain crops (Valenzuela-Lamas, Albarella 2017).

The 5th century saw the final disintegration of this unified social, economic and political system in the West, at least partly due to the observable human mobility of the “migration period” and consequent disruption to cultural unity within the Empire. The western Empire had fragmented into separate, often-warring kingdoms by the end of the century, which was followed by further centuries of continued conflict, invasions and warfare. In addition, based on the evidence of Greenland ice cores, Alpine speleothems, lake sediments and dendrodata, it has been argued that the third century CE was a climatic turning point, with the ending of conditions favouring intensive agriculture (termed the Roman Climate Optimum). Climatic conditions in areas of Europe and the Mediterranean became more variable, with periods of cold temperatures, floods in some regions and aridity in others, perhaps even constituting a ‘Late Antique Little Ice Age’ (Büntgen et al. 2016; Eisenberg et al. 2019; Erdkamp 2021; Labuhn et al. 2019). A long drought between 338 and 377 CE may have prompted pastoralist groups (known collectively as the Huns) to seek out new lands west and south of the River Don, displacing other groups such as the Goths, and setting off the chain of population movements characteristic of early medieval Europe (McCormick et al. 2012). Dated glacier sediments in Greenland and Antarctic ice cores also indicate that volcanic eruptions beginning in 536 CE caused an atmospheric acidic dust veil and sharp cooling events across most of the Northern Hemisphere, particularly in northern Europe, which can also be seen from severely reduced tree growth evident in tree-ring chronologies in north and central Sweden, Finland, Russia and Austria (Larsen et al. 2008; Newfield 2019). Contemporaries record a dimming of the sun, and a “summer without heat” (Arjava 2005). It seems that there was a significant period of cooling for nearly two decades in the mid-6th century (Newfield 2018). While scholars disagree regarding the chronological and geographical extent and the impact on society of these climatic events (summary of viewpoints in Eisenberg et al. 2019: 48–49), it is possible that this triggered some cultural adaptations in the rearing and use of animals.

Zooarchaeology indicates that during this period there was an increase in mixed, non-specialised farming and changes in animal husbandry practices.
We can see a trend towards greater variability between different regions in the 5th to 7th centuries, reflecting the fragmentation of political, economic, social and cultural life and development of practices more adapted to local environmental conditions (Chavarría, Lewit, Izdebski 2019). Scholars emphasize the quite diverse strategies adopted, with different proportions of domestic species even at different sites even within the same region (Gallego-Valle et al. 2022; Nieto-Espinet et al. 2021).

Sometimes animal husbandry increased in importance in relation to agriculture or vine cultivation. For example, Vilauba in north-eastern Spain, a former Roman villa which had produced wine and wheat in the 1st to 3rd centuries became the site of a small hamlet with animal pens in the early 6th century (fig. 1). The animal remains show a marked change from the earlier occupation, with the proportion of cattle – kept for traction in agriculture — shrinking and the proportion of ovicaprids increasing (from around 20% to 32%). While ovicaprids in the 1st to 3rd century were predominantly killed in their 6th-8th years, indicating that they were kept primarily for wool and milk, this also changed in the 6th to 7th century, when most sheep and goats were killed between the 2nd and 4th year, indicating a change to meat production (Colominas et al. 2019).

Sheep and goat husbandry, mostly for mixed use for meat, wool and milk, was particularly practised in highlands. Expanded grazing in the 5th to 7th centuries has been detected in the uplands of central Spain (López-Sáez et al. 2014) and in the Massif Central of France (Servera Vives et al. 2014). For example, at the early medieval village of Gómez, near Madrid, ovicaprids — kept for meat, milk and wool production — made up 63% of animal remains by the 7th century (Vigil-Escalera Guirado et al. 2014). There is evidence for widespread non-specialised pig keeping in lowland and in forested areas, where pigs could forage in woodlands for food such as acorns. This has been noted in northern Italy (Rottoli 2014), and in Belgium and Holland, where both zooarchaeological and palynological evidence of the 5th to 7th centuries points to a process of reafforestation with the exploitation of mixed deciduous woodland for pig foraging (Pigière, Goffette 2019). Local ecologies clearly played an important role in determining productive strategies. For example, at 5th to 7th century sites in Yorkshire, cattle and therefore probably agriculture were predominant, perhaps reflecting a lack of woodland, in contrast to the dominance of sheep and pigs at West Stow, in Suffolk (O’Connor 2014).

The stature of cattle, which had significantly increased during the Roman period, decreased again to pre-Roman levels across Europe from the 6th century. This may have been due reduced opportunities to cross-breed between regions due to the loss of transport and communications after the end of unified Roman rule. Alternatively, it may reflect new patterns of less intensive feeding, with cattle grazed free-range on pastures rather than fed in stalls.
Fig. 1. Reconstruction of the 6th—7th century hamlet at Vilauba, Spain. Image courtesy of P. Castanyer Masoliver
with cereal fodders; or perhaps the deliberate selection of smaller, more easily handled animals that were more suitable for smaller farms and transhumance practices or more resistant to adverse climatic conditions (Valenzuela-Lamas, Albarella 2017; Rizzotto et al. 2017; Salvadori 2019; Clavel, Yvinec, 2010; Trentacoste et al. 2021; Grau-Sologestoa et al. 2021; Nieto-Espinet et al. 2021; Rizzetto, Albarella 2022).

Thus, zooarchaeological data suggests that the more standardised, market and state-oriented, and culturally uniform practices which had been introduced under Roman rule were replaced by more diverse and local systems of animal husbandry. The relative impacts of changing climate and socio-political or cultural change is difficult to gauge, but all may have played a part in triggering these changes.

**TRANSFORMATIONS**

The breakup of the western Roman Empire did not only result in a process of economic change but also profound social transformation. The 5th to 7th century migrations of peoples from outside the Roman Empire — including Angles, Saxons, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Lombards, Vandals, Huns, and many others – and the settlement of these new populations in many areas of Europe is a process now increasingly documented by genetic data (Schiffels et al. 2016; Amorim et al. 2018). Archaeological remains indicate a rupture with the cultural heritage of the Classical world, including the disuse and repurposing of Roman style aristocratic rural residences (Chavarría 2004, 2006; Castrorao Barba 2020; Cavalieri, Sacchi 2020, 2022). A key question, therefore, is how human-animal relations were changed or modified within this context of migration and changing cultural identities, an area of study which has received less attention from archaeologists than changes in farming.

The use of horses in warfare by many of these “barbarian” populations was noted by contemporaries (e.g. Procopius *Gothic Wars* 1.16.11) (fig. 2). Some, including the Lombards, Arabs, and former steppe nomads such as the Huns, Avars and Magyars, had strong ethnocultural traditions of horse-breeding and horse-mounted fighting (Bachrach 1985: 709, 725–26; Hyland 1994: 47–57; Pohl 2018: 209–11). Horses were high status animals, associated with elite warrior status, and in mythologies with gods and goddesses, fertility and power (Cross 2011: 190–191) (fig. 3). Hunting on horseback, accompanied by hunting dogs or birds, was associated with training for warrior life by some migrant groups. Hunting with birds of prey such as falcons and hawks was introduced to Europe in around the 5th century: among the earliest visual representations of falconry in Europe is the mosaic from the House of the Falconer at Argos (c. AD 500) and an early 6th century gilded fibula from Xanten which may represent a horseman wielding a falcon’s lure (Dobiat 2013). Birds
of prey used for hunting and hunting dogs are mentioned in early medieval Frankish, Burgundian and Bavarian law codes (Giese 2013: 497–499; Salisbury 2011: 35–42). Both falconry and the pursuit of large, dangerous animals such as boar, antlered red deer, wolf and bear, were particularly associated with aristocratic hunting. The expensive and time-consuming nature of falconry, and the lack of nourishment provided by wild birds in proportion to the resources needed for their capture, reveal the social symbolism of the hunt and consumption of game animals (Oehrl 2013; Pluskowski 2006: 22, 98, 103–107; Albarella, Thomas 2002). Such activities represent a nexus not only between hunter and hunted, but between the hunters and their animal hunting allies, their horses, dogs and birds.

Zooarchaeological evidence for the value of horses, dogs and raptors within barbarian society has come to light through excavations of burials (Jennbert 2003; Pluskowski 2012). Whole animals, especially horses and dogs, often occur in the cemeteries of immigrant barbarian groups (including those
of Avars, Franks, Anglo-Saxons, and Lombards) during the 5th–8th centuries, inhumed with their owners, generally elite males (Prummel 1992; Crabtree 1995; Bond, Worley 2009; Bede 2012). An example is the 7th century Anglo-Saxon burial of a young man with a whole horse as well as a rich sword, found in Mound 17 at Sutton Hoo (Carver 2005: 281–282). Bones of birds of prey have also been found in both male and female elite burials of 6th–11th century Scandinavia, Central Europe, France and England (Dobiat 2013; Prummel 2013; Vretemark 2013). Bones, claws and teeth or tusks of wild animals are also found in burials, and seem to have been an indicator of social status, symbolising a hunter’s accomplishments, as well as possibly amulets, transferring the animal’s strength to the hunter by apotropaic means (Sykes 2014: 127; Pluskowski 2006: 110–111).

The use of fur in clothing took on a new importance as a sign of status, further signalling a rupture with the cultural heritage of the Classical world since this had not been the practice for Roman aristocracies. Texts record the
wearing of fur by early medieval aristocracies such as Hunnic princes, who are described by the 5th-century writer Priscus (Frag. 15.4) as wearing the “skins of wild animals” (Howard-Johnston 1998). Traces of fur production and consumption are difficult to discern in the archaeological record since only more durable elements such as claws remain, but zooarchaeological investigation from commercial centres in Viking Age Scandinavia has identified traces of species such as red fox, wolf and otter (Wigh 1998; Becker, Grupe 2012). In Russia, archaeological finds such as blunt arrowheads and tally sticks have been identified as related to fur production (Makarov 2012). Fur was highly valued in the Islamic Empire from the 8th century, as we know from texts: Caliph Harun al-Rashid was said to have owned fur robes numbering thousands (Howard-Johnston 2021). Archaeological excavations of very large quantities of Islamic coins, found particularly in Russia, the Baltic, Poland and Scandinavia, attest this vigorous trade (Kilger 2008).

TABOOS

Religion and ethnocultural heritage, specifically religious taboos, also played a role in the human-animal relationships of the early Middle Ages. From the 6th century, the practice of monasticism spread through western Europe, with monasteries increasing in number and size from the late 7th century (Bully et al. 2020; Hedstrom, Dey 2020). The ideal of monastic life was one of bodily discipline and a renunciation of the worldly lifestyle lived by mainstream society. Monastic rules thus imposed eating and drinking restrictions, and the eating of meat (a food source regarded as pleasurable and also associated with physical passion) was frequently limited. Such rules separated monks from Christians outside the cloister and bound them to their ‘table-fellows’ within the monastery (Bazell 1997; Jotischky 2011: 52). Practices varied considerably: a number of monastic rules specified a vegetarian diet, or one in which only fish was permitted, with marine mammals such as seal and dolphin regarded as fish. The widely influential 6th century Rule of Benedict forbade the eating of the meat of quadrupeds by monks in good health (Bond 2001; Murray et al. 2004; Pluskowski 2010). A 9th century text recording the customs of the monastery of Tamlachta in Ireland tells us that there the only meat eaten was that of “deer or a wild swine” (Gwynn, Purton 1912), the eating only of wild meat perhaps reflecting the practices of very early Near Eastern monks who lived on what they could forage as a means of renouncing the importance of food (Jotischky 2011: 31–43).

Zooarchaeological data confirm such practices at the Monastery of Iona on an island off Scottish coast, where early medieval remains indicate a predominant consumption of fowl, wildfowl, fish and shellfish, as well as game including red deer and seal/cetacean. Zooarchaeological data also indicate that fish played a very important role in the diet at the 7th to 10th century monastery
of Illaunloughan. However, pig bones also appear at the monastery of Iona, suggesting that these monastic ideals were not always adhered to, and that food renders were brought to the monastery from outside this island, which is unsuitable for pig rearing (Murray et al. 2004). High proportions of young pig bones also appear at the 5th–8th century abbey of St Albans, and the 7th–8th century monastery of Wandgries-Homage in northern France, a pattern similar to contemporaneous secular elite sites (Crabtree 2010, 130; Clavel, Yvinec 2010: 80). Thus the zooarchaeological record also reflects the high status and important socio-economic role of large monasteries, and possibly the provision of food for visiting notables.

By contrast, both Islamic and Jewish communities in medieval Europe strictly avoided the raising and consumption of pigs as part of their religion and ethnocultural heritage. While scholars debate the origins of such food taboos, particularly whether they arise from practical concerns (for example, protection of health), cultic or cultural symbolism (for example, the meaning of a particular animal) or historical influences (Simoons 1994: 64–101; DeMello 2012: 127–128), when practised by a particular group such taboos serve to maintain its cohesion and feeling of uniqueness. Based on ethnographic work on Jewish orthodox and Indian Hindu dietary taboos, as well as dietary restrictions in communities with traditional lifestyles in Malaysia,
Papua New Guinea, and Nigeria, Meyer-Rochow concludes that the taboo “assists that group to maintain its identity and creates a feeling of “belonging”” (Meyer-Rochow 2009). Dietary taboos thus serve as a marker of identity and self-differentiation as well as devotion (Montanari 1999).

Jewish communities had been established in Italy, southern France and Spain before the start of the early Middle Ages (fig. 4). Jewish dietary rules forbade not only pigs but additionally a large range of other animals and animal parts for consumption or use, and Jewish communities employed a ritual butcher to carry out specific slaughtering practices (Motis Dolader 1999). The disparity between Christian and Jewish diet even formed a topic of medieval theological debate (Stollar 2009; Resnick 2011). The dietary taboos among European Jewish communities can be seen in zooarchaeological evidence for specifically Jewish meat consumption patterns. These are particularly clear during the later Middle Ages, when Jewish communities were segregated, and differentiated dietary patterns can be clearly seen from excavations of medieval Spanish sites (Valenzuela-Lamas et al. 2014).

Most of the Iberian Peninsula was conquered by the Islamic Umayyad Empire at the start of the 8th century (fig. 5). The consumption of pigs is also strictly forbidden by Islam. Medieval Islamic cookbooks indicate that mutton played a central role in the Islamic diet, as well as fowl (Rosenberger 1999).
Zooarchaeological data also indicate that pig was rarely eaten, although pig remains are not completely absent at Islamic sites (Garrido-García 2011; Morales Muñiz et al. 2012; García 2023). For this reason, sheep breeding increased in importance in Muslim Spain and Portugal. Recent zooarchaeological studies of different Spanish and Portuguese contexts dated to between the 9th and the 13th centuries demonstrate a complete dominance of ovicaprids, which make up around 70–90% of bones in large assemblages. In the earlier period, the majority were slaughtered young, for meat, rather than kept for wool (Moreno-García 2013; García 2023). The size of ovicaprids increased, probably reflecting specialised breeding directed towards meat consumption, while new breeds were introduced (Davis 2008; Grau-Sologestoa 2015; Moreno-García 2013). Genetic analysis reveals a possible route from North Africa — part of the same Islamic Empire — for the introduction of these different breeds, which show more genetic variation than those found in other areas of Europe (Pereira et al. 2006).

CONCLUSIONS

The human-animal nexus within early medieval Europe can be explored through multiple lenses. Historical approaches have used documentary and archaeological sources to explore transformations in socio-political and economic structures brought about by the disintegration of the Roman state and migrations of new populations. Paleoclimate studies have put forward the theory that climate became more variable, with intermittently colder and drier conditions. Examinations of early medieval law codes have highlighted the social meaning of certain animals and their importance within warfare, hunting and feasting. Discussions of monasticism and theological debates have examined dietary restrictions relating to meat consumption. The lens of zooarchaeology offers us additional and unique insights into how the traumas, transformations and taboos of the early Middle Ages impacted the human-animal nexus.

The end of the unified Roman state system in Europe and Mediterranean market, and possibly climatic change, impacted on animal husbandry. Animal remains reveal how specialised production and animal husbandry decreased, along with the stature of cattle. Changing proportions of domestic species found at archaeological sites demonstrate that more local and diverse patterns of mixed animal husbandry developed, with the use of highlands for grazing of ovicaprids, and forests for pig foraging. The new peoples entering former Roman territories brought with them horse-riding cultures and an increasing emphasis on the hunting of wild animals as an elite activity. Hunting dogs and birds of prey gained social meaning alongside horses. This social meaning is apparent in the ritual burying of these animals alongside their human owners, discovered through archaeological excavation. The wearing of animal fur
gained great importance with certain of these migrant groups, and the hunting of fur-bearing animals became an important activity due to changed social norms. Although fur consumption is difficult to discern in the archaeological record, traces of hunted species, of hunting implements, and of intensive trade contacts (attested by coins) in fur-producing regions provide material evidence of this cultural change. Finally, different animals had special meanings in terms of religious beliefs and identities which developed in early medieval Europe. As monasticism spread, the impact of monastic rules regarding meat taboos can be seen through zooarchaeological analysis, although the high status of major monasteries is reflected in some similarity of their diet with secular elite sites. For Jewish communities within Europe, taboos around meat were a marker of identity, reflected in both textual and zooarchaeological evidence. Similarly, ethnocultural change in Spain and Portugal brought about by the Islamic conquest led to the importance of different animals in the diet of communities in these regions. The consumption or non-consumption of certain animals, visible in the zooarchaeological record, had a powerful symbolic meaning for all these communities, indicating their identity and self-differentiation as well as having religious significance.

The relationships between humans and animals underwent important changes in the early Middle Ages, reflecting the many dramatic changes within European society in the period of transformation from the 5th to the 8th centuries. Zooarchaeology provides a powerful lens through which to view more clearly how migration, identity, mythology, religion, and ethnocultural heritage all played a central part in these changes, and in the transformation of the human-animal nexus.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My gratitude to friend and colleague Professor Alexandra Chavarría, who inspired and assisted my research on this topic; and to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

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Submitted: 17.09.2022

Accepted: 15.12.2022

Article published: 01.07.2023