

The medieval cattle raising and their use in Asturias (Spain): a city, a monastery and a castle

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With broad strokes, we can assume that the medieval meat diet in “Atlantic Europe”, into which we place the North of Spain (Moreno 1997, 47), would have shown a preference for the consumption of domesticated animals, bred in the private houses, and that amongst them it would appear that cattle played a favourable role (Morales 1977, 12; Giovannini 1997). But other kinds of foodstuffs which could be acquired from the incipient urban shops, stemming from remote areas, also should not be forgotten.

Within this generic environment, we are trying to shape such an outlook through a series of studies of the Asturian medieval cattle, as much for the existing consumption as for being the means of assessing various social realities, which were going to shape this medieval time, and that we want to centre on a city, a monastery and a castle. But also without forgetting the determination of the principal breeds of a livestock area, which to all appearances, was settled from pre-Roman epochs onwards.

A city: Oviedo

As we have already checked in other studies (Adán 1997a), the inhabitants of Oviedo (Asturias) during the “Middle and Modern Ages” supplied themselves with foods from the various markets in which all kinds of meat products were sold. These were regulated by means of decrees and arrangements. According to Argüello (1996), as long ago as the 13th century, there was a fixing of prices on the pieces of meat, depending on the geographical zone where they come from as well as on the type of piece carved up.

Through the archaeology, it is known that the main consumption seems to be of bovines and pigs which were slaughtered in the city (Adán 1997a). Rams of Castilla were also consumed which influenced trade and supply, but indeed their prices were quite high. More difficult is the distinguishing between the archaeo-faunistic remains, such as autochthonous ovines and goats that were consumed.

It would appear, that the essential base of the medieval urban diet was not made up from horses, farm birds or hunted animals, whose percentage is very low. In fact, they are hardly evidenced in the found bone-material or even the documentary sources (Aguadé 1983).

What is distinguished, is the economical usefulness which is also shown in another oriental Asturian monastery situated in Villanueva, with a succession in the importance of cattle, showing bovines, pigs and in the last place, ovines (Requejo 1998, 97).

A monastery: Cornellana

The archaeofaunistic analysis in the early phases of the Benedictine monastery of Cornellana (Salas, Asturias), seem to show a pattern of meat-consumption similar between the medieval epoch (from the 11th century) and the modern epoch (till the 18th century) (Álvarez Laó 2001).

A predominance of sheep can be recognised, as they make up more than a half on the remains from the archaeofauna analysed. They probably stem from what we can think of as a series of private flocks belonging to the monks and shepherded by their servants. This preference for little cattle is also evident in the foun-

dition document from the year 1024, in which the infante Cristina makes a donation of 10 cows, 5 mares and 100 units of little cattle (Aguadé 1983, 37).

Shortly thereafter, from the 'Low Middle Ages' onwards, the importance of bovines seems to increase in Asturias (Aguadé 1983, 35 and 46). They dominate in the business transactions from 12th century, and also in the donations by most of the aristocracy (Aguadé 1983, 41 and 60). A donation of 70 cows to Cornellana is registered in the year 1300 (Aguadé 1983, 37). The third most important species would appear to be the pigs, whereby there still remains some doubt if they were indeed domesticated, or if they were wild – there could also have been some ancient breed of tame pigs, now extinct, but similar to wild boars (Álvarez Laó 2001) as was the case in Great Britain (Davis 1989, 189). Another source of nourishment were the farm birds, horses and – sometimes – game (deer, rabbits, and batrachians). Other found remains stem from cats, dogs and horses which (especially for the latter) were probably kept more out of practical reasons than for food.

In any case, we are in the presence of a cattle which belonged to the monks and that would be cared for by their servants. These herds could be increased through buying additional animals or donations of livestock. Contributions from outside, from markets or hunting, seem to be very sporadic.

A castle: Peñaferruz

The fortified settlement of Peñaferruz (Gijón, Asturias) shows the passing of the time of a possible rural community that lived on a limestone watchtower during the full Middle Age, in order to control a passage which was dominated by the local aristocracy (Gutierrez 1999). Most of the consumed fauna is domestic, preferably sheep (more than half of the remains), and in second place bovins (Adán 1997b), although one should not neglect the contribution of hunted animals towards the complementation of the diet, in this case consisting of wild boars, deer, roebucks, hares, wild goats, etc; these were hunted in a possible forest setting. But the little cattle continues to dominate the everyday consumption in a pronounced rural surrounding where abundant pastures could

be near the zone of habitation. Nearly all the located fauna shows marks on the bones of defleshing, which in turn indicate the last ending of the animals found in the deposit.

Medieval Asturian races

We will centre on the three main species of livestock which here are the bovines, ovine and the porcine.

The bovine is the most important one regarding the volume of remains and the volume of deduced biomass although it is not always like this regarding the number of remains or the minimum number of individuals.

Based on the study of the bone-remains, little information relative to the morphological characteristics of these animals can be obtained, especially if we keep in mind the degree of fragmentation of the material which is often very high. Sometimes the only characteristic one can attend to is the size of the animals. Centring on the bones of the mature individuals, few are those that conserve characteristics that we can evaluate. Judging by this, it is evident that the size of these animals is quite inferior to that of the current autochthonous races. This difference in size is difficult to quantify, due to the already mentioned high fragmentation present in the material.

In their study about the archaeofauna of "Castro de Llagú" (Oviedo), Liesseau and García (2002) expose measures of bovine remains that are very similar to the ones found in the sites that are the object of the present study. These authors deduce for the livestock of their site a height of approximately 115 and 118 cm. It could be therefore deduced that the bovine livestock in Asturias would present a similar size in the medieval time. This fact would coincide fully with the pictorial representations of this time, where these animals appear, as Davis (1989) had already appreciated. This size is inferior to the one that the present-day autochthonous livestock of Asturias present (Álvarez Sevilla 2001). Today's species could be located on height of around 120–130 cm. The difference is even bigger with the present-day cows of Frisian race imported from Holland and very common today in the region.

Not only in the Iberian North but in all of Europe, the size of the bovine livestock increased

beginning from the 18th century due to selective breeding in order to achieve a bigger productivity until reaching the big sizes that they present nowadays.

The ovine livestock is the one that follows in importance to the bovine according to the amount of material. Nevertheless, in some cases, the number of remains is much bigger as in that of the monastery of Cornellana.

Regarding the study of the sheep remains, as in those of the cows, the degree of fragmentation of the material is high enough so as not to allow more deductions than those merely related with the size of the animal. We meet again with individuals very inferior in size to the present-day sheep races that inhabit most of the Asturian region. Nevertheless, the bone-measures of these medieval animals coincide almost in total with those that are present in the autochthonous Asturias sheep denominated "Xalda" (Álvarez Sevilla, pers. com.) that, although almost on the edge of extinction due to the introduction of races of more size coming from other peninsular regions, is today fully recovered. The discovery of bony nuclei of horn that present the typical spiral form of the rams of this race seems to corroborate this fact.

The goats remains proves often very difficult to distinguish from those of sheep. For this reason, sometimes we speak of both animals as a whole. Nevertheless, in none of the three sites we studied would it appear that the goats were an important part of the cattle raising, because no remains with clear evidences of belonging to these animals have been found. Maybe the main cause for this is the fact of the situation of the sites, an environment more favourable for the development of sheep. With these data, we cannot yet make any statement about the race of the existing goat in Asturias during the Middle Age.

We will talk now about the porcine livestock. The remains of pigs are also important, although in different proportions according to the sites. Once again, the fragmentation of the material prevents us from making detailed morphological descriptions. As in the case of bovines and ovines, the amounts of the remains show a more inferior size than the species found nowadays. The difficulty in this case is even bigger because it is not evident whether they belong to domestic pigs or to hunted wild boars. The autochthonous race of Asturi-

an pig is the denominated "Gochu'l país" and it is at the moment on the edge of extinction. Their size is also inferior to the introduced present-day races, so the medieval pigs may belong to this race, although there are no evidences that allow us to confirm this.

Finally, a review of other types of livestock, that although are less frequently found, are also present in the sites.

The remains of horses are uncommon although this does not mean that they were scarce, but rather that the treatment that would be given to their remains would be different as they were not animals whose main interest is the food they can provide. This material shortage does not allow us therefore to speak of races.

Other domestic animals as rabbits, farm birds, dogs and cats are also present, but in very low proportions and in very fragmentary state, so it does not make any sense to try to assign their remains to certain races.

Meat consumption in Asturias: Social valuation and autochthonous races

As we have seen, in Asturias in the medieval phases as well as in the pre-Roman and Roman times (Adán 2001; Liessau/García 2002, 262 ff.) one of the principal contributions to the meat-diet seems to be the bovines. However, one should not forget that some dominions, as in the case of the monastic or aristocratic, were situated in rural zones because of the advantage in the formation of flocks easily shepherded.

The bovines are for consumption, but also for different activities, for example transport, they help in the farm work and were used in economic transactions of sales, interchanges and dowries. Another question which remains to be answered is that of the breed of these animals. What also attracts the attention is the scarce presence of bovines in the medieval documentation (Aguadé 1983, 31), with a predominance consumption of goats, pork and ovines. This seems to fit the description of Est-rabón, when he writes that northern people "eat generally he-goat meat" (3, 3, 7). However, in the few deposits analysed, already since the pre-Roman epoch this prospect would seem to be rather diluted. Would we be then

in the presence of differentiated possessions? That is to say, a use of ovines for consumption and day-to-day exploitation, whereas the bovines are habitually reserved for farm work which would appear to be of a higher necessity?

Once again, we can only be providing first steps and are just beginning to catch a glimpse of as well the races as the dominion and control of the Asturian cattle in the medieval epoch.

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