

Forest animals and hunting in medieval Livonia

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Since hunting almost always took place in the forest, the question of medieval hunting must be considered in relation to research on the composition of the forest fauna of the particular period. Thirty to forty animal species were important in medieval hunting, particularly artiodactyls and fur-bearing animals, of which a few have now become extinct.

Although information about the animals and birds in the forests of Livonia in the 13th – 16th centuries can be found in written historical sources, animal bones obtained in archaeological excavations are still important, as they are for previous periods. The ideas expressed in the paper are in fact based largely on analysis of data on bone material, as well as written historical sources.

In comparison with stock-keeping, hunting was of secondary importance in the economy of the inhabitants of medieval Livonia. This is reflected in written sources and the bone material obtained in archaeological excavations. Comparison of the percentage representation of wild and domestic animal bones from excavated settlements of this period shows that only about 10% belong to wild species (Mugurēvičs 1997, 149). The role of game in the diet of the inhabitants depended on the geographical location of the settlement and on the social status of the inhabitants. In locations close to large tracts of forest, wild animals were still more important than domestic animals.

However, in general in the medieval period wild animals had only a supplementary role in the diet, a fact confirmed by data from 15th – 16th century inspections conducted at Livonian castles (UB, XI, Nr. 1601). These do not provide information about reserves of meat from wild animals, while the inventory of

stores of meat from domestic animals (pigs, cattle and sheep) is quite thorough. If the lack of records about the meat of wild animals at the castles of the Order is to be interpreted, it is necessary to take into account the official position of the leadership of the Teutonic Order on questions of hunting. According to the statutes (Šterns 1969, 65), hunting – particularly with dogs or birds – was forbidden for the brothers of the Order. Only carnivores (wolf, lynx and bear) could be hunted. In later times, hunting of other wild animals was permitted, evidently because of the cold climate in Livonia, the furs being used for clothing. The data from inspections of castles of the Teutonic Order within the state ruled by the Order (former East Prussia) indicate that in the 15th century the Order was maintaining quite large reserves of game in its castles (Ämterbuch 1968, 46, 96, 222). It is thought that this was also the case in the castles of Livonia, because, as shown by analysis of castles in the State of the Teutonic Order, the inspections only recorded preserved game (salted or smoked) (Militzer 1997, 345). Indirect evidence of the use of game at castles comes in the form of finds of wild animals, and this form of evidence from all archaeologically excavated medieval castles of Latvia is analysed in the present paper. These castles were inhabited from the 12th to the 16th century both by native peoples and by the immigrants under the control of the Order or the bishop, the lords of the country. Following the crusades of the 13th century, with the division of the conquered lands of Livonia, hunting rights were also defined (UB, I, Nr. 299, 432) in which the lords had the main role. Later centuries saw ever more common disputes between the lords them-

selves concerning hunting areas in the borderlands of the territories under their rule (UB, VIII, Nr. 1016, 1019; UB, IX, Nr. 637). Correspondence between the local commander of the Order at Kuldīga and the bishop of Couronia in 1465 shows the existence of free hunting (*freye jachtt*), on the basis of old custom, but this did not apply to red deer, roe deer, elk and other large game, where the estate owner held the advantage (*herschop de vorjacht*) (UB, XII, Nr. 293).

On the basis of the above, two groups of forest animals can be distinguished: large game – artiodactyls – which could only be hunted by the landlord, and the smaller animals, the hunting of which was open to peasants. The artiodactyls included the European bison, elk, red deer and wild boar.

Osteometric data indicates that Stone Age European bison (*Bison bonasus* L.) did not differ in proportions from their descendants in the Middle Ages (Calkin 1961, 212–214), their bones being quite widespread in the archaeological sites of the southern part of present-day Latvia, as well as in Lithuania, Poland and Belarus. Bison (*zubr*) and the places where they were hunted / captured (*lobma zubrinnaâ*) are mentioned in documents of the Lithuanian state from the late 15th and first half of the 16th century (LM, kn. 8, 172; kn. 10, 77; kn. 11, 52), which mention protection of the bison and the price of its hide (10 groats). The bison as a rare forest animal served as a gift sent by the Polish king to the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order in 1406 (Militzer 1997, 357). In the early modern era the bison gradually died out because of unfavourable conditions for feeding. In the early 20th century bison were even hunted to extinction in the Białowieżskiej Forest (Więcko 1963, 349), where they were later re-introduced.

Medieval sources indicate that the aurochs (*Bos primigenius* Bojan) occurred in the Baltic region up to the 15th – 16th century, since in the years 1404 – 1409 aurochs (*Aurochsen*) are mentioned as gifts (Militzer 1997, 357), and in 1523 aurochs meat (*aurwilt peth*, *aurnwilpret*) was recorded by inspections at two castles of the Teutonic Order (Tilsit, Stradaunen) (Ämterbuch 1968, 255, 296). It must be mentioned, that palaeozoologists (Calkin 1961, 214) dispute such recent occurrence of aurochs in the Baltic region, because aurochs bones are not found in medieval osteological

material, and it has been suggested that the mentions of aurochs could actually refer to bison. A wild animal of southern latitudes, from which domestic cattle have originated, the aurochs rapidly began to disappear already in the Bronze Age, being in competition for food with domestic cattle.

As can be seen from analyses of wild animal bones, the elk (*Alces alces* L.) remained, as it was in the Iron Age, the most important hunted species, comprising around 40% of game animals. The Lithuanian metrica (LM, kn. 8, 172; kn. 10, 771) mentions elk hunting sites on several occasions in the first half of the 16th century.

Red deer (*Cervus elaphus* L.) and roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus* L.) were hunted in lower numbers in Livonia, so 17th century chroniclers (Curlandia 1924, 26; Fabricii 1848, 440) describe these forest animals as rare. At medieval settlement sites in Latvia red and roe deer each contribute only 2–5%. Reserves of red deer meat (*hirterfleisch*) in several barrels are noted as present in one of the castles of the Teutonic Order (Zinsbuch 1958, 136). This same inspection also mentions wild boar meat (*wiltswynfleisch*) and bear meat (*bernfleisch*). These animals were also hunted in medieval Livonia. The use of wild boar (*Sus scrofa* L.) meat declined with the introduction of the domestic pig and in medieval times only made up 1–2%.

Bones of the brown bear (*Ursus arctos* L.) have been found at all excavated medieval settlement sites. The proportion of bear bones (10%) corresponds to that found in the Iron Age. Sixteenth – 17th century written sources (Škutāns 1974, 170) indicate that bears caused destruction to the fields of the peasants, and so hunting was unrestricted.

Hunting of small fur-bearing animals (beaver, fox, marten and hare) was also important. The valued fur and meat of the beaver (*Castor fiber* L.), as well as the secretion from its genitalia (*castoreum*), an important medicine, was the reason for intensive hunting of this animal. Beaver takes second place after elk in terms of osteological material from excavations (Mugurēvičs 1997, 152). Many indications of the occurrence of beaver in the East Baltic can be found in 16th century documents. For example, from 1599 there is information that many good quality brown and black beavers were hunted in the lakes and the rivers that flowed

into them in the eastern part of Livonia (Jakubowski, Kordzikowski 1915, 159; Škutāns 1974, 174, 342, 355). In 16th century metrica books of the Lithuanian State (LM, kn. 4, 9, 17, 36, 108, 203, 252–254) dozens of mentions can be found of beaver living and breeding sites noted in documents (*bobrovye zony*). That this was an important source of income is shown by the use of the terms beaver-hunting (*bobrovni estvo*) and beaver-hunters (*bobrovniki*), which refers to an occupation concerned solely with catching beavers (*venatio castorum fibrorum*) (LM, kn. 8, Nr. 525; kn. 11, Nr. 15). The furs were used for paying dues (*tributum castorum sui fibrorum*). The important role of these furs is seen in a treaty signed in 1230 between the Teutonic Order and the king of Masovia, which has a special paragraph devoted to rights of beaver hunting in the land of Kulma (Militzer 1997, 336). Relentless beaver hunting was a serious threat to the existence of this species, and as a consequence there is a lack of mentions of beaver in 17th and 18th century documents.

In the eastern part of the Baltic region, alongside beaver, the pine marten (*Martes martes* L.) was also an important animal hunted for its furs. The proportion of marten among the hunted animals was around 10%, and certain sites such as Asote hillfort have shown a particularly large number of bones of pine marten. This means that the pine marten had a particular significance in the lives of the inhabitants of the castle in the 12th – 13th century, stimulating early medieval trade contacts (Šnore 1961, 124). The pine marten is quite often mentioned in 14th – 16th century written sources from Livonia and Lithuania as an important item of trade and feudal dues (*tributum mardurum*) (UB, IV, Nr. 1551; VII, Nr. 579; VIII, Nr. 142; IX, Nr. 598; XI, Nr. 1905; LM, kn. 4, Nr. 9, 17, 108, 252–254; kn. 8, Nr. 525, 526, 529).

Among other hunted fur-bearing animals were hare, squirrel, lynx, wolf etc. Both the brown hare (*Lepus europeus* Pall.) and the blue hare (*Lepus timidus* L.) occur. Sixteenth – 17th century chroniclers noted the great number of hares (*leporum copiosa est multitudo*) (Spekke 1935, 120; Fabricii 1848, 440) and the seasonal changes in fur colour. The *Landtag* of Couronia decreed in 1570 that hares could also be hunted by peasants (observing seasonal restrictions) (Šreinerts 1939, 384).

The fox (*Vulpes vulpes* L.) is represented by only a few percent in the bone material from settlement sites of this period. An exception is the Livonian Order's castle at Rakvere (Paaver 1965, 323 f.), where this species makes up 80% of all forest animals. The fox is mentioned as a hunted animal in 16th–17th century written sources, and the fur, which was highly regarded, had to be handed over to the landlord (Landesordnungen 1707, 32). The Lithuanian metrica documents show that the fox furs obtained as feudal dues were used for making various coats (LM, kn. 564, Nr. 74; kn. 4, Nr. 398), as with pine marten furs (LM, kn. 8, Nr. 574).

The lynx (*Lynx lynx* L.) is poorly represented in medieval bone material, not exceeding 1% of the material (Mugurēvičs 1997, 151). Written sources testify to the presence of lynx in 16th century Livonia (Škutāns 1974, 30 f.) and Lithuania (LM, kn. 564, Nr. 74). Following the decree of the *Landtag* in 1570 lynx furs had to be handed over to the landlord. Since wolf (*Canis lupus* L.) meat was not consumed, their bones are very rarely found in the bone material. Medieval historical sources do, however, testify to their presence in the forests of Livonia (LG I, Nr. 127, 252; II, Nr. 84, 1026), since there are mentions of wolf pits (*fovea luporum*, *wulves kule*) and wolf gardens (*wolffesgarten*), different wolf catching facilities (Strods 1971, 126–131). Foreign visitors testified that the furs of wolves (*lupnia pelle*) were well suited for coats and sleigh blankets (Curlandia 1924, 34 f.).

Birds also had an important place in medieval hunting, including the *galliformes*, the *anseriformes* and the *falconiformes*. Bird bones were poorly represented in the bone material for two reasons. First, because of their small dimensions, they were more susceptible to decay, and secondly bird bones could be eaten by other animals, such as dogs. Among the surviving material, palaeozoologists have identified bones of wood capercaillie, grouse, hazelhen, duck, hawk and others (Mugurēvičs 1997, 153 f.). Medieval written sources note the great abundance of animals and birds (*myriades, ungläublich viel*) (Curlandia 1924, 34 f.), but rarely describe particular species. In the granting of fiefs in the 15th – 16th century sites for bird-catching (*vogelye, avium aucupiis, lovy ptašnymi*) are mentioned (LG II, Nr. 385; LM, kn. 8, Nr. 544, kn. 10, Nr. 1–10). Hunting often involved tame hawks which were kept by

the lord's keeper of hawks (*sokol'niki gospodarskii*), as seen from the Lithuanian metrica (LM, kn. 6, Nr. 44, 234).

Analysis of the recovered material indicates that in the 13th–14th centuries artiodactyls were hunted to a larger extent, because in the frequent wars during this time it was necessary to compensate for plundered livestock by hunting large animals for food. Later, with the intensification of trading contacts, more fur-bearing animals were hunted, and this led to a rapid decrease in their numbers in late medieval times. The tendency seen from the Bronze Age onwards to give more attention to domestic stock led in medieval times to the rapid decrease in food availability for large wild animals: bison and wild horse became extinct, and the number of wild boar declined.

In late medieval times and the early modern era, firearms came to be employed for hun-

ting, and this became a privilege of the ruling class. The *Landtags* forbade the hunting of large forest animals by the peasants. The peasants hunted using traps, nooses and nets, and they had to give up the furs of the hunted animals to the landowners for a paltry recompense. Order in the forests was maintained by the forest and hunting master (*Forstmeister*), who was appointed by the government and from the 17th century onwards was under the governor-general. His duty was to protect the state forests and ensure that hunting did not take place without permission from the land- or forest-owner. It was the task of this official to ensure the participation of peasants in wolf and bear hunts organised by the government, and to make sure that hunting weapons were available and that so-called wolf-pits were dug (Mugurēvičs 1997, 154).

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