FOOD, STATUS AND RELIGION IN ENGLAND IN THE MIDDLE AGES: AN ARCHAEOZOOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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"It's not just pork. It's power."
Alan BENNETT, *A Private Function.*

Popular images of diet and eating in the Middle Ages present the rich eating enormous quantities of food at sumptuous banquets while the poor are half starved on a diet of bread, vegetables and scraps of bacon. There is documentary evidence to show that there were indeed differences in the diet of those at various social levels, particularly affecting the proportion of meat in the diet (DYER, 1983). And, the rich did have banquets, where they consumed not only large amounts of food, but a wide range of more exotic species. Large numbers of swans, peacocks, cranes, rabbits and kids were prepared for the coronation feast of Edward I in 1274 (BOND, 1984: 126) and the coronation feast of Henry VI in 1429 included beef, mutton, pork, venison, rabbits, chickens, partridge, peacock, cygnet, heron, quails, snipe, larks, and curlew (MYERS, 1969: 1160).

The nature of archaeological evidence is such that it can shed little light on the relative proportions of meat and vegetable food consumed. Nor can deposits of bones resulting from a single feast be readily distinguished from the accumulation of bones from many more mundane meals. Archaeology, or more specifically, archaeozoology can however be extremely useful in demonstrating the general trends of food consumption. This brief paper attempts to show the broad differences in the animals chosen as food by those at higher and lower levels of society in England in the Middle Ages, and discusses these in relation to the rural economy and the attitudes and customs of the contemporary Church. For the purposes of this discussion, the term medieval is taken to mean the period from the Norman Conquest to the end of the fifteenth century.

The archaeozoological evidence for animal husbandry and eating habits comes from faunal remains recovered from excavations of a wide range of medieval sites in England. Urban sites have generally received the most attention, but there have been investigations of castles, palaces, hunting lodges, monasteries and villages. It is the bone refuse from the castles and palaces that will most clearly reflect the diet of those of high status, and the towns and in particular the rural settlements that of those of lower social status. It is however recognised that the food debris in each of these types of context is likely to have derived from meals consumed by a number of people at different social levels. This is particularly true of the towns, where the poor, the comfortably off and the lords may have lived in relatively close proximity, and, more importantly, have dumped their rubbish in the same place (ARMITAGE, 1977; KEENE, 1982).

Nonetheless, looking first of all at the relative percentages of the three main domestic animals, cattle, sheep and pigs, clear and consistent differences emerge between the three groups of sites (Fig. 1). The most pronounced differences lie in the relative proportions of sheep and pig bones. High status sites have, on average, rather lower percentages of sheep bones, but rather higher percentages of pig bones than urban sites or villages. This latter fact is perhaps surprising, since the pig is traditionally and popularly viewed as a peasant animal.

Domestic bird bones frequently form a part of the bone assemblages from medieval sites. Chickens are the best represented, but geese also seem to have been important, and at some locations, usually in towns, they are as common as fowl bones, or even, occasionally, the

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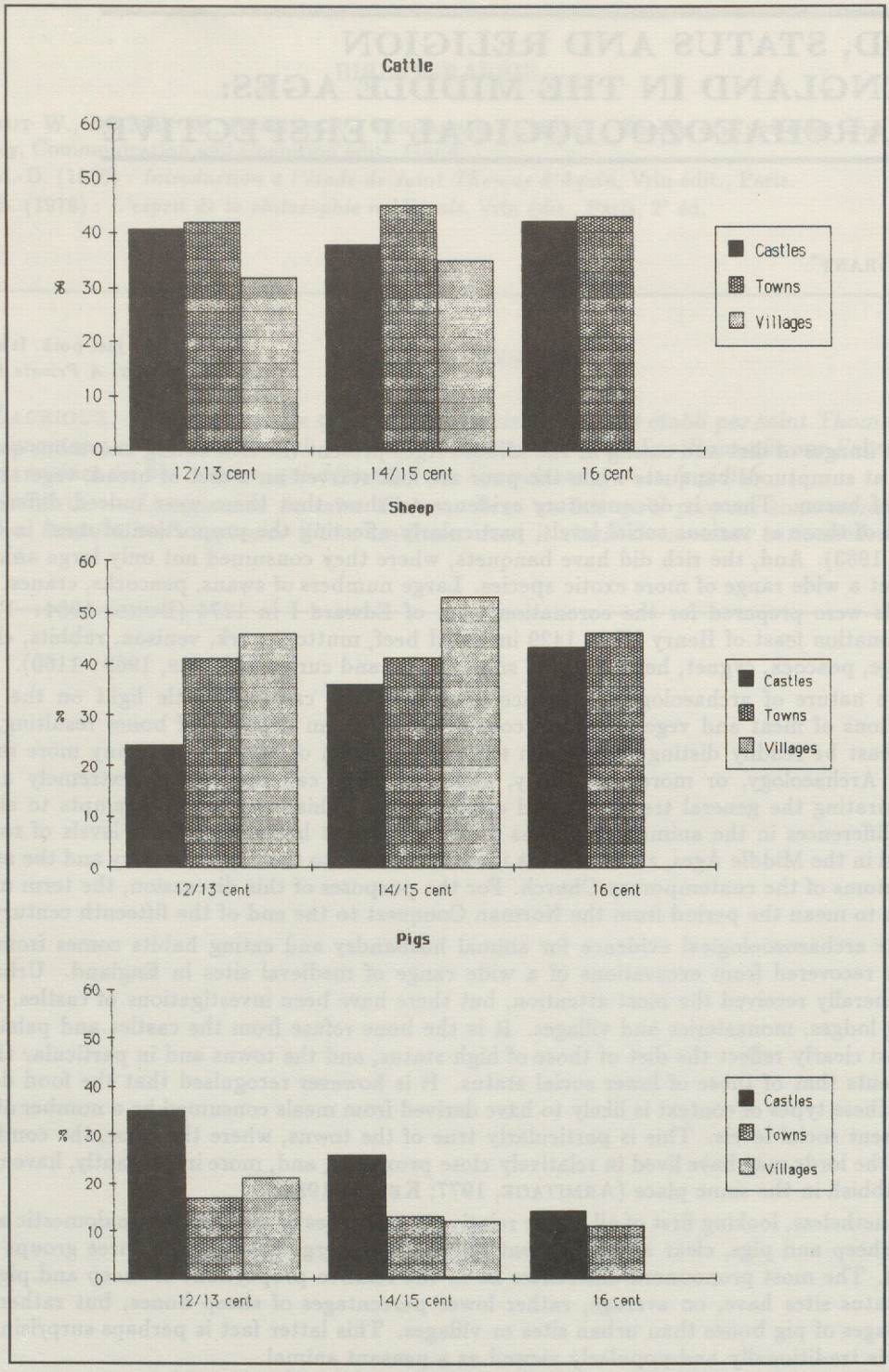

Fig. 1

Averages percentages of cattle, sheep and pig bones in castles and palaces, towns and villages. (Percentages are expressed as a proportion of the total number of cattle, sheep and pig bones recovered).

predominant species. Geese are perhaps better represented in towns because unlike chickens, they can be driven to market over quite long distances, while chickens have to be transported. Percentages of domestic bird bones are higher in high status sites than in towns. Unfortunately, there is not enough evidence available from ordinary rural sites to be able to make comparisons with these for all periods (Fig. 2).

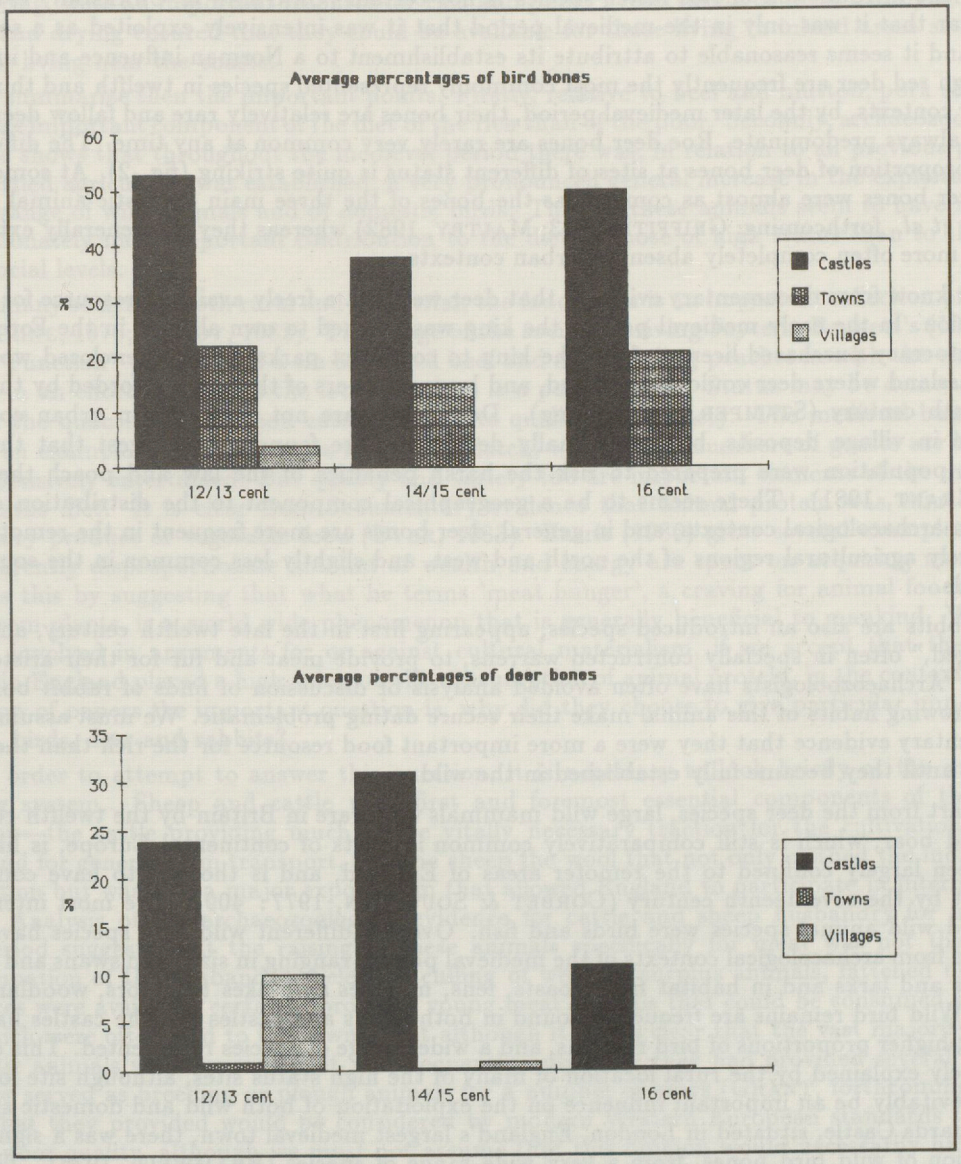

Fig. 2

Averages percentages of bird bones (wild and domestic) and of deer bones in castles and palaces, towns and villages. (Percentages are expressed as a proportion of the total number of cattle, sheep and pig bones recovered).

A striking feature of almost all medieval bone assemblages from England is the number of bones from wild animal species. Whereas in some parts of continental Europe, the wild animals appear to have made a significant contribution to the meat consumed by those with settled agricultural

economies, in England, in all periods from the Iron Age to the Saxon period, the contribution made to the human diet by the flesh of wild animals was in most instances negligible (GRANT, 1981).

The wild animals commonly represented in the medieval period can be subdivided into what can be termed "managed" wild animals and the truely wild species. The "managed" wild animals include the two native deer species, the red and the roe, and the introduced fallow. The precise date of the introduction of this latter species is not certain (CHAPMAN & CHAPMAN, 1975) but it is clear that it was only in the medieval period that it was intensively exploited as a source of meat, and it seems reasonable to attribute its establishment to a Norman influence and impetus. Although red deer are frequently the most commonly represented species in twelfth and thirteenth century contexts, by the later medieval period, their bones are relatively rare and fallow deer bones almost always predominate. Roe deer bones are rarely very common at any time. The differences in the proportion of deer bones at sites of different status is quite striking (fig. 2). At some castle sites deer bones were almost as common as the bones of the three main domestic animal species (JONES *et al.*, forthcoming; GRIFFITH, 1983; MALTBY, 1982) whereas they are generally extremely rare or more often completely absent in urban contexts.

We know from documentary evidence that deer were not a freely available resource for all the population. In the early medieval period, the king was deemed to own all deer in the Forest, but the aristocracy purchased licences from the king to construct parks, areas of enclosed woodland and grassland where deer could be confined, and large numbers of these are recorded by the early fourteenth century (STAMPER, forthcoming). Deer bones are not only rare in urban contexts, but also in village deposits, but occasionally deer bones are found that suggest that the local peasant population were prepared to risk the harsh penalties of the law and poach the lords' deer (GRANT, 1981). There seems to be a geographical component to the distribution of deer bones in archaeological contexts, and in general, deer bones are more frequent in the remoter, less intensively agricultural regions of the north and west, and slightly less common in the south and midlands.

Rabbits are also an introduced species, appearing first in the late twelfth century, and were "managed," often in specially contructed warrens, to provide meat and fur for their aristocratic owners. Archaeozoologists have often avoided analysis or discussion of finds of rabbit bones, as the burrowing habits of this animal make their secure dating problematic. We must assume from documentary evidence that they were a more important food resource for the rich than the poor, at least until they became fully established in the wild.

Apart from the deer species, large wild mammals were rare in Britain by the twelfth century. The wild boar, which is still comparatively common in parts of continental Europe, is likely to have been largely confined to the remoter areas of England, and is thought to have completly died out by the seventeenth century (CORBET & SOUTHERN, 1977: 409). The most intensively exploited wild animal species were birds and fish. Over 75 different wild bird species have been recorded from archaeological contexts of the medieval period, ranging in size from swans and cranes to pipits and larks and in habitat from coasts, fens, marshes and lakes to moors, woodland and towns. Wild bird remains are frequently found in both towns and castles but the castles have, on average, higher proportions of bird remains, and a wider range of species represented. This cannot be entirely explained by the rural location of many of the high status sites, although site location must inevitably be an important influence on the exploitation of both wild and domestic species. At Baynards Castle, situated in London, England's largest medieval town, there was a significant proportion of wild bird bones, from a very wide range of species (BRAMWELL, 1975). There is no clear and consistent reflection of status in the particular bird species found. For example, the remains of swans, which documentary evidence shows to have been high status birds, have as often been found in urban as in castle contexts.

The shooting and trapping of birds was controlled on the lords' land, although licences to capture birds might be granted to those who could pay the price (MUNBY, 1985: 289). Peasants had free access to the birds on common or waste land, but there is no evidence that they made extensive use of this resource. However, given the poverty of the archaeozoological evidence from village sites is probable that we do not have an accurate picture of the use of wild birds for food by the rural population.

Because of the enormous problems of preservation and recovery, it is almost impossible to use archaeozoological evidence to assess the proportion of animal protein contributed to the diet by fish, but it is clear that there was a very marked increase in the exploitation of both freshwater and in particular marine fish, from at least the tenth century. Freshwater fish were not freely available to all classes of society. Many of the freshwater fish consumed must have come from the artificially constructed fishponds that are a feature of most castles and monastic sites, and river fisheries could also be under the control of the lords. However, marine fish, and in particular cod and herring, were an important resource for rich and poor. Preservation of these fish by smoking, salting and drying ensured that they could be available for those living in inland areas as well as for those living near the coasts.

To summarize then the important points. Firstly, relative to beef and mutton, pork seems to be a more important component of the diet of the rich than of the poor. Secondly, archaeozoological evidence shows that throughout the medieval period there was, in relation to all previous periods since settled agriculture was established, a very pronounced general increase in the exploitation of a wide range of wild animals and of domestic birds. Thirdly, these animals seem to have made a proportionately more important contribution to the diet of those of high status than to those at lower social levels.

In many societies, both rural and industrial, the food eaten is an important reflection of status (DE GARINE, 1976; GOODY, 1982). The image of the socially striving Joyce in Bennett's (1984) "A Private Function" putting half a tin of corned beef and a tin of cling peaches in with the waste for the pig in an effort to impress the local worthies is a powerful one. Status may be demonstrated both in the quantity of the food eaten, and in its quality and variety. The medieval banquet is clearly an example of the former—a form of potlatch, where large numbers of guests are lavishly and expensively entertained. But quality and variety too are important elements of the medieval high status diet. It is clear from documentary evidence that animal protein was valued more than dairy produce or vegetable food (DYER, 1983). Harris (1986) gives several examples where an apparently disproportionate amount of wealth and energy are spent on acquiring meat, and explains this by suggesting that what he terms 'meat hunger', a craving for animal foods above those from plants, is a world wide phenomenon that is generally beneficial to mankind. Without getting involved in arguments for or against cultural materialism, if we accept that the upper classes in England placed a high value on the consumption of animal protein, in the context of this collection of papers the important question is, why did they choose to give particular importance to pigs, birds, deer and rabbits?

In order to attempt to answer this question, it is necessary to look briefly at the medieval farming system. Sheep and cattle were first and foremost essential components of the rural economy—the cattle providing much of the vitally necessary traction for the cultivation of the fields and for general farm transport, and the sheep the wool that not only clothed the indigenous population but was also a major export item that allowed England to participate in international trade. Analysis of the archaeozoological evidence for cattle and sheep husbandry for much of this period suggests that the raising of these animals specifically for meat was not the major preoccupation of the husbandry. Selective culling of weak or surplus animals, fattened up if the resources were available, certainly provided young meat animals that could be consumed at home but which were often sold to the towns. But although it seems clear that the vast majority of the domestic animals were consumed, it was frequently only after they had provided several clips of wool, or served as breeding or plough animals for a number of years (GRANT, forthcoming). The meat that they provided would be considered by modern Western European standards to be of rather poor quality, although we must not assume that this opinion would necessarily have been shared by the medieval population.

The pig, however, is an animal whose primary domestic function is as a producer of meat and the evidence for pig rearing shows that it was focused on the production of human food. However, the most important food resource, both in terms of the total amount of calories produced, and for its contribution to the diet of the medieval population as a whole, was the cereal crop.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the population of England rose dramatically. Estimations have been made of a two and a half to fourfold increase from 1086 to 1300 (PLATT, 1978: 92). Providing food for this enlarged population, in an era when productivity showed no parallel increase, necessitated the expansion of the arable into land that had previously been

animal pasture. The sheep and cattle were pushed onto the areas of poorer grassland, and yet large numbers of mature animals were needed as providers of traction and manure for agriculture, and wool for cash revenue. With the limited resources available, it would not have been possible to raise large numbers of cattle and sheep specifically for meat at the same time as maintaining sufficiently large herds and flocks of adult animals.

A common characteristic of all the animal species that occur in higher proportions at the high status sites is that they are exploited for meat as a primary, rather than as a secondary product. With the exception of pigs, which produce manure, none provide products of major economic importance while alive. And, eating wild species, such as birds and deer, was a way of exploiting, at least indirectly, land that could not easily be cultivated or used as permanent animal pasture. The institution and maintenance of forest laws showed that the value of those areas was clearly understood, and that those with power wished to ensure that they gained maximum and exclusive benefit from them. The one wild animal resource that appears to have been, in principle at least, freely available to both rich and poor, were sea fish. Although the cost of these fish limited their availability for the lower social orders, the sea could not be fenced, and so high value, in social terms, was accorded to the freshwater fish whose acquisition could be controlled.

The kings and their lords frequently owned a number of estates that could be widely dispersed throughout England, and in order to maintain control over their land, and reap the maximum benefits from them, they travelled from one to another, with large households. The castles may only have been occupied by their owners for a relatively short period of each year, but during this time, they and their followers and guests would expect to eat lavishly and extravagantly. The provision of very large quantities of food for a very short period would have been extremely difficult and damaging if the domestic animal population were the only source. Deer from the parks and other wild animals, together with pigs, whose vigorous reproductive capacity would enable depleted numbers to be rapidly replaced, would have made it possible to support these occasional, but expensive visits.

The status of many wild animals was reinforced by the manner in which they were captured and killed. Deer hunting was an important and valued leisure activity. Horses and dogs were trained and maintained for the chase, and the "excoriation" of the deer was an activity with ritual significance (VON STRASSBURG, 1960: 78; BARRON, 1974). Some wild birds and even hares and rabbits were caught with falcons, and the training and keeping of these birds could be an intensive and timeconsuming activity (WHITE, 1963).

The expenses involved in the maintenance of deer parks and fish ponds and the capture of wild animals were by and large labour expenses, and in the early part of the Middle Ages at least, labour was plentiful and relatively cheap. However, even in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when labour was scarce, the supply of wild animal food could clearly be maintained, and in fact there was general increase in proportions of deer bones and bird bones at many high status sites in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Fig. 2).

There was a decline in the proportion of pig bones at this time, but this was part of a general decline and pig percentages are still generally higher in castles than in towns (Fig. 1). This may be related to change in the availability of appropriate food. In suitable environments, pigs can find a great deal of their own food, and will convert otherwise inedible or even poisonous vegetable matter into high class protein. Where suitable natural resources or waste vegetable and cereal products are not available, pigs must compete for food with other, more useful animals or even humans. In the thirteenth century, the anonymous writer of the Senechaucy advised the keeping of pigs only in manors where they could be self supporting, and warned that "he who will keep pigs throughout the year at the expense of the grange will loose as much as he will gain" (OSCHINSKY, 1971). However, it is clear that despite the importance of woodland pannage for the seasonal fattenings of pigs, differences in the proportions of pigs at different sites cannot be explained merely by reference to local proximity to woodland areas. In fact the traditional equation of woodland and pigs has been shown to be an oversimplistic view of the management of pigs in the medieval period. Pigs seemed to have increased their contribution of meat to the diet over a period when the amount of woodland in England was declining (GRANT, forthcoming). Biddick's (1984) analysis of pig husbandry on the Peterborough Abbey estates in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries showed that a large amount of grain and legumes were fed to the estate pigs. The increased production of grain in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries meant that there was an increased amount of cereal waste

and stubble, some of which could be used to feed pigs. The landowners made large profits from their manors, a part of which could be diverted to the production of meat.

The early fourteenth century was a period of crisis in England, as in much of Europe. Bad weather, poor harvests and epidemics of the Black Death lead to a considerable reduction of the human and the animal population, and areas previously colonised for arable were abandoned. The increased availability of better pasture may have made the keeping of pigs relatively less and the raising of sheep and cattle for meat relatively more profitable. Certainly by the fifteenth century, there is documentary evidence for the appearance of the butcher-grazier, who leased land in the countryside for fattening the cattle that supplied his urban business (DYER, 1983: 211), although it is sheep that appear from the archaeozoological evidence to be replacing pigs for meat (Fig. 1).

What of the role of religion? While the Christian church rejected dietary laws as a means of separation and establishment of religious identity, dietary regulations were a part of Christian religious practice, tied to concepts of both fast and abstinence. Fasting is the complete or partial abstention from food, and was a very early part of the Christian faith, being recommended by Christ (for example, *Luke*, 4:2; *Matthew*, 6:16–18). On fast days, no food was to be eaten, initially until after sunset. By the medieval period the fast was permitted to be broken at None (around 3 p.m.) in many religious orders, and it was monastic practice that provided the example for general custom. However, it was abstinence, the total avoidance of certain classes of food, that had the most significant effect on consumption. While fast days were usually also days of abstinence, other days could also be days of abstinence alone. By the medieval period, abstinence was practised by the general population on up to three days a week and throughout Lent. The laws regarding abstinence were generally unwritten laws and were subject to local variation. This is important, and meant that they could reflect or even influence eating habits and therefore animal husbandry. In the early church, flesh meat and meat products, together with milk, eggs, butter and cheese were all proscribed, but dispensations led to the exception of milk, eggs and milk products by the ninth century (*NCE*, 1979, 8:847). The Rule of St. Benedict proscribed the meat from "quadrupeds," and although the precise interpretation of this was a matter of argument, as a general rule the flesh of birds, and of course of fish, were considered to be lawful (KNOWLES, 1963). The effect of these dietary regulations was an encouragement towards a diversification of food resources, away from the domestic quadrupeds and towards birds and in particular fish. The vast resources of the sea surrounding England had previously been very much underexploited, but became an extremely important source of protein to feed the rapidly expanding rural and urban populations. The influence of the Church in the medieval period may have been sufficiently strong to provide the necessary checks to prevent the premature selling of sheep and cattle for meat before they had served their other vital functions as breeding animals and as part of the farming system. Later, the state had to intervene. In the sixteenth century the slaughter of animals by butchers was restricted by law. In 1532, an Act of Parliament prohibited the killing of calves under two years old, and similar prohibitions were repeated right through to the eighteenth century (JONES, 1976: 141). And, despite the reformation, an Act of Parliament of 1548 ordered the abstinence from flesh meat on "all days formerly accounted fast days," giving as the reason that it was "for the better subduing of the body to the soul and the flesh to the spirit ... (and) also for the preservation of the breed of cattle, the encouragement of mariners and the increase of shipping" (MACLEAN, 1932: 247).

Analysis of archaeozoological evidence from the medieval period in England demonstrates clear differences in the meat diet of those of different levels of social standing. There was a general and marked increase in the exploitation of a wide range of wild animal resources, which can be seen, in the case of fish and birds, to be encouraged and supported by the dietary regulations imposed on believers by the Church. The rich reinforced their social status by the consumption of much larger amounts of meat than were available to the lower social orders. But they were only able to satisfy this desire by turning in particular to those animals, pigs, deer and a wide range of other wild species that were not essential to the rural economy.

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