

CONFERENCE REVIEW

Consuming Passions and Patterns of Consumption, McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research and Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge, 20th September 1997

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With the recent rush of 'consumption' studies in the social sciences, it is hardly surprising that this theme has been picked up by archaeologists. What is perhaps odd, however, is length of time it has taken for those who focus on the evidence of diet in the past to move beyond the traditional questions of acquisition or production to consider the wider meanings of animals and plants, and even of 'food' itself.

It was to encourage this reorientation that Preston Miracle and Nicky Milner (Cambridge University) organized this one-day meeting in Cambridge, intended as a forum for the airing of ideas on consumption applied (mainly) through zooarchaeological studies.

In his introduction, Preston Miracle noted how zooarchaeological interpretations tended to overemphasize the so-called 'economic' uses of animals in archaeology, and stressed the need for broadening enquiry to encompass other aspects of animal treatment. He called for 'new questions' to be posed and a more anthropological, social perspective to be applied to bioarchaeology. Later, he asked how we might get at ideas such as *cuisine* for more distant periods (Palaeolithic and Mesolithic), rather than resorting to the ecologically-driven or dietarily functional explanations of subsistence which are currently the norm. Yannis Hamilakis went further, and reminded us of the richness of the subject of consumption. He stressed how consumption can be a means of communication, of display, of expressing power; it can have ritual roles, gender implications, an ability to intoxicate, and multiple meanings.

Given such an understanding, the fullest archaeological studies should demand the consideration of meanings - the style and social context, as well as the empirical results of acts of consumption.

History and anthropology make it clear that ignoring 'consumption' in favour of 'subsistence' is simply to miss a large part of the story. Finbar McCormick gave a fascinating insight into the various joints of meat served to nobles and their vassals in *coe* hospitality feasts in early Medieval Ireland, showing how each rank had their own exclusive meal, although this information is derived entirely from textual evidence. The single ethnographic study was Hamish Forbes' examination of the role of wheat and oil storage in a modern Greek village, in which he cautioned against any simple correlation between production, consumption and storage features. Lin Foxhall used a brilliant example of the trade in, and diverse uses of, olive oil in Archaic and Classical Greece to discuss the complexities of consumption, and introduced the concept of *desire* for certain (particularly luxury) goods. She showed how goods

might define groups and link them symbolically to a wider world; hence, demand is clearly based on much more than a simple lack of availability.

But what about bones? The excellent paper by Umberto Albarella and Dale Serjeantson examined possible modes of consumption through their re-examination of the animal bone assemblage from the British Neolithic site of Durrington Walls. They showed how a careful analysis of bone modification signatures (e.g. the evidence of preservation, gnawing, cut marks, fracturing, burning and wounds) could be used to infer that large parts of pig carcasses were roasted on fires. They then went further to ask whether this practice could result from large gatherings of people ceremonially feasting on pigs, and whether activities such as baiting or stunning pigs before the kill could explain the healed wounds on their limb-bones and the embedded flint implements.

Several speakers discussed the potential for studying social status through animal bone assemblages, with varying results. Annie Grant argued that pig bones are more common at high status sites in the British Iron Age, Roman and Medieval periods, and hence pigs could be seen as a luxury food, despite being efficient feeders and thus easy to raise. In other cases, however (e.g. deer in Medieval England), rarity was taken to reflect high status, while absence of a particular species might be seen in terms of avoidance or taboo. Clearly, contextual information is needed to interpret proportions of taxa. Nicola Murray's attempt to explore social status through midden deposits at Medieval sites in Scotland proved difficult, since the discard practices and subsequent mixing of deposits obliterated any patterning that might result from differential consumption between status groups. Tony Legge suggested that the presence of hunted animals at the Bronze Age agricultural site of Moncin in Spain reflected social relations between groups. He argued that the high numbers of infant deer bones resulted from targetting this category for their spotted hides. Together with the furs of the lynx, wild cat and badger, deer hides were being traded with lowland farmers as high status animal products from the forest - a convincing scenario.

Marsha Levine's examination of horse cull profiles from Neolithic Botai in Kazakhstan was interesting in itself, but did not really address social issues (except for a passing thought on the wastefulness of killing large numbers of animals). On the more methodological side, Alan Outram's rigorous study of bone fracture marks gave much-needed new criteria for identifying the extraction of fat.

With such a stimulating set of papers it was a pity that more time was not given to discussion, although there was a chance for reflection at the end of the day with the two discussants' comments, which were well worth waiting for. Peter Rowley-Conwy thought that while consumption studies could suffer from an inability to get at categories of meaning, zooarchaeology has some advantage, since it deals with 'natural' categories, and hence has a methodological 'yardstick'. Martin Jones, too, highlighted the importance of categories in interpretation and questioned the swing from the processualists' emphasis on biological categories, to the post-processual emphasis on socially defined ones; he thought it productive to give equal consideration to both views.

The day was a considerable success in that most papers gave serious consideration to activities beyond production and in many cases showed how consumption activities could be argued to drive those of production. I imagine that most left Cambridge (that former hot-bed of palaeoeconomy) feeling that any future study which focused solely on food acquisition would lead to rather impoverished explanations.