

BIRD REMAINS IN ROMAN GRAVES

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ABSTRACT:In burials dating to the Roman period birds, as well as other animals, are found included as grave goods. Such birds are mainly domestic fowl and were often prepared as a meal for the dead. Any relationship between such gifts of food and the terracotta or metal bird figurines that have also been found in graves, is suggested to be unlikely. The fact that chickens are, after pig, the most frequently recovered animals from grave deposits, may well give a totally wrong impression as to the original animal composition of the food given to the deceased. In general, grave gifts of domestic fowl were given to both men and women in similar quantities. The suggestion that chicken was used as a feminine symbol within the burial ritual, must be rejected.

KEYWORDS: ROMAN PERIOD, CEMETERY, ARCHAEOZOOLOGY, BURIAL PRACTICE, GRAVE GIFT, BIRDS, DOMESTIC FOWL

RESUMEN:En enterramientos de época romana se recuperan aves, además de otros animales como ofrendas. La mayoría de las aves son gallinas que se preparaban normalmente como alimento funerario. Parece poco probable la relación que se ha llegado a postular entre estas ofrendas culinarias y las figuras aviares metálicas o de terracota también recuperadas en tumbas. El hecho de que las gallinas, sean, tras el cerdo, la especie animal más frecuente en estas tumbas posiblemente no sea más que una evidencia engañosa de lo que en realidad ocurría. En general, las ofrendas de pollo parecen haberse dado a varones y hembras por igual. Carece de base, por tanto, la hipótesis de que los restos de gallina servirían como símbolos femeninos en los rituales funerarios.

PALABRAS CLAVE: PERIODO ROMANO, CEMENTERIO, ARQUEOZOOLOGIA, PRACTICAS FUNERARIAS, OFRENDAS FUNERARIAS, AVES, GALLINA

INTRODUCTION

Animal bones are found in human graves in almost every excavation of a Roman cemetery. A large number of these bones are from birds (Figure 1). In this article, an attempt has been made to answer some of the questions concerning both the occurrence and the role of these birds within the burial context. For instance, which birds were deposited as grave gifts and what, if any, was the relationship between these birds and the bird-shaped figurines that have also been found in graves.

The validity of two statements in particular concerning the role of chicken in the food offering given to the deceased will be considered. Firstly, that domestic fowl were the second most important animal to be included in graves and secondly, that because domestic fowl is more frequently associated with female graves, it should be interpreted as a feminine symbol.

BIRDS IN ROMAN GRAVES

There are two different kinds of birds that are found in Roman graves: the real birds and the figurines. Since a relationship between the two has been suggested, the latter will also be briefly discussed below.

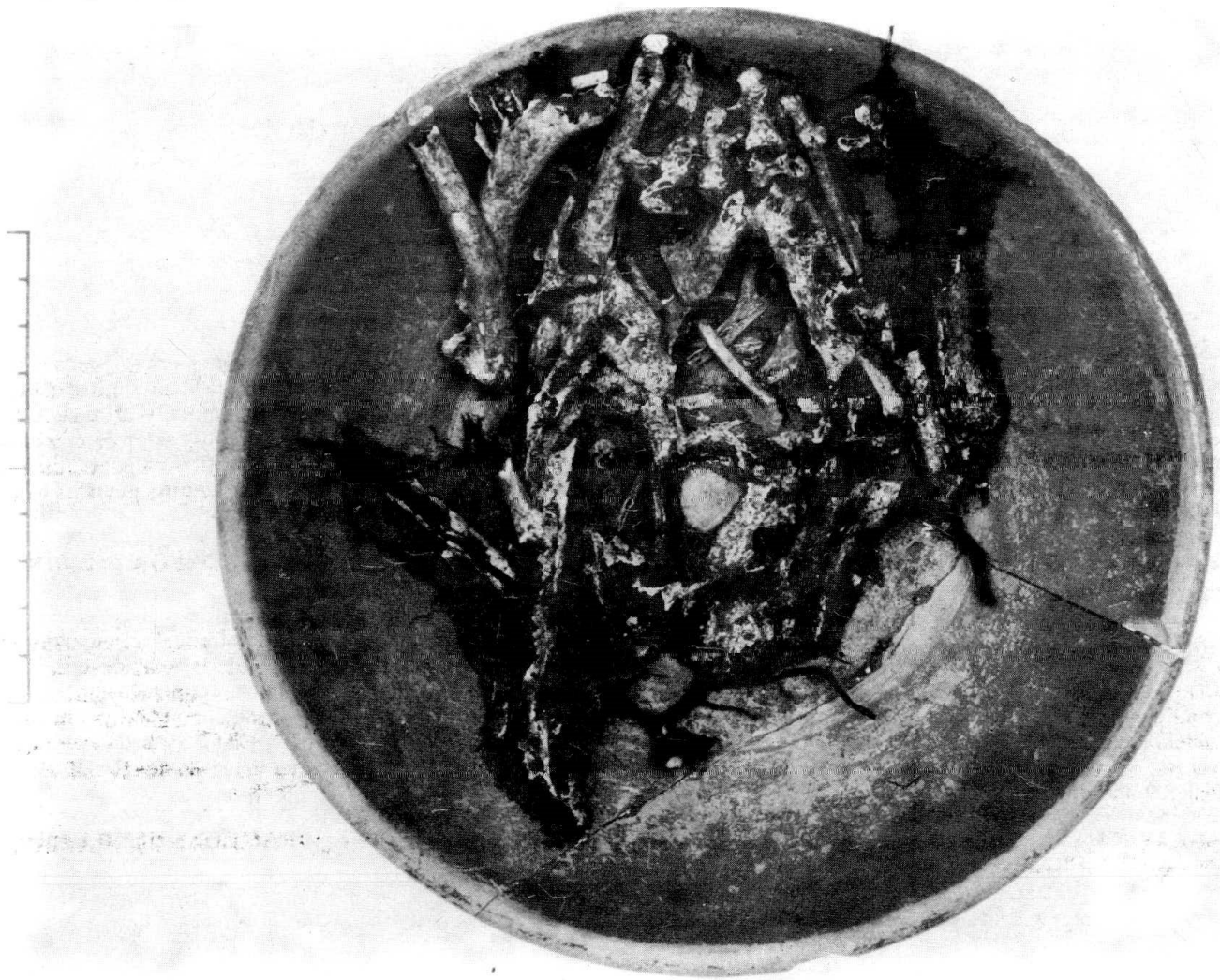


FIGURE 1 - Terra sigillata (Semian Ware) dish from a 4th century cemetery at Nijmegen, containing the articulated skeleton of a domestic fowl.

In several cemeteries, metal or terracotta animal figurines have been found deposited in graves. Van Boekel (1986), who surveyed the evidence for terracotta figurines in the Netherlands, mentions that, besides mammals such as lion, horse, sheep and dog, bird figurines have also been retrieved. These birds include cocks and hens, as well as doves and other bird-like figurines. One of Van Boekel's conclusions, based on the study of Dutch and other material, is that the different types of animal terracottas cannot be interpreted as indicators for the age and sex of the deceased. Their function is uncertain. The figurines may well have been placed in the graves as offerings to the deities of whom they were symbolic; perhaps as a substitute for a living sacrifice. The dove, for instance, is associated with the goddess Venus and the cock with the god Mercury, the guider of the spirits of the deceased to the Underworld (Van Boekel, 1986: 155, 163; Toynbee, 1973: 257). Another assumption is that the statuettes of animals were used as cheaper substitutes for the food that was normally given to the dead to aid their journey to the Underworld (Van Boekel, 1983: 239; 1986: 155). In both cases, either as the substitute for a sacrifice, or the substitute for a meal, there remains a link with the remains of real animals found in the burials. If this statement was true, then we should expect terracotta images of pigs as well as those of sheep and birds, since pig bones are frequently found in graves. This, however, is not the case. On the contrary, there are animal species represented

amongst the terracotta figurines, such as dog and horse, that were hardly ever, if at all, used as sacrificial animals in the Roman period, nor as animals for consumption. For dogs, there is certainly no evidence to suggest they were used as such. As far as the horse is concerned, there is very little conclusive evidence that it was ever eaten, even on a moderate scale (Luff, 1982: 248). Indications that horses were used as offerings are also rare and rather insubstantial (Kyll, 1966). Even though horse remains are being found in Roman cemeteries, they were probably never generally part of the funeral ritual (Lauwerier & Hessing, 1993). The conclusion must therefore be that in regard to pigs, dogs and horses, no relationship exists between the terracottas and the real animals found in graves. The terracotta figurines of horses and dogs must have fulfilled some other function than that represented by pig meat. Following on from this, it would seem equally unlikely that any relationship existed between terracottas of birds and real birds. The conclusion must be that the bird figurines also fulfilled another function in the burial ritual and were no substitutes for sacrificial animals or for the meals comprising fowl.

There are several different situations in which the remains of real birds, like those of other animals, occur in cemeteries. Firstly, there are burnt animal remains that were cremated with the human remains on the pyre and afterwards collected for deposition in the grave (e.g. Mackensen, 1978). Whether the collection of these animal bones was intentional or not, is uncertain. The articulated remains of unburnt animals were certainly intentionally interred. These occur both in cremation and inhumation graves (e.g. Grünewald, 1990: 65, 77). Clearly buried as grave gifts are the bones found in vessels. Whenever bones are found loose in the grave, there is always the possibility that they were not the remains of meat given to the dead, but were rather scattered bones that had accidentally fallen into the grave during the digging of the pit (e.g. Wahl & Kokabi, 1988).

Where bird bones from burials have been identified, they are mostly from domestic fowl (Lauwerier, 1983; 1988; Philpott, 1991). Only in exceptional cases are other species found, such as woodcock at Milland (Jones, 1978), three geese at Oudenburg (Mertens & Van Impe, 1971), one goose at Stettfeld (Wahl & Kokabi, 1988), a goose and a song bird at Courrox (Kaufman, 1976; Martin-Kilcher, 1976: 77), an eider duck at Neuss (Härke, 1980; Reichstein, 1980) and a small corvid at Avenches (Olive, 1987). The species composition of birds found in graves resembles those from settlements: mainly chicken, with some goose, duck or other birds, like song birds.

It is an arguable question whether the bones are the remnants of meat given to the deceased to feed the dead body, or if they only had a symbolic meaning in feeding the immortal soul, but in either case the form is most probably a meal. In the case of cremated remains, the interpretation of the bones as a meal is not so clear, since the bones would have been collected together with the human remains, thereby removing them from their original position in the grave ritual. Besides this, the bones were often only collected just partly. In most of the above-mentioned publications, the indications that point to the bones representing meals is fairly clear. In most cases the bones are found arranged as if representing a normal dish on vessels that are often found together with other pottery vessels and flagons. In many cases the meatless feet of the chicken have been cut off (e.g. Keller, 1971, 1979; Lauwerier, 1988; Wahl & Kokabi, 1988). Evidence is sometimes found for cut marks on the distal ends of the tibiotarsi that indicate the removal of the feet (e.g. Wahl & Kokabi, 1987). Often the head is cut off (e.g. Lauwerier, 1988). This removal of feet and head is done in the same way as we would do nowadays with our fried chicken. A picture of fowl prepared in this way can be seen on the decorated bronze lid from Mundelsheim, dating to the 2nd or 3rd century AD (Paret, 1938).

BIRDS AND THE MEAL OF THE DECEASED

Animal remains in graves are interesting because they give an insight into the way in which men perceived the after-life. The presence of a meal in the grave suggests that the deceased, or his immortal soul, had such a form that it had to be fed, at least symbolically. Apart from this aspect, the bones are also interesting from a culinary point of view.

The bones of domestic fowl are the second most frequently-occurring animal bones in human graves, both in Britain and on the Continent (Philpott, 1991; Lauwerier, 1988). From this fact, it can be concluded that the meat of domestic fowl should have been, after that of pig, the second most important within the burial ritual. Another conclusion would be that the dead were given other food than the more mundane everyday food of the living (Lauwerier, 1988; Olive, 1987), or even that, with pork and chicken, the deceased were given more luxurious food (Lauwerier, 1988). Whether these are valid conclusions, or whether the animal bones give a realistic impression of the meal given to the deceased, must be analysed.

Figure 2 illustrates chicken as the second most important meat in cemeteries. The first two categories of data used in this diagram come from 30 settlements and 15 cemeteries within the Roman Empire (Lauwerier, 1988: 82-83). In the graves, pig can be seen to be the most important

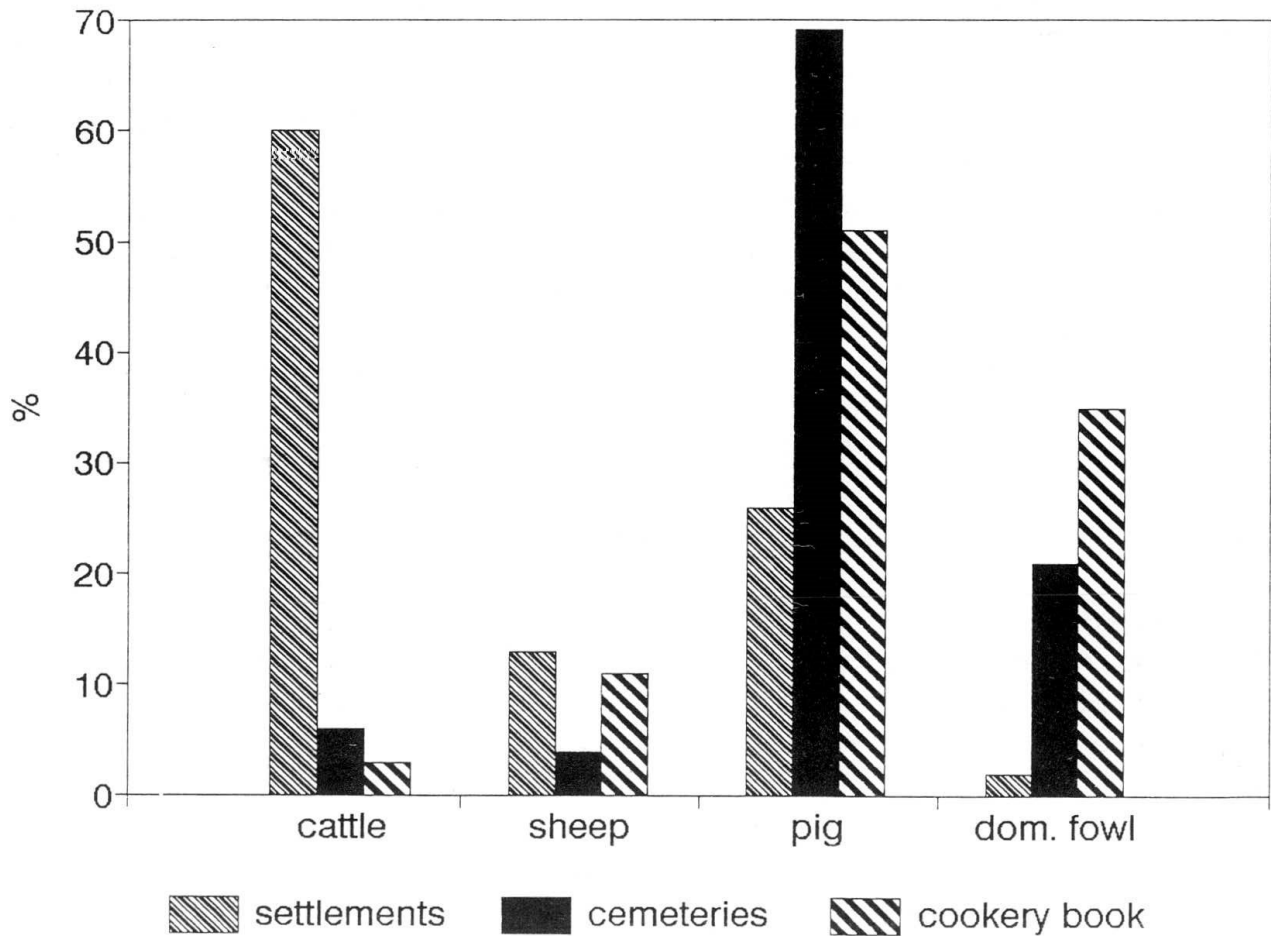


FIGURE 2 - Frequency distribution of cattle, sheep/goat, pig and domestic fowl in settlements, cemeteries and the cookery book of Apicius. The percentages are based on numbers of fragments for the settlements, the frequency of occurrence for the cemeteries and the number of times a species is mentioned in the cookery book.

meat, followed by chicken. Cattle and sheep are the most uncommonly found species. The settlements on the other hand, give a totally different picture, with cattle as the most commonly occurring animal, fewer pigs and even fewer domestic fowl. Chicken represents only 2% in the assemblages found in settlements, against 35% in the cemeteries.

One explanation for this result could be that the cemeteries have been excavated more meticulously, so that species with smaller bones are more likely to be recovered. This would, however, not lead to such big differences, especially since pig as well as chicken score higher.

Another explanation can be taken from the cookery book, originating from the 1st-century AD, of the well-known gastronome Apicius (Flower & Rosenbaum, 1974). In Figure 2, data from the cookery book are entered as the third category. The percentages worked out are based on the number of times different species are mentioned in recipes. Such a comparison can be seen to be interesting, even though the different sets of data are of a completely different nature. If we compare, in a general way, the data from the graves with that from the settlements and that from the cookery book, we could conclude that the reason so many chicken bones are found in graves (as with pig) is because the meat spectrum present in the graves compares most readily with that used in a luxurious cookery book.

Another explanation for the fact that so many chicken (and pigs) are found in cemeteries is perhaps more obvious. Except for when a fillet or ragout of chicken is put in the grave, the meat would normally always still be on the bone. The same can be said for pork, the top scorer in the cemeteries. Many recipes using pork include the bone. Recipes made of sucking pig, regularly found in graves, always contain bone and by so doing, always leave evidence. Recipes using beef are, however, totally different. In contrast to pig and chicken, the meat is cut off the bones, thereby leaving no remains in a grave if the beef was placed on a plate (cf. Mackensen, 1978: 173).

The frequent occurrence of chicken and pig bones in graves may well, therefore, give a false picture of past reality. It is not unlikely that the empty or half empty plates found in graves may have contained beef. The information from the plates seems to be very clear, but the rubbish pits in the settlements, containing the offal and discarded remains of meals, give a much more reliable picture of the consumption pattern of the living, than do the plates and dishes in the graves for the "consumption" pattern of the deceased.

FOWL AND FEMALE

One of the initial questions of this paper was whether or not the domestic fowl should be seen as a feminine symbol in Roman graves. One idea, suggested by Martin-Kilcher (1976: 77) and based on the data from Courroux, is that chicken are a female attribute and are deposited more frequently in female than male graves. Wahl and Kokabi (1987, 1988) make the same suggestion. The main argument is based on the fact that more chicken have been recovered from graves anthropologically identified as female rather than male. If this can be confirmed, then we could use the occurrence of chicken as a grave good as an indication for the sex of the deceased.

However, if the data upon which this suggestion is made is studied in more detail, doubts begin to arise. Martin-Kilcher's statement is based on the fact that only 2 out of 23 female graves contained the remains of domestic fowl as opposed to none of the 20 graves anthropologically identified as male. In the case of the Stettfeld (Wahl & Kokabi, 1988), a cemetery dating to the 2nd

and 3rd centuries AD and associated with a small, rural settlement, 11 out of 70 male graves as well as 14 out of 95 female graves were found to contain the remains of fowl. This represents 16% and 15%. Further chicken bones were found in 7 out of the 92 graves of unidentified adults, 4 out of 39 children's graves and in 4 out of 11 double graves. In Wahl and Kokabi's conclusion (1988: 280), it is correctly stated that when relating the information from the graves of adults whose sex could be anthropologically identified, neither of the sexes are especially well-provided with domestic fowl. It is clear that the expectation of sex specificity is high, since the authors continue to suggest that, when the information from unidentified (!) persons is included, the inclusion of chicken bones amongst grave goods is more specifically associated with females. How such a strong prejudice continues to work is seen in the publication of late Roman remains from Konstanz by the same authors, where they refer to the Stettfeld publication with the erroneous remark that the remains of domestic fowl are more frequently found in female rather than male graves (Wahl & Kokabi, 1987). Philpott's study (1991) mentions relatively more male than female cremations associated with unburnt chicken remains. He also states that the percentage of male inhumations associated with fowl is also higher than those of females. On the other hand, the percentage of female cremations associated with burnt chicken appears to be higher than that of male cremations. The main problem is, however, that for all the cemeteries mentioned in this study, the actual numbers of graves involved are low. The restraints of such data are well-illustrated in the publication of the cemetery in the Jacobstraße in Cologne (Friedhoff, 1991). Herein is stated that there is no sex-specific pattern in the food grave gifts, even though 13 female graves contain chicken as opposed to only 2 male graves. Quite rightly though, account is made of the fact that out of 327 graves, only 25 contained chicken and that the sex of individuals could only be established for 59 graves: 51 females and 8 males. This suggests that when considering both the female and males, only one in four was found with chicken.

There is, therefore, no proof for the suggestion that chicken was in fact used as a feminine symbol within the burial ritual. On the contrary, the available data would suggest that, in general, domestic fowl were given to both males and females to the same extent. The most one might be able to say is that there may have existed local preferences for attributing fowl to males or females, but sufficient evidence for this is lacking.

CONCLUSIONS

To summarize, we arrive at the following conclusions:

Bird remains from Roman graves show the same species spectrum as is known from settlements: mostly chicken, sometimes alternated with goose, duck or other fowl. If the bones are well-preserved and are found lying in their originally-deposited position, then they often indicate prepared food. As grave gifts then, the bird remains were intended as food for the deceased, either literally or in a more symbolic sense. Any functional relationship between these meals and the metal or terracotta bird figurines that have also been found in graves, seems unlikely.

The data from cemeteries, where both archaeozoological and anthropological information is available, in general shows no difference in the frequencies of the occurrence of chicken in female or male graves. There is therefore no reason to suspect that domestic fowl should have been used as a feminine symbol within the burial ritual.

It is not possible to come to any quantitative conclusions concerning the status of birds within the food donations based on bone assemblages alone, since not all types of meat left evidence in the

form of bones. If we, as archaeozoologists, want to know more about the role of chicken and other food in Roman grave assemblages, then we must stop writing appendices and start to do research directly integrated with the anthropological research and the archaeological study of ceramics from a cemetery, for example. Not only the bones have to be studied, but also the empty dishes. Perhaps chemical analysis will be able to determine whether or not the dishes ever contained beef. Finally, statistics must also be made good use of, even in the research of birds in Roman graves.

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