

Medieval records versus excavation results -examples from Southern England

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ABSTRACT: This paper briefly summarises the development of fish bone studies in the Wessex Region (especially Hampshire and Wiltshire) of Central Southern England during the 1980s and some attempts to use documents to aid interpretation of results from post-Saxon medieval deposits and, by contrast, Saxon deposits. A variety of medieval documentary sources mention fish and fishing. The kinds of medieval document available have been summarised, with special reference to the port of Southampton and surrounding areas of Central Southern England, and their usefulness for archaeologists and fish bone specialists explored. Certainly fish archaeologists cannot ignore the existence of contemporaneous documents in their interpretation of medieval fishbone results. Formerly, interpretation frequently attributed changes in species exploited or their sizes to ecological factors or changes in fishing practice when this could also be due to fluctuations in trade or a difference in buying practice. In the same way historians cannot ignore the archaeological results. It is the differences noticed when finds and documents are contrasted which sometimes lead to new insights.

KEYWORDS: FISH, SAXON, MEDIEVAL, BONES, DOCUMENTS, TRADE, ENGLAND.

RESUMEN: El trabajo resume el desarrollo de los estudios sobre restos de peces en la región de Wessex (especialmente Hampshire y Wiltshire) en Inglaterra centro-meridional durante la década de los ochenta así como determinados intentos por utilizar la información documental en la interpretación de los datos procedentes de depósitos medievales posteriores a la etapa sajona comparándolos con depósitos sajones. Una amplia gama de fuentes documentales medievales tratan sobre la pesca y el pescado. Repasamos los tipos de documentos con énfasis en el puerto de Southampton y áreas circundantes de la Inglaterra centro-meridional y valoramos su utilidad para arqueólogos y arqueozoólogos. Los arqueozoólogos no pueden ignorar la existencia de documentos contemporáneos de las muestras óseas que analizan al interpretar éstas. En el pasado, la tendencia ha sido a interpretar los cambios en la explotación de las especies o sus tallas en función exclusiva de agentes ecológicos o cambios en las técnicas pesqueras cuando ello podría asimismo haberse debido a fluctuaciones en el comercio o a diferencias en la estrategia de mercado. De igual modo, los historiadores no pueden ignorar por más tiempo los resultados de la investigación arqueológica. Son precisamente las discordancias entre muestras óseas e información documental las que conducen a plantear y resolver cuestiones de forma novedosa.

PALABRAS CLAVE: PECES, PERIODO SAJÓN, MEDIOEVO, HUESOS, DOCUMENTOS, COMERCIO, INGLATERRA.

INTRODUCTION

This paper replaces and expands an earlier one read at the York Conference in 1987. Although the writer left the Faunal Remains Unit, Southampton University, in 1989 and the work continues under Dale Serjeantson and Pippa Smith, much of the

1980s fish analysis is still unpublished by the excavators so it was felt that an update would be useful.

The finding of fish in excavations is unpredictable. Some medieval stratigraphy (both Saxon and post-Saxon) in Southern England yields rich supplies of fish bones, some scarcely any. Improving

excavation techniques to sample fish remains more reliably must be a part of every modern excavation strategy. The range of features sampled obviously plays a major role in controlling the sample obtained. Some small species turn up in cesspits and pits because faecal material has passed through the gut (Wheeler & Jones, 1989: 8). The concentration of pockets of small eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) and herring (*Clupea harengus*) bones in many excavations in Wessex is probably often an indicator of cess.

Like many bones, fishbones often survive better when swiftly buried, as in rubbish pits, whereas kitchen and other occupation areas may be kept clean and yield material only from crevices and drains or from layers which postdate their use as living quarters. Sieving strategies too are obviously of key importance and only a partial picture is revealed from unsieved excavations where trowelling mainly reveals large gadoids (Gadidae) and conger eel (*Conger conger*) (e.g. Coy, 1985).

SOUTHAMPTON'S SAXON AND LATER MEDIÉVAL FISHBONES

Earlier analysis of mid-Saxon material from Melbourne Street in Saxon Southampton (Hamwic) included a list of those fish species that we were able to identify at the time (Bourdillon & Coy, 1980). Fish studies were then in their infancy at Southampton and there had been no routine sieving strategy during the 1970s when the Melbourne Street sites were excavated. Most of the fish remains originated from a single feature which had been carefully sieved by post-graduate students. At the time we came to two conclusions, both of which subsequently proved to be incorrect. We assumed that subsequent sieving would always produce results like those of the feature mentioned above. In fact routine sieving for 10 years at Hamwic never produced such a rich feature again. We also assumed, on the basis of quizzing local fishermen of the river Itchen, that all the species in the

Saxon excavations were locally caught. Although this may have been true of the ones we listed, subsequent work by Sheila Hamilton-Dyer on sieved samples from Saxon layers produced bones from herring, and it is likely that these were already traded by the Anglo-Saxons.

Results from the nearby post-Saxon settlement of medieval Southampton were again initially from unsieved samples but increasing attention was paid to retrieval strategies for fish, culminating in the enormous amount of sieving carried out at the excavations at St Michael's, the site of the medieval fishmarket (Coy & Hamilton-Dyer, unpublished). In this analysis it was possible to show clearly that only large gadoids were retrieved by trowelling whereas another 12 species were identifiable from sieved samples (Coy, 1989: 28, Table 2). The main problem in interpreting the «fishmarket» results was our inability at the time to compare the results with comparably well-sieved occupation sites in medieval Southampton. We did not know whether they were «different» and so could easily fall into the trap of finding what we expected to find in a fishmarket, having regard to existing documents. It would therefore be wise to leave a fuller interpretation of these results until comparable sieved results are available from other types of medieval site in Southampton.

By contrast, the excavations at nearby Winchester in the 1970s benefitted from intensive sieving for plant remains which produced as a by-product a good sample of fish bones. Medieval Winchester, in some ways has thus produced more reliable evidence on the effect of taphonomic factors on post-Saxon fish than medieval Southampton. Sieving at Winchester led to the retrieval of large quantities of common eel and herring bones, probably associated in some cases with cess. At Western Suburbs, fishbones tended to be found in pits but not in ditches, possibly as a result of either quicker burial, association with a higher density of bone or both. The species known from medieval Winchester Western Suburbs are basically those known also from medieval Southampton (Coy, forthcoming).

SPECIES	ARCH	1300 DOC	1426-30 DOC
<i>Petromyzon marinus</i>	--	lampereyes	-
Pleurotremata	SM	-	-
Rajiidae	SM	-	-
<i>Acipenser sturio</i>	-M	sturgoun	-
<i>Anguilla anguilla</i>	SM	-	-
<i>Conger conger</i>	SM	congres	congres
<i>Clupea harengus</i>	SM	arang, harang	heryng
<i>Sprattus sprattus</i>	-?	-	sprot (1430)
<i>Sardina?</i>	-?	sardeyn (oil)	-
<i>Salmo solar</i>	SM	salmoun	salmon
<i>Osmerus?</i>	-M	-	sperlyng
Cyprinidae	-M	-	-
Preserved fish	??	stockfyssh	stokfische
<i>Gadus morhua</i>	SM	cod, moreu, mulwell	meluel
Young Gadidae	SM	-	codling
<i>Melanogrammus aeglefinus</i>	-M	haddok	-
<i>Merlangius merlangus</i>	SM	-	whiting
<i>Trisopterus luscus</i>	-M	-	-
<i>Pollachius pollachius</i>	SM	-	poullock
<i>Pollachius virens</i>	-M	-	-
<i>Molva molva</i>	-M	leeng	lyng(e)
<i>Merluccius merluccius</i>	-M	-	haake
<i>Atherina sp.</i>	-M	-	-
<i>Belone belone</i>	-M	-	-
Triglidae	SM	-	-
??	—	gobettes?	-
<i>Dicentrarchus labrax</i>	SM	-	-
<i>Trachurus trachurus</i>	S-	-	-
Sparidae	S-	-	-
Labridae	SM	-	-
Mugilidae	SM	coignes	-
<i>Scomber scombrus</i>	-M	makerel(le)	makerel
<i>Scophthalmus maximus</i>	-M	-	-
Pleuronectidae	SM	-	-
<i>Solea solea</i>	S-	-	-

TABLE 1

A comparison of archaeological and documentary results. KEY: ARCH = Archaeological results from S = Saxon and M = post-Saxon Medieval. DOC = documentary sources from Southampton, - see text. (-) species not found.

NAME IN TEXT	MODERN EQUIVALENT	ORIGINS
congres	conger eel	Jersey, Guernsey
heryng	herring	Suffolk, Norfolk
heryng sore	salt herring	Suffolk, Norfolk
salmon	salmon	Suffolk
sperlynge	smelt	Suffolk
meluel	cod	Brittany, Holland, Norfolk, Cornwall
codling	young Gadidae	Suffolk
whiting	whiting	Dieppe
poullok	pollack	Cornwall
lyng	ling	Brittany, Holland, Norfolk
stokfische	preserved Gadidae	local trading?
haake	hake	Brittany, Devon, Cornwall
makerel	mackerel	Dorset, Guernsey

TABLE 2

Species of Imported Fish in 1426-30 Southampton Documents.

As can be seen from Table 1, which lists the main species identified from Southampton Saxon (S) and post-Saxon medieval sites (M), a wider range of species was identified from the latter. At first we put this down to «more adventurous fishing», but for all medieval excavations in Southampton, in view of widely published information on trade in the post-Saxon port (e.g. Platt, 1973) we later came to assume that at least some of the species found in medieval excavations might be from trade. A large number of the fish bones found are of flatfish and placed in Table 1 as Pleuronectidae. These finds probably include plaice (*Pleuronectes platessa*); flounder (*Platichthys flesus*); and dab (*Limanda limanda*).

Although we were aware early on that medieval documents were unlikely to cover the full range of people who lived in Southampton it became clear that this was also true of archaeological excavation in the medieval town as the richer element of society with its stone buildings and well-defined properties and pits was always more visible. It is therefore likely that the post-Saxon results, unlike the Saxon ones which have covered a very wide range of settlement, do not cover some groups of people who lived at Southampton. This is the second reason for always including the Saxon Period results in any study. The first is because, as already mentioned, they are by contrast more likely to be related to local fishing.

SOUTHAMPTON AND ITS DOCUMENTATION

Southampton has a rich fund of archive material surviving, not only in the town but elsewhere. Since 1905, the Southampton Record Society and its successor, the Southampton Record Series of Southampton University Press, has provided a collection of edited material with translations of the Anglo-Norman and Latin texts (James, 1983).

References to fish themselves, fishmongers, fishmarkets, merchants who owned ships, people who stole, secreted, or resold fish, or those who saw it being illegally sold, are scattered through the documents. The major sources of importance for fish studies at Southampton belong to four categories of document which will briefly be discussed below. This list is not exhaustive and the writer is not a document specialist and is currently confined to published sources.

1. Borough Administration and Finance

The Oak Book shows guild ordinances dated to 1300 (Studer, 1910, 1911a). The Guild Merchant of Southampton was probably established by 1249 and these ordinances describe their trading privileges and the control of commerce. There are several ordinances about the sale of fish, for example, a translation of ordinance 64 states:

«*Let no-one sell any fresh fish, either in the market or street, but the man who has caught it in the water.*»

(Studer, 1910: 65)

Further ordinances mention the position of the fishmarket, fish sizes, and the price of salt herring. The Oak Book also contains a list of customs which suggests the species of fish commonly traded at this time (Studer, 1911a). This forms the «DOC 1300» column of Table 1. Studer also wrote a supplement explaining the language used in the Oak Book and gives a glossary (Studer, 1911b).

The fifteenth century Stewards books are of particular interest as they sometimes list foods purchased on particular dates and their costs. As well as food for banquets at the Guildhall there are lesser items of expenditure for feeding auditors and other small gatherings which in some ways are even more interesting. Some of the fish were probably locally caught fresh fish, e.g., gurnards (Triglidae); mullet (Mugilidae); and flounders (Giddens, 1935, 1939). One entry even states «fresh fish». The fish entries are sometimes replaced by those for capons, rabbits and sucking pigs. I cannot find any mention of gurnards and flatfish in the portbooks discussed below, although mullet are said to be listed in the Oak Book as «coignes», presumably «coins de mer».

Information on relative price and relative palatability may also be gleaned, for example, there appears to be much use of onions, mustard, and scented oil with stockfish!

Another late source is the 1454 Southampton Terrier, a survey undertaken to allocate responsibility for the maintenance of the town wall (Burgess, 1976). This identifies shops and workshops and makes it possible to find out who lived where and where the cellars were.

2. The Port Books

Here we get on to the really solid information for the fish specialist. Although of late medieval date these documents record practices which are likely to have been well established. A succession of portbooks has been published for the fifteenth century (Studer, 1913; Quinn, 1937, 1938; Cobb, 1961; Foster, 1963). The oldest and best are the first two which are records kept by Robert Florys, bailiff and collector of tolls and customs in 1426-7, 1429-30 and 1435-6, and show a conservatism

in still using the French language, probably against the current fashion. This may partly be because Robert Florys was a Channel Islander (he crops up again in section 4 below).

The port books list boats coming in and out of Southampton, their names, ports of origin, masters, loads, and dues paid. The piece below shows a typical entry, showing the keelage paid for the entry of the ship Trinity from Penzance in Cornwall and the amounts of fish and the customs levied on them the master's hake (*Merluccius merluccius*) and herring, as well as hake, pollack (*Pollachius pollachius*), ling (*Molva molva*), and «meluel» (cod, *Gadus morhua*) brought in by John Basse and John Gregry. The charges are in pence (d).

«*Entre La trinite de Pensens, Mestre John Hykes, kylage ij d:*

Le dit Mestre: v C de Haake - cust. xd; j barel de heryng - cust ijd.

John Basse: v C de Haake - cust. xd.

John Gregry: C de Haake - cust. ijd. demi C. de poullok - cust jd.;

demi C. de lynge et meluel - cust. jd.

(Studer, 1910: 16)

Quantities here are in «hundreds» and it is suggested by Foster (1963) that this was used colloquially to mean an English hundredweight (cwt) and that this usage could still occasionally be heard in Southampton at the time he was writing. Some fish are quantified differently. Some are measured and priced in lasts, which equal a boatload and vary with the species and type of preservation: e.g., 12 barrels of red herrings (Cutting, 1955). Stockfish are often in «bundles». In most accounts, salmon (*Salmo salar*) appear to be priced singly; conger, cod, ling, and mackerel (*Scomber scombrus*) per hundred; and hake in thousands (with the proviso on hundredweights discussed above).

In some cases the Southampton portbook entries are dated by the day and it is possible to work out seasonal effects on the fish trade. Later on two books were kept, one for Mediterranean carracks and galleys and one for all the others. There was extensive medieval trade between Southampton and the Mediterranean but I cannot deduce that this had much effect on the supply of fish, the products imported being usually more exotic (Ruddock, 1951). The origins of the fish coming in are wide. Table 2 gives a summary of what I think were the origins for 1426-30. Further study might reveal more on the activities of local boats and

merchants of which there is some evidence in the port books. Stockfish, for example, seems to be mostly associated with local boats.

By the end of the fifteenth century English fishing boats were searching further away. Gray (1992: 141) suggests that boats from the South-West were already fishing for Irish herring, cod, hake, and ling. In the same volume Starkey (1992: 163) suggests that the Newfoundland fisheries developed in the sixteenth century were built on the discovery of this abundance of fish in the late fifteenth century voyages of discovery. The European quota battles started here, the French and the Spanish being early competitors!

3. *The Brokage Books*

These show daily lists of goods passing in and out of the town compiled by the Bargate broker; the Bargate being the main gate on the North-South axis of the medieval town. According to Stevens & Olding (1985) who published the 1477-88 and 1527-8 books such detailed records are not available for any other English town. Others published are for 1439-40 (Bunyard, 1941) and 1443-4 (Coleman, 1960, 1961). They show tolls, names of carters and owners, and destination of outgoing goods. The broker liaised with the port bailiff and it often says «paid at sea» if the owner has already paid at the port. If goods change hands, fees have to be paid again. The records often mention fish and there is some evidence that fish transport is at its height in Lent. Herrings, salmon, and hake are especially noticeable.

These records throw light on the extensive trading of fish inland, which we know occurred. According to Platt (1973: 78) 40 major towns could claim exemption from toll. The brokage books often mention the destination of goods as this decides the toll or absence of toll. Sometimes the owner of the material is stated e.g. Robert Florys, mentioned above.

Tying up with this, a wide range of marine species is gradually being recovered from excavations inland from Southampton (e.g. Coy, forthcoming; Coy, unpublished a).

4. *Wills and other Legal Documents*

The Black Book of Southampton covers wills and deeds between 1388 and 1620. It often links people with ships. Here in 1443, for example, is

the will of Robert Florys mentioned above. We learn that he was a merchant; that he traded in fish with his Guernsey kinsman Thomas Florys; and that he owned a house in the fishmarket (Wallis Chapman, 1912).

Legal documents often point to what people actually did rather than what they should have done. In one footnote here we are referred to a fourteenth century Mayor of Southampton who received a pardon for having sold herrings (among other things) to the King's enemies in Normandy under an earlier regime.

Some sixteenth and seventeenth century documents suggest that the breaking of the existing laws provided quite an income and it is likely that the frequent stress on certain ordinances connected with fish in the earlier Oak Book results from the frequent breaking of these ordinances. Laws in connection with food are quite a good guide to what people actually did or there would be no need to introduce the laws. In post-medieval times too there are many references to the site of the fish market because people are obviously trying to sell fish elsewhere. Fines for depositing refuse also suggest that they were breaking the laws on this as well.

RESULTS FROM SOUTHAMPTON'S HINTERLAND

The Beaulieu Abbey Accounts (Hockey, 1975) and research on the Bishopric of Winchester pipe rolls by Roberts (1986) suggest alternative sources of information about the supply of fresh freshwater fish (e.g. Cyprinidae) from fishponds and eels from eeltraps. As early as 1269, Beaulieu, near Southampton, had a base on the East coast of England near Great Yarmouth where herring were kippered or dried. Their own ship also traded elsewhere. Fishermen were also paid for the provision of eels from a site well inland on the River Thames.

Roberts has shown that an extraordinary burst of activity between c1150 and 1208 caused the construction by the bishops of Winchester of a number of important fishponds on their estates in southern England. The pipe roll information confirms that the freshwater fish from ponds was reserved exclusively for the bishops and their royal and aristocratic associates, and it was almost always eaten fresh (Roberts, 1986).

Household Accounts from as early as the 12th century AD may provide a record of purchases (Woolgar, 1992-3). These show some interesting discrepancies when compared with the port documents. The 1406-7 accounts for Richard Mitford, Bishop of Salisbury, include many references to flatfish - flounders, sole (*Solea solea*), plaice, and turbot (*Scophthalmus maximus*) - not found in the portbooks but widely represented on the archaeological sites. Rays (Rajiidae), gurnards, and bream (in this association obviously marine Sparidae) are also listed. The rays are called «thornbackes». As Table 1 shows these species are not in the portbooks but again are represented on the archaeological sites.

CONTRASTING DOCUMENTS AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Table 1 draws up a list of species or groups of fish for which there is evidence of some sort at Southampton. The recorded finds from Saxon and post-Saxon medieval excavations are listed. Saxon ones are included as they may give a better picture of the species exploited locally (S). The overall post-Saxon medieval picture from a wide range of Southampton sites is also given (M). These results are derived from Bourdillon's forthcoming volume on Southampton Environmental Archaeology (Coy, unpublished b) with the addition of results for the fishmarket (Coy & Hamilton-Dyer, unpublished).

Set against these are the names given to these fish in the 1300 list of customs tariffs given in the Oak Book which we may assume are of fish utilised or brought into Southampton at this time. The DOC 1426-30 names come from the port books of that date.

Some fish mentioned in the documents have not been found or are very rare in the archaeological record, e.g., lamprey (*Petromyzon marinus*). There are three reasons for this: their remains do not preserve, they could not be identified, or it is not clear which fish are referred to in the documents.

But by far the largest discrepancy is the long list of species not in the Southampton Port Books which do occur on sites. These include Sharks (Pleurotremata); rays; common eel - which is ubiquitous on Southampton sites; freshwater fish (e.g. Cyprinidae); saithe or coley (*Pollachius virens*);

gurnards; bass (*Dicentrarchus labrax*); sea breams (Sparidae); wrasse (Labridae); all flatfish and a number of small species that are not economically viable. Some of the latter are probably present on site as the gut contents of the larger species.

Some of the fish listed above may have been locally or specially caught rather than imported through Southampton port and therefore not logged in the port books. To confirm this the Steward's book as discussed in 1. above mentions gurnards and flounders, and the Bishop of Salisbury, as discussed above, took in gurnards and a number of flatfish species, as well as thornbacks (presumably *Raja clavata* and related species with bucklers) and sea bream. In a similar way the thirteenth century information from Beaulieu Abbey and the pipe rolls discussed above suggest that freshwater fish and eels would be provided from fishponds or from specialised eel fisheries inland. Local inhabitants of both low-lying Hamwic, near the rivers Itchen and Test, and the later post-Saxon town nearby would have had no problems in catching their own eels.

The flatfish and rays in particular are so common on sites that their absence from portbooks was surprising but the household documents link them firmly with those in the medieval community, like the Bishop of Salisbury, able to afford fresh fish and control its source. Salmon and freshwater fish are also absent from the fishmarket finds (Coy & Hamilton-Dyer, unpublished).

There is some evidence for saithe from excavations in the medieval town and one dubious identification from the recent fishmarket excavations (Coy & Hamilton-Dyer, unpublished). But with all the trade recorded with the South West it seems unlikely that none appeared in the port and it is more likely that, as occurs even today, fish were not always identified correctly to species.

The differences between the Oak Book and the first port books are several. For example, although they are mentioned in the Oak book, I can find no specific references in the 1426-30 port books to haddock (*Melanogrammus aeglefinus*). Haddock, often of a large size representing fish over 3-4 kg, turns up on medieval excavations in Wessex. It is also in the Oak Book list mentioned above and in later port books. It is also likely that some of the categories listed in the 1426-30 port books (stockfish and muluel perhaps) included large haddock.

Conversely, the entries for pollack, hake, whiting (*Merlangius merlangus*), codling (young *Gadus morhua*), and «sperlyng» only appear in the

port book. But the evidence from elsewhere suggests that this means the Oak book list is wanting. Some species only appear even later - sprats (*Sprattus sprattus*) from 1430 and «brode» fish from 1469. I am assuming the last to be flatfish or perhaps rays. «Sperlyng» is usually translated as smelt (*Osmerus eperlanus*). «Gobettes» which appear in the Oak book are currently a mystery to me.

CONCLUSIONS

A wide variety of routes brought fresh and preserved fish into Southampton and its rural hinterland. Some of these routes and practices may have started during Saxon times and with care comparisons can be made. There are a number of problems to be addressed in this kind of study. First the identification of fish species from documents is far from secure. Second the origin of marine fish at Southampton is complex. For some species it will depend on the size of the fish as to whether we assume it was a young migratory form which came close inshore or a larger one fished from deeper water. Some species, such as flounders, may have come from estuarine areas near the port. These and eels may have justified permanent trapping structures. Some local fish may have been individually caught on lines rather than netted in bulk. The supply of the vast amounts of fish needed for non-meat days and for the longer period of Lent would have put pressures on the market to produce fish from other sources. These and other pressures would have decided whether or not fish were salted: for example, eels might sometimes be salted when they were too numerous to eat fresh (Roberts, 1986: 127).

By carefully contrasting the results from archaeological excavation and all available documents it should be possible to tease out the elements of this complicated story. Comparison between documentary and archaeological results can be a useful exercise for fish in the Medieval Period as both kinds of evidence are incomplete. The search is aided by the economic importance of fish in the medieval diet which caused it to be subjected to frequent inspection, taxing, and safeguards to ensure that profits were maintained. In Southampton the burgesses by their ordinances attempted to oversee the retailing of fish. Their failure resulted in the

imposition of a lot of rules and quite a good income from fines.

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