Beyond the domestic: a review of the evidence for the exploitation of wild resources in the Roman South-West

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Hunting, fowling and fishing in Roman Britain

• Understudied area of late Iron Age/Roman Britain

• Small proportions of wild fauna suggest their diminutive economic importance which understates potential social/cultural significance of hunting, fowling and fishing

• Interpretations of wild animal remains of late Iron Age/Romano-British sites have altered and developed over time:
  
  - Supplement meat supplies (Grant 1989), and to protection farmland (Buckland-Wright 1987)
  
  - Iron Age taboo against consumption (King 1991; Dobney and Ervynck 2007); wild fauna only of symbolic importance (Hill 1995)
  
  - Consumption of wild resources linked to status or new culinary practices, i.e. fish (Richards and Hodges 1998; Cool 2006; Locker 2006)
  
  - Control over wild resources reflect changing cultural attitudes towards the ‘natural world’ (Sykes 2010), or are expressions of landownership and social relations (Allen 2014)
Wild fauna in the south-west region (1stC BC-4thC AD)

Distribution of animal bone assemblages with >100 identified mammal and bird specimens

Proportion of assemblages with wild fauna

- Wild mammals present
- Wild fowl present
Proportions of wild fauna by size of assemblage

- **%NISP wild mammals**
  - NISP >100
  - NISP >300
  - NISP >500
  - NISP >1000

- **%NISP wild fowl**
  - NISP >100
  - NISP >300
  - NISP >500
  - NISP >1000

No. assemblages vs. %NISP for wild mammals and wild fowl across different NISP categories.
Variation in the ubiquity of different wild mammal taxa

- Wild mammals found on rural settlement sites include both hunted and trapped animals, from red deer and hare to fur-bearing species, such as badger, weasel and polecat.

- Wild boar are suggested on some sites with large pig bones.

- Some records include identifications of fallow deer – an imported ‘exotica’ in the Roman period (game parks?)

* antler removed though some may remain if unspecified in report
** includes weasel, stoat, polecat and pine marten
* fallow deer also recorded in 1 non-quantified assemblage
** wild boar also recorded in 2 non-quantified assemblages
Chronological variation in wild mammal and bird exploitation
Inter-site type variation in the wild animal frequencies

- Villas stand out as sites tending to produce higher frequencies of wild mammals and birds.
- Nucleated settlements also have comparative high frequencies.
- Little variation between farms, religious and other rural sites – all include low frequencies.
Intra-site variation in wild mammal frequencies

- Frequencies generally minimal compared to domesticates
- Can reflect natural deaths or occasional exploitation
- Slightly higher frequencies may reflect more regular hunting and trapping of wild mammals
- c.50% of villa assemblages include wild mammal frequencies above 2% NISP
- Only ‘outlier’ assemblages from farms and nucleated settlements produce >2% wild mammals
Varying proportions of deer bone and antler in assemblages between different types of site

![Graph showing mean percentage NISP for different types of site](image)

- Villa (n=13)
- Nucleated settlement (n=20)
- Farm (n=39)
- Religious (n=4)
Distribution of spear and arrowhead finds across the South-West

http://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/419674
Presence and frequency of different wild fowl taxa

**Ducks and waders:**
- commonly recovered
- high frequencies

**Corvids:**
- commonly recovered
- low frequencies
Geographic variation of different taxa

Corvid sp.

Anser/Branta sp.
Restricted geographic distribution of seabirds

Guillemot
Great northern diver
Cormorant

Great auk (now extinct)
Distribution and frequency of fish remains

61 assemblages with fish bones
39 from assemblages with >100 identified specimens
Impact of wet sieving on the recovery of fish remains in south-west faunal assemblages
Ubiquity of different fish taxa, grouped by habitat
No. of faunal assemblages with fish bones by phase

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>No. of Assemblages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>late Iron Age</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st BC/AD</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st-2nd C AD</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st-4th C AD</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd-4th C AD</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd-4th C AD</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evidence for aquaculture?

Halstock villa, Dorset

- Managed water-systems utilising natural spring from mid-2ndC AD
- System developed in 3rdC AD to supply an ornamental pond and ‘control’ tanks within the courtyard
- No environmental sieving carried out; unknown whether fish adorned the gardens
Distribution of fishing equipment finds across the South-West

Finds include:
- Fish-hooks
- Fishing weights
- Fish trap
Proportion of sites with marine shells by type and taxon

no. sites with marine shell (n=142)

- oyster
- mussel
- limpet
- cockle
- periwinkle
- whelk
- scallop
- carpet shell
- topshell
- topshell
- other

% assemblages present

- 0
- 20
- 40
- 60
- 80
- 100

- villa
- farm
- nucleated settlement
- religious
- coastal production

Villa
Farm
Nucleated settlement
Religious
Coastal production

Villa
Farm
Nucleated settlement
Religious
Coastal production
No. of faunal assemblages with marine shell by phase

![Graph showing the number of faunal assemblages with marine shell by phase from late Iron Age to 3rd-4th centuries AD.](Image)
Geographic distributions of sites with oyster and mussels

- Oyster and mussel widespread in east
- Restricted to coast in west
- Mussel distribution more thinly spread than oyster, but follows same pattern
Geographic distributions of sites with periwinkle, cockle and limpet

- Clear coastal distribution – periwinkles restricted to coastal sites
- Restricted inland distribution compared to oyster and mussel
- Distribution focused upon the Ilchester-Dorchester access route between the Somerset levels and Portland/Poole Harbour
Inter-site variation in marine molluscs taxa frequency

- All marine shell taxa relatively well represented at coastal ‘production’ sites
- Proportions of each taxon at ‘consumer’ sites may suggest how widely each is selected for trade and consumption away from coastal settlements
- Oyster widely recovered and well represented at all types of site
- Mussel widely distributed, but less well represented
- Periwinkle rarely recovered away from coastal sites
Inter-site variation in marine molluscs taxa frequency

Scallops found at a few villas
- Highly prized?

‘Minor’ taxon recovered from a few farmsteads and villages
- Low value?
Summary points

• Large faunal dataset from the south-west, but severely biased to the east of the region

• Call for continued efforts in generating statistically-viable samples through considered excavation and recovery strategies, and reporting of standardised data

• Analysis suggests local and regional variation in wild animal exploitation practices, as well as social differentiation

• Deer hunting and venison consumption appears to be most commonly associated with villa settlements: protection of agricultural land, diversification of diet, and/or demonstrations of land-ownership?

• Evidence for the development of a ‘coastal culture’, expressed through exploitation of seabirds, marine fish and molluscs – partly economically influenced