

# Animal Bones from Anglo-Scandinavian York

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## Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the current state of knowledge regarding vertebrate animals in and around York in the Anglo-Scandinavian period. The great majority of the available evidence derives from 16–22 Coppergate (AY 15/3), with smaller amounts of data from a number of excavations around the city. The aim is not to describe the data at length, but to review the information inferred from those data under several thematic headings. Examination of the material from Coppergate began as the excavation neared its end, early in the 1980s. At that time, our knowledge of urban zooarchaeology in Britain rested on just a few major studies (e.g. Exeter, Maltby 1979; Southampton, Bourdillon and Coy 1980; Baynards Castle, London, Armitage 1977), and little or nothing was known about Anglo-Scandinavian husbandry. The intervening 30 years has seen the publication of many substantial assemblages from 8th- to 15th-century urban contexts across northern Europe (e.g. Birka, Ericson et al. 1988; Ribe, Hatting 1991; Waterford, McCormick 1997; Lübeck, Rheingans and Reichstein 1991; Compiègne, Yvinec 1997). With that increasing information has come some shift in emphasis from data such as the relative abundance of different taxa and changes through time, to more thematic questions of supply and demand, and the value of animal bones in discussions on the emergence of towns and their associated social structures (e.g. Bourdillon 1994; O'Connor 1994; Crabtree 1990). This review therefore revisits previously published material, and incorporates additional data in a synthesis of evidence from York as a whole, and in regional comparisons. Practical methods are not discussed at length here: they are detailed by site in the appropriate fascicules of AY 15/1–5, and reviewed in AY 19/2.

## Materials

Excavations at 16–22 Coppergate (1976–81.7) generated an enormous archive of animal bones, of which an estimated 50% was from, broadly, Anglo-Scandinavian deposits. The great majority of that

archive was retrieved by hand-collection during excavation, with a much smaller, though still significant, quantity retrieved by the bulk-sieving of sediments on 1mm mesh, followed by sorting of the >2mm fraction. Work on the bones began in parallel with studies of the pottery and other dating evidence, and the analysis of the stratigraphic record. Accordingly, the first published work was based on a selection of the better-dated and larger assemblages (AY 15/3). Subsequently, the larger remaining assemblages from Anglo-Scandinavian deposits were assessed and recorded. The strategy of recovering some bones by hand-collection and some by sieving became the standard for subsequent YAT excavations in York (AY 19/2, 98–112).

Material from 1–9 Micklegate (1988–89.17) was recovered in particularly difficult circumstances, from surface deposits and pit fills associated with Anglo-Scandinavian post-and-wicker structures. The remains of small vertebrates from the pit fills were the subject of a special taphonomic study (Piper and O'Connor 2001). Although the Micklegate assemblage is quite small, preservation is very good, and the close association with structures makes this an important assemblage. Anglo-Scandinavian deposits were sampled during excavations at 9 St Saviourgate (1995.434), with particularly substantial assemblages from two Anglo-Scandinavian pits. Although this material has been the subject of an assessment, not a full analysis, the results are sufficient to be incorporated into this synthesis (Carrott et al. 1998). Further material of Anglo-Scandinavian date has been recovered from excavations on Layerthorpe, where deposits of refuse and leather working debris appear to have accumulated within the channel of the Foss, and a small assemblage from 76–82 Walmgate (1987.33). Further 9th- to 10th-century material has been recovered from excavations in North Street (1993.1), and has been subject to an assessment, not a full record (Dobney and Jaques 1993).

Excavations at 58–9 Skeldergate (1973–5.14) yielded modest bone assemblages, which are reported in AY







woodland, and it is possible that some of York's beef derived from extensively managed 'park' cattle. Studies of plant macrofossils and invertebrate animal remains from Coppergate have produced numerous records of woodland taxa (AY 14/7, 656-61), and it is clear that woodland mosses were brought into the city. Moss would offer a ready mode of transportation for seeds and snails, though mud and plant debris attached to cattle would serve equally well as a vector (see pp.389-91). Again, this is a topic that merits further investigation, in part through archaeobotanical work in the region, and in part through historical reference to woodland pasturing.

The place of sheep in this proposed regime is around the edges, as useful grazers of uncultivated rough grassland, and of harvest aftermath. The relative abundance of sheep in Anglo-Scandinavian assemblages is generally low (Table 20): just 22% of identified hand-collected specimens at Coppergate, 13% at Micklegate; 16% at Walmgate; 18% in Trench

2 at St Saviourgate, but 33% in the two pits in Trench 3 at St Saviourgate. Recovery bias does not entirely account for these low percentages: at Micklegate, sheep and sheep/goat specimens comprised 13% of hand-collected assemblages, and 12% of sieved assemblages. Either wool production was relatively unimportant, and finds of textiles and related artefacts suggest otherwise (see pp.474-5), or it took place at a sufficient distance from York that only small numbers of sheep entered the city's food supply. Age at death data consistently show a predominance of adult sheep, though with some site-to-site differences. Fig.99 summarises the attribution of mandibles to age classes for Micklegate and for Coppergate. Taken with the more detailed breakdown of the Coppergate data in AY 15/3, 173, table 48, the results show the presence of generally younger sheep at Micklegate (mostly one to two years old) than at Coppergate (mostly two to four years old). Although the two samples differ considerably in size, the difference is highly significant (Table 21). The two sites may have been access-

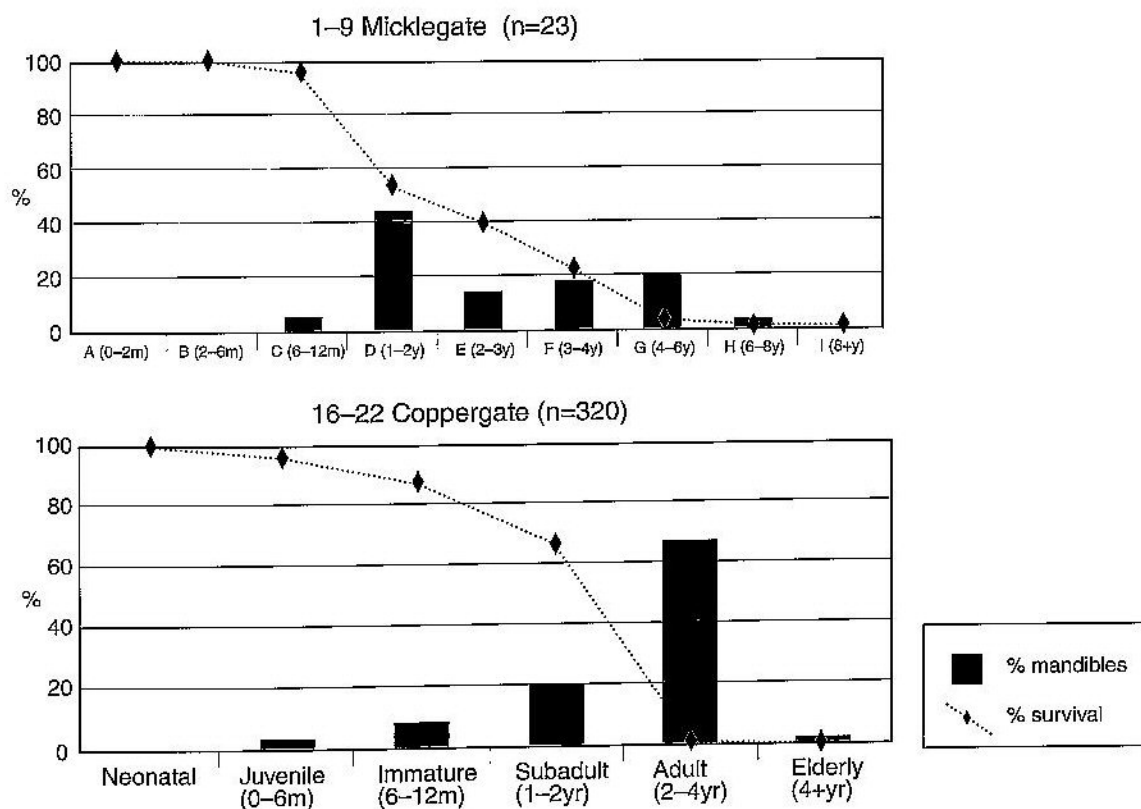


Fig.99 Age at death distribution for sheep from 16-22 Coppergate and 1-9 Micklegate, based on dental eruption and attrition. Age groups for Coppergate are as used and defined in AY 15; those for Micklegate follow Payne. Approximate calendar age equivalents are given to facilitate comparison. See also Table 21, p.432































