CHAPTER 8

The Wild Boar

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Introduction

On 7 January 2004 the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reported the news that a wild boar had been spotted in a supermarket in a Gloucestershire town. Apparently the animal had already knocked over an elderly lady and eluded the attention of the supermarket staff. Anybody who spotted it was supposed to alert the police.

Sightings of wild animals in unusual places are not particularly rare – foxes are regularly spotted in human environments, including shops. The interesting aspect of this particular story is, however, that the wild boar had been extinct in Britain – as a free-living species – for centuries. This news, one among many of this sort (Goulding and Roper 2002), was indicative of the fact that the wild boar was back and had once again become a regular feature of British life (Figure 13). Animals escaped from wild boar farms established in the 1980s and 1990s had eventually led to the re-establishment of viable free wild boar populations in the south of the country and were obviously not especially afraid of direct exposure to the human species.

The interest that the return of the wild boar has generated (no less than 107 media articles in six years; Goulding and Roper 2002) justifies our curiosity regarding the past life of this species and how eventually it came to be lost to the British countryside. In this chapter I will briefly report on what is known

FIGURE 13. A small group of wild boar recently re-established in Britain
PHOTO BY MARTIN GOULDING

about the archaeology and history of the British wild boar, its origins, heyday, decline, demise and eventual return.

Origins

According to Yalden (1999, 15) the earliest known occurrence of the wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) in Britain dates back to the Cromerian interglacial (Lower Pleistocene, 600,000–450,000 BP). Remains of the species were found at the site of West Runton (Norfolk), which typifies the period in Britain. Evidence of the presence of wild swine is again found in the Hoxnian and Ipswichian interglacials (Yalden 1999, 17–18), and then in the Late Glacial, when it was never particularly common (Yalden 1999, 60–1). The role played by the wild boar in the life of Palaeolithic hunters in Britain is by and large unknown.

In the Mesolithic the wild boar was – with red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) and aurochs (*Bos primigenius*) – one of the three most common game species. It is relatively uncommon at Star Carr (Legge and Rowly-Conwy 1988) but abundant at the other early Mesolithic site of Thatcham (King 1962). It is the predominant species at Faraday Road (Ellis *et al.* 2003), a possibly slightly later site. There is no chronological pattern to the variation in abundance of the wild boar in the British Mesolithic (Albarella and Pirnie in prep.) and its relative frequency is therefore likely to be related to local environmental conditions and hunting preferences.

In the British Mesolithic the wild boar seems to have been relatively small. In Figures 14 and 15 the size of these animals is compared with that of Mesolithic wild boar from other European areas and to modern wild boar (data from Albarella *et al.* 2009). Both tooth and postcranial bone measurements indicate that British wild boar were smaller than their Danish and, to some extent,

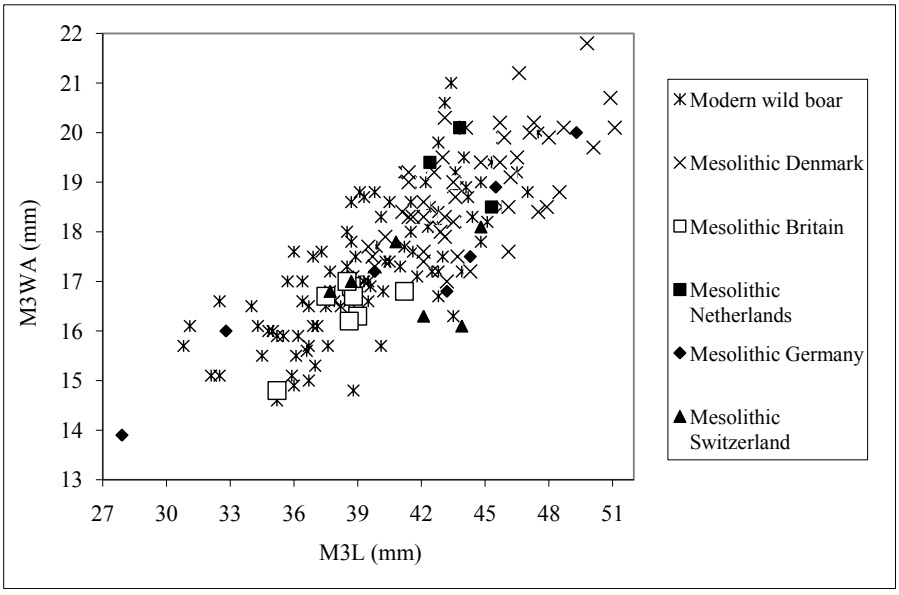

FIGURE 14. Size of lower third molar in British Mesolithic wild boar compared to other Mesolithic specimens and to modern European wild boar. Modified from Albarella *et al.* 2009.

central European counterparts. They also tend to plot towards the lower half of the distribution of modern European wild boar.

Wild boar hunting in farming societies

With the beginning of the Neolithic and the introduction of the domestic pig, the archaeological record for the British wild boar becomes elusive. It is difficult to say to what extent this is due to a genuine rarity of the wild species, the difficulty in distinguishing wild and domesticated forms or the frequent interbreeding between the two populations. A combination of these factors may well represent the best possible explanation.

The domestication of the pig is known to have brought about – at least in the long term – a reduction in the size of the animals. The size of the wild boar cannot, however, be assumed to have remained stable, as a post-Mesolithic size increase has been proved for some other European areas (see Albarella *et al.* 2006a and Albarella *et al.* 2006b, where possible explanations for this phenomenon are discussed). There is some evidence that this occurred in Britain too but the situation for the Neolithic is not particularly clear, due to the scanty biometrical record.

The presence of the wild boar in the early Neolithic is claimed at a few sites. Some large humeri are present at Hambledon Hill (Legge 2008) but the claimed wild boar from Ascott-under-Wychwood (Mulville and Grigson 2007) are of a size that could also be compatible with domesticated forms. The main evidence for the late Neolithic comes from Durrington Walls, where a detailed biometrical analysis of a large pig dataset has revealed that the wild boar was – if at all present – exceedingly rare (Albarella and Payne 2005). Other late Neolithic sites provide evidence that is consistent with Durrington Walls (e.g. the West

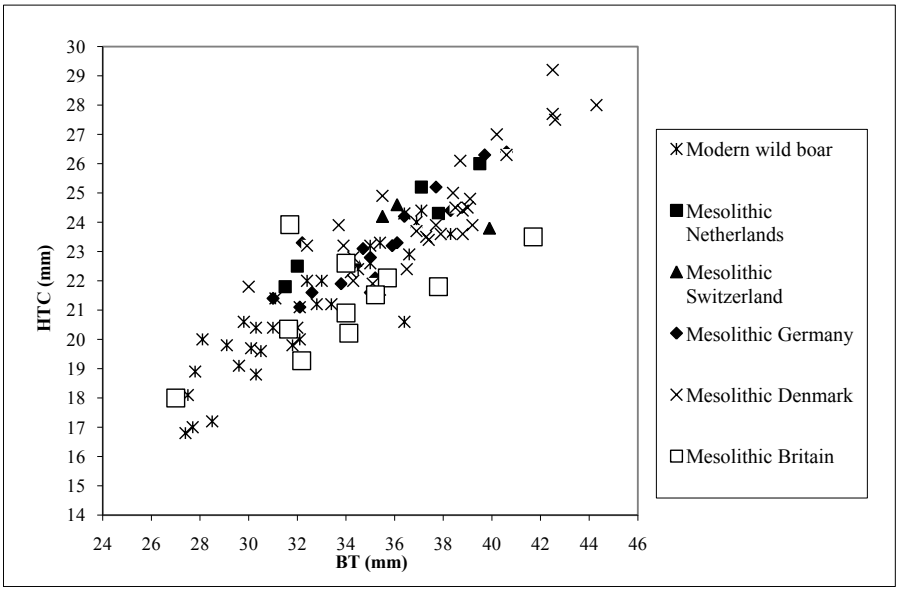

FIGURE 15. Size of distal humerus in British Mesolithic wild boar compared to other Mesolithic specimens and to modern European wild boar. Modified from Albarella *et al.* 2009.

FIGURE 16. A wild boar skull from the late Bronze Age site of Welland Bank Quarry, Lincolnshire
PHOTO BY SHANE EALES

Kennet Enclosure; Edwards and Horne 1997). A lower third molar from the late Neolithic levels at Windmill Hill is larger than any found at Durrington and may well belong to a wild boar, but at this site too the species seems to be far from common. Wild boar is also claimed at late Neolithic Fengate (Harman 1978) and Puddlehill (Grigson 1976) but the evidence is not entirely unambiguous (Albarella and Pirnie in prep.). The most interesting finds are from Mount Pleasant (Harcourt 1979b), where a huge *Sus* astragalus and canine were discovered. This suggests that large wild boar – morphometrically distinct from domestic pigs – did indeed exist in the Neolithic of Britain, but were rare or rarely hunted. Such large specimens also suggest that, as elsewhere in Europe, Neolithic wild boar were larger than their Mesolithic counterparts.

In later prehistoric times the evidence for the occurrence of the wild boar becomes even thinner. The possible presence of the species is mentioned for the Beaker site of Poors Heath (Cornwall 1976) and at late Bronze Age Runnymede, where Serjeantson (1996) mentions the occurrence of some very large, though not measurable, *Sus* specimens. In late Bronze Age levels at Welland Bank Quarry an almost complete skull of large size and typical wild boar profile was found (Albarella *et al.* in prep.) (Figure 16). The presence of the wild boar is also mentioned at the lakeside settlement of Glastonbury (Yalden 1999, 104), among a few other Iron Age sites.

The wild boar in historic times

Studies of large animal bone assemblages from Roman times reveal either no sign of the presence of the wild boar, such as at Colchester (Luff 1993), or the occasional large specimen found among a multitude of smaller pig bones, such as at Exeter (Maltby 1979). Most interesting is the evidence from Wroxeter (Hammon 2005) and Chedworth Villa (A. Hammon, unpublished data), where some specimens are of an exceptionally large size and clearly stand out from the rest of the *Sus* measurements. Considering the propensity of the Romans to export exotica it could be argued that these may represent imported animals from the European continent. The occurrence, however, of large wild boar in

prehistoric times in Britain indicates that the post-Mesolithic size increase of this species is more likely to represent an indigenous phenomenon. In Roman times large wild pigs could have therefore still been found naturally in the British countryside.

Analysis of the mitochondrial DNA of the specimens from Wroxeter and Chedworth, indicates that the British wild boar was genetically indistinguishable from that present in central Europe, but different from the animals living in Italy and outside Europe (Larson *et al.* 2007).

From Anglo-Saxon times onwards the archaeological evidence can be integrated with that deriving from written sources. This is the period when pig breeding reached its hallmark, with most animals kept free range (Albarella 2006). Such abundance of free pasturing domestic pigs must have increased the probability of interbreeding with wild boar, a phenomenon historically documented by later sources (Goulding 2003, 26). Nonetheless, the Anglo-Saxons made a clear distinction between the domestic pig and the wild boar, using different terms for the two forms (Rackham 1997, 36; Yalden 1999, 131). That the wild boar still existed in the Anglo-Saxon countryside of Britain is made further clear by the fact that soon after the Norman Conquest William I made a deliberate effort to protect the species, together with other wild game (Goulding 2003, 16). The existence of the wild boar in this period in the British Isles is also documented by Welsh (Rackham 1997, 36) and Irish (Kelly 2000, 281) written sources.

Archaeologically, the occurrence of the wild boar in the second half of the first millennium AD is suggested at a few sites, but not all of them provide conclusive evidence. Perhaps most remarkable is the apparent complete absence of the wild boar in the very large early Saxon animal bone assemblage of West Stow (Crabtree 1989). The occurrence of the wild boar is suggested for York (Coppergate and Fishergate; O'Connor 1989 and 1991b), Lincoln (Flaxengate; O'Connor 1982), Aylesbury (Walton; Noddle 1976) and Southampton (Melbourne Street; Bourdillon and Coy 1980). The stray find of a Middle Saxon (ninth century) isolated pig skeleton, interpreted as a wild boar on the basis of its size, at Stanstead Abbots (Ashdown 1982) is backed up by more detailed biometrical evidence. This is a truly large pig, in the range of the wild boar from the Roman sites mentioned above.

Extinction

By medieval times (i.e. after the Norman Conquest of AD 1066) the documentary evidence becomes more abundant and detailed. The wild boar was protected and its hunting rights restricted to the aristocracy (Grant 1988, 168; Yalden 1999, 150 and 166). The species is therefore not likely to occur in archaeological sites of lower status. Wild boar are, however, more difficult to fence than deer (Rackham 1997, 37), providing thus the occasional opportunity for poaching.

There is general agreement that 'by the Middle Ages wild swine were very rare' (Rackham 1997, 36), which perhaps explains why their hunting did not receive the status or popularity that it had in other European countries such as Germany, Spain (Cummins 1988, 97) or France, where the famous hunting treatise of Gaston de Phoebus provides plenty of descriptions and illustrations of the wild boar hunt.

The final demise of the native British wild boar probably occurred in the second half of the thirteenth century. The best record of this gradual disappearance comes from the Forest of Dean. Here wild boar were still chased for Henry III between 1251 and 1257, but Rackham (1997, 36) believes that 'the dozen which Henry III ordered killed for a friend in the Forest of Dean in 1260 were the last free-living wild swine in England'.

This is probably not far from the truth but it may not be entirely accurate as a few more populations may have managed to linger on until the end of the century. Woolgar (1999, 115–6) reports the hunting of wild boar between the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century in the western part of Essex, where they had by then become rare. He has, however, also two records for the very end of the thirteenth century, though one of them was a gift and it could have conceivably come from the Continent.

Goulding (2003, 19) has a later record than Rackham's for the Forest of Dean (1282), but he also mentions that a request by Edward II (reigned 1307–1327) for wild boar from the Forest of Dean could not be fulfilled, suggesting thus that by that time the species had disappeared.

In Scotland the wild boar may have become extinct at a later date (Goulding 2003, 25), but it was already sufficiently rare in the latter part of the thirteenth century to require management and deliberate feeding (Smith 2000, 706). In Ireland it was, according to Giraldus Cambrensis, still common in the twelfth century but it did not survive for much longer (Kelly 2000, 281–2).

The archaeological evidence reflects the rarity of the species as portrayed by the documentary sources. The best diachronic evidence derives from Dudley Castle (Thomas 2005). Thorough biometrical analysis carried out on *Sus* teeth from this high status site demonstrates the occurrence of a single large outlier (a probable wild boar) in phase 5 (dated 1262–1321), but none are present in the four following phases (dating up to 1750). Postcranial bones show no obvious large outliers, but in phase 5 there is a certain degree of bimodality in the distribution of the measurements, possibly indicating a mixed population with domestic pigs integrated by a wild component. This evidence is remarkably consistent with the historical data as it shows that throughout the medieval sequence wild boar were always rare, and completely absent by the fourteenth century onwards.

The rarity of the wild boar is confirmed by its apparent absence from the animal bone assemblages of Okehampton Castle (twelfth-fourteenth centuries) (Maltby 1982) and Launceston Castle (thirteenth and fifteenth centuries) (Albarella and Davis 1996). This is significant when we consider that these sites

produced large samples, which were subject to careful biometrical analysis. In addition both assemblages contain a substantial amount of remains of wild species, particularly deer and wild birds. There are occasional other claims of the presence of the wild boar in the medieval archaeological record, such as at Bewell House, Hereford (Noddle 1985b) and at a few other urban sites (Sykes 2001, 158) but these add little to the story.

Sykes (2001, 158 and 2006, 166) suggests that wild boar specimens identified from British medieval sites may represent imported animals. This cannot be ruled out and it is likely to be the case for the later Middle Ages. In earlier times, however, it does not need to have been so, as large wild boar survived in Britain, though in small numbers, until the thirteenth century. These, as we have seen, can be tracked down throughout the whole prehistoric and historic archaeological sequence.

It is likely that the wild boar disappeared from Britain as a consequence of a combination of habitat depletion (mainly woodland), over-hunting and eventually inter-breeding of the final relict populations with free ranging domestic pigs. Britain suffered woodland loss more than the rest of Europe (Rackham 1997, 37) and, being an island, could not easily be replenished with animals moving in from other areas. Wild boars are strong swimmers (Nowak 1999b) but the Channel was probably too wide and treacherous to be negotiated easily. Loss of habitat alone is unlikely to represent a sufficient explanation for the extinction of the British wild boar, as in Scandinavia, despite the abundance of forest, the species encountered a similar fate, having become extinct by the later Middle Ages (T. Tyrberg pers. comm.). The Scandinavian wild pig populations, however, shared with those of Britain their relative isolation. Although Scandinavia is not an island, a reduction in wild boar numbers in that region could only be compensated with animals coming from the far north. But this area is located outside the natural distribution of the species, which is notoriously vulnerable to deep snow conditions (Nowak 1999b).

Reintroduction and further disappearance

The British countryside did not remain devoid of wild boar for very long, because soon after its disappearance the aristocracy tried to reintroduce the species by using continental stock. It is possible that the park of Cornbury, Oxfordshire had wild boar as early as 1339 (Yalden 1999, 157), though it is difficult to establish whether these were part of a relict population of native animals or they rather represented introduced stock.

Most interesting is a debate occurring in the second half of the fifteenth century between a French and an English herald, which is reported by Cummins (1988, 97). The French herald teases the English for not having in their countryside fierce animals that require bravery to hunt, such as the wolf, the lynx and the wild boar. The English herald replies that although they are lucky not to have wolves they do indeed have the wild boar. Such inconsistency

of views suggests that in this period the status of the wild boar in Britain was dubious. The most likely explanation is that the species had indeed become extinct but had eventually been reintroduced for hunting purposes.

In the earlier part of the sixteenth century Henry VIII received from Francis I some live wild boar, but also with instructions on how to maintain and breed them (Williams 1998, 86–7). The introduction of these animals in the sixteenth century is also documented for the Savernake Forest (Wiltshire), Chartley Park (Staffordshire) (Rackham 1997, 37) and the palace of James V in Scotland (Smith 2000, 706).

In the first half of the seventeenth century James I and Charles I introduced wild boar to Windsor and the New Forest from France and Germany (Goulding 2003, 25; Rackham 1997, 37; Yalden 1999, 168). Further reintroductions from Germany are documented until the end of the seventeenth century, but were met with little enthusiasm by local people, who persecuted the animals and eventually contributed to the final disappearance of the species by the end of the century (Goulding 2003, 26).

By the eighteenth century the wild boar – either native or introduced – could no longer be found in the country, and its meat had disappeared from the British tables. Two of the classic British cookery books of the nineteenth and twentieth century (Beeton 1982; Hartley 1954) make no mention of wild boar venison in their recipes.

Archaeologically, the presence of the wild boar is claimed in late fifteenth-mid sixteenth century levels from Worcester (Chaplin 1968–9) and, more tentatively, for the early sixteenth-eighteenth century from Great Linford village, Milton Keynes (Burnett 1992). Since both finds are not backed up by any biometrical evidence they cannot be relied on. The partial skeleton from Great Linford may even belong to a relatively modern improved animal, which would explain its large size. In the absence of any substantiated identification, we must thus assume that the archaeological record confirms the disappearance of the native wild boar in this period. If any bones of this species will in the future be found in late medieval or post-medieval contexts, they will probably turn up at high status, rather than urban or village, sites.

Conclusions

Uncommon in the Palaeolithic, the wild boar was widespread in Britain in early post-glacial times, and one of the favourite preys of Mesolithic hunters. As in other European areas, in this period the wild boar was of a relatively small size. With the introduction of farming the wild boar becomes elusive in the archaeological record, partly due to the difficulties in distinguishing it from the domestic pig, but mainly due to its rarity as a hunted species. From the beginning of the Neolithic until the Middle Ages the wild boar archaeological record in Britain is remarkably consistent. The species remains rare throughout, with the occasional very large animals cropping up at a few sites. If the scarcity

of the species in prehistory might partly be attributed to hunting preferences, by post-Roman times documentary evidence clearly indicates that the species was genuinely rare in the countryside. This eventually led to its complete disappearance by the end of the thirteenth century. The following four centuries saw various attempts at reintroduction with the aid of continental stock (mainly from France and Germany), but these eventually run out of steam by the end of the seventeenth century, when the species can be regarded to have become finally extinct. This was, at least, the case until the 1980s, when escaped animals from wild boar farms led to the establishment of viable free living populations in the South of Britain. The return of the wild boar has not always been met with great favour by local farmers (Goulding and Roper 2002) and the animals have genetic characteristics which are mixed and of rather uncertain origins (Goulding 2001). They cannot replace what we have sadly and irremediably lost, but they still remain an interesting and rather majestic addition to our countryside.

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Preface

All books are a labour of love, and this one has been particularly protracted. It has taken longer than usual to bring to press, thanks in part to the usual exigencies of competing demands (and childbirth on the part of at least two contributors), and in part to the developments and new finds that are constantly being made in the field. Even at the time of writing, we are aware of new discoveries that (fortunately) strengthen the arguments made in this volume. Studies of wildlife are becoming more aware of, and informed by, the long-term record provided by historical and archaeological sources, and we hope that this volume will be seen as a timely addition.

We thank the many contributors for their expertise and patience, and thank Windgather Press and subsequently Oxbow Books for theirs, and for supporting the project. We are grateful to staff and students, in particular Tom Hartman and Alex Hyde of the University of Nottingham's MSc in Biological Photography and Imaging, who provided some of the beautiful images for this book. We thank all of those who have given permission for their images to be used here, in particular Julie Curl, whose illustrations for Figures 31 and 40 add art to this work of, we hope, science. Figures 22, 23, 34 and 42 are by TPOC. NS would like to thank both the University of Nottingham and the Arts and Humanities Research Council who supported the period of research leave in which this volume was edited.

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