Distinction Through Diet: Assessing the Evidence for Consumption at Late Anglo-Saxon Estate Centres

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Bourdieu presents the idea that taste is determined by social class and taste in music, art and films, amongst other things will vary with social status and contribute to distinguishing those with more 'cultural capital' from those with less. By studying taste in food, in other words diet, archaeologists may be able to gain an increased understanding of social stratification in antiquity. This paper looks at landscape, faunal assemblages, and plant remains at five 'estate centres' in Late Anglo-Saxon England (Faccombe Netherton, Flixborough, Goltho, Higham Ferrers and Yarnton) to discuss the idea that archaeologists can use consumption as an indicator of status. Although the sites studied are all distinctive in different ways, it appears that looking at faunal and plant remains alone is not enough when trying to classify sites as higher status 'estate centres'. This highlights the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in archaeology which take into account textual, iconographic and experimental evidence, as well as the material remains at sites.

Introduction

In his 1979 work *La Distinction, Critique sociale du judgement*, Bourdieu presents the idea that taste is determined by social class and that taste in music, art and films amongst other things will vary with social status and contribute to distinguishing those with more 'cultural capital' from those with less.[1] Thus, by studying diet, which could be called 'taste' in food, archaeologists might be able to gain increased understanding of social stratification in antiquity. Furthermore, regional changes in consumption could be relevant: differences between types of site (for example urban or rural), different cultures, and changing climates or topographies could all have impacts on the types of food being grown and consumed in an area. This paper will concentrate specifically on diet at Late Anglo-Saxon estate centres (from around 800 A.D. – 1066 A.D.) to establish whether this method is a suitable technique to use when looking at social stratification in this period.

An estate centre is taken here to be a centre of organisation and authority within the landscape, often a cluster of buildings, not large enough to warrant the term 'village'.[2] Estate centres were places where elites were apparently able to 'distinguish' themselves – the perception of the estate centre as a model of distinction has led to anything out of the ordinary being labeled as an estate centre by archaeologists, which would indicate a more elite presence. The five sites that this paper will discuss are: Flixborough, Goltho, Higham Ferrers, Yarnton, and Faccombe Netherton. All of these sites have been identified as estate centres for a variety of reasons. Large numbers of styli, believed to represent estate management, and unusual faunal assemblages at Flixborough have been taken to indicate an elite presence. The changing nature of the site makes pin-pointing the exact type of settlement more difficult, with later material culture lacking evidence of falconry and thus being generally closer in appearance to monastic sites in England rather than other known aristocratic residences, highlighting the difficult nature of classifying sites.[3] A malting oven at Higham Ferrers points to large scale production of ale, and the construction of the large halls and ditches would have required a degree of centralised authority.[4] Yarnton also had large, timber hall structures: two built by the end of the eighth century, and another which may be from the period in question. This later structure was associated with other buildings – granaries and a possible fowl house (the pattern of post holes is similar to that of a likely fowl house at Cheddar).[5] This is suggestive of elite activity and organisation and is further supported by the presence of a smithy, copper, iron, bone and glass objects, and worked stone. Two aisled halls at Goltho distinguish it as an estate centre – similar halls are found at Yeavering, Cheddar, Portchester, Westminster, Thetford and Waltham Abbey (all elite sites).[6] The fifth site, Faccombe Netherton, is first mentioned in a charter of 863 A.D.[7] Documentary evidence tends only to be found for important sites, such as the site of Faccombe Netherton. Faccombe Netherton's elite status is further supported by a wealth of finds from pottery and coinage, to metal artefacts and more elite food types such as deer.[8] The decision to primarily study these sites was pragmatic, looking at all of the known sites in the country would be too vast an undertaking, and choosing a specific type of site makes comparisons more viable. These five sites cover a broad regional area, from Lincolnshire to Hampshire, so it may be possible to note some regional variation as well.

Landscape and Climate

Soil type, exposure and drainage can all have an effect on the types of crops and animals that can be efficiently maintained within a landscape. For instance, arable land tends to be found in fertile, sheltered environments,

with relatively flat ground (which is more appropriate for machinery such as ploughs), whereas animals can be raised in harsher conditions (poorer soils, colder, wetter, windier climates, and steeper slopes). Not only does environment determine whether land is used for agriculture or pasture, but also what species or breeds are used there. In modern sheep farming, a stratified system exists where different breeds are raised in different environments, and sheep at different stages of their lives are moved between environments depending on their intended use. Similar strategies can be applied to different species as well. Pigs can be reared successfully in forested areas, whereas cattle require more grassy land, and barley can be grown further north in England than wheat, owing to the colder and wetter northerly climate.[9] Change in landscape can also determine the availability and types of exploitable natural resources: sites nearer to coasts, rivers and lakes are likely to make more use of marine and aquatic resources than sites further away.

Landscape and climate were therefore important factors in determining land use and resource availability. Flixborough, eight kilometres south of the Humber estuary, was well positioned near both wetland (near the River Trent) and the more well-drained Lincoln Edge which allowed for pasture, arable land, and marshes to be available for exploitation.[10] Faunal remains there indicate the presence of eel, salmon, perch, trout and pike - demonstrating the exploitation of estuarine resources.[11] Further evidence of this exploitation takes the form of wildfowl remains. Cranes and geese seem to have been favoured at Flixborough, possibly due to the proximity to the marshy environment in which these birds live.[12] Faccombe Netherton, on the edge of Salisbury plain, is further south than Flixborough, thus crops grown there would be expected to be better suited to slightly warmer climate (for instance, a predominance of wheat over barley). Furthermore, the landscape there is predominantly chalky, which tends to provide well drained, alkaline soil types.[13] Place names (such as 'mere', meaning pond) and documentary evidence (such as charters) also indicate the presence of forests and ponds in the area surrounding Faccombe Netherton.[14] Exploitation of these forests and ponds is supported by pig, deer and fish remains.[15] Yarnton, eight kilometres north-west of Oxford, was also situated near different exploitable landscapes – river, woodland, heath, and open land with soils suitable for both grazing and cultivation.[16] There is also evidence here for declining soil fertility over the Saxon period – pottery scatters often associated with manuring and the presence of crops such as vetch, which is indicative of a low nitrogen environment.[17] Looking at topography and location alone is not sufficient for archaeologists when it comes to understanding the use of the landscape, it is also important to consider factors that could change over time like forest coverage, soil fertility, and position of sites relative to rivers. Archaeological evidence for presence at a site can be an indication of how productive the land was – a number of sites, including Yarnton and Higham Ferrers, have evidence for prehistoric settlers. In both of these cases this is likely due to the productivity of the land and access to a waterway (the Thames and the Nene, at Yarnton and Higham Ferrers respectively).[18]

The environmental features at each site are summarised in Table 1 seen below. The main differences between the sites in question are proximity to water (Faccombe Netherton and Goltho are furthest from rivers), soil type (clay soils are usually less well draining than chalky or gravelly soils), and climate (with sites further north – Flixborough and Goltho – being more likely to experience colder and wetter climates than the more southern ones). The landscape and climate can determine what can be produced at a site; however, analysing landscape alone cannot tell archaeologists what was actually being consumed in the past, only what was feasible. Although

Site:	Location:	Soil type:	Details:
Faccombe Netherton	Hampshire, Salisbury Plain	Chalky (alkaline, usually well draining).	Forests, ponds, grasslands, heath
Flixborough	Humber Estuary, Lincolnshire	Limestone	Proximity to River Trent, in an area with access to both waterlogged and well-drained conditions.
Goltho	Lincolnshire	Boulder Clay, containing chalk and sandstone.	Elevated, dry conditions, compared to nearby lower, wetter areas, heavy clay types.
Higham Ferrers	Northamptonshire	Boulder Clay, limestone.	Alluvial deposits, proximity to River Nene.
Yarnton	Upper Thames Valley, Oxfordshire	Gravel terraces, Oxford and Kimmeridge clay.	Proximity to Thames, situated on floodplain, flat.

Table 1. Summary of Environmental conditions (based on data from Fairbrother 1990; Loveluck 2007, 2010; Beresford 1987; Hardy et al. 2007; Hey 2004).

archaeologists should not look solely at topography and climate when drawing conclusions, it is important to take them into account when making comparisons, as some differences could be due to environmental factors, rather than socioeconomic ones. Also, environmental factors might not always be reflected in the archaeological remains. It cannot always be assumed that a settlement made use of resources simply because it had access to them, and some remains are less archaeologically visible than others.

Faunal remains

Faunal remains are incredibly important to archaeologists; however, one must be aware of some of the biases that will affect the interpretation of the assemblages seen today. The most obvious factor is the survival of remains – bone survives longer than flesh or hair. Smaller pieces are also more likely to be missed due to both human error and because small fragments are less likely to survive; especially if sieving techniques are not used. As a result, larger animals are better represented in the archaeological record. Animals such as fish and birds, which could have been important in the Anglo-Saxon diet, as demonstrated by remains at Flixborough, are more likely to be underrepresented. The same applies to different bones in animals – larger or denser bones are more likely to survive and be found than smaller, less resilient ones. Another potential issue associated with interpreting faunal remains is that bones can come from one individual or many, and even knowing the number of individuals can be misleading. For example, even if the absolute number of sheep is larger than the number of cows, cows are larger animals and contribute more meat weight overall. The area being excavated will also have an effect on the type of assemblage – small vertebrates at Flixborough were primarily found in middens (refuse dumps), so where middens are absent, there are likely to be fewer small vertebrates discovered.[19] Understanding excavation location is valuable as well: at Faccombe Netherton, faunal remains found near buildings are likely to represent consumption, as animals that died from disease would probably have been removed from domestic areas.[20]

Regardless of these biases, faunal remains could still be useful in reconstructing diets at different levels of society and the relationships between them. In the case of venison for instance, ‘high-status’ sites often have fewer meat-bearing bones than other places, such as religious sites. This is likely to be due to redistribution practices, since the elite could afford to give away more nutritious parts of a deer after a hunt and there may have been some obligation

to provide for religious institutions.[21] The very presence of deer bones at a site also indicates hunting, which has implications for social interpretations. After the production of agricultural surpluses, when farming was no longer purely for subsistence, there was less pressure to hunt for food, so hunting became an elite activity, as it required spare time and resources.[22] Similarly, falconry, indicated by the presence of wildfowl, like at Flixborough, or by the remains of the hunting birds themselves, such as the Goshawk skeleton at Faccombe Netherton, could represent elite activity for the same reasons.[23] Faunal remains can also be useful for studying secondary products such as wool, leather and milk. Looking at mortality profiles can reveal variations in dairying practices. For instance, high numbers of male calf bones and older female cow bones usually indicate dairying. However, sexing the animals can be difficult if the skeleton is incomplete. Veal and the production of vellum would also produce many calf bones, and cattle for traction would result in more mature bones, complicating interpretations.[24]

Preservation and excavation techniques will also affect the quality of any evidence. For instance, changes in sampling and excavation technique at Goltho have made interpretations more difficult. At Goltho there is evidence for exploitation of both domestic and wild animals. 2,559 bones were found at the site, 125 of these were deer bones, identified as red, fallow and roe deer, providing sufficient evidence to suggest hunting activity.[25] However, when considering the data provided by Beresford concerning the Goltho faunal remains, a number of issues arise. The first is variation in sampling techniques between seasons means that comparisons between contexts (and thus change over time) is more difficult due to differences in rigour of excavation and recording.[26] Also, only well preserved whole bones, bones with joints, and fragments larger than 60mm were kept after excavation, and any data concerning smaller and more delicate remains, such as fish bones, is not available.[27] The second issue with the Goltho faunal remains is that the data provided is measured in Number of Identified Specimens (NISP), where each bone fragment is a single unit. This technique often over-represents larger animals, like cows and deer, as their bones fracture more easily and were more likely to be broken during butchery for redistribution, which is considered an unnecessary practice for smaller species such as sheep, goat and pigs.[28] This is the case at Yarnton, where cattle are the most abundant when NISP is used, but when using Minimum Number of Individuals (MNI) sheep/goat appear to be the most abundant.[29]

MNI is useful when looking at what proportion of a diet a species might have contributed to, but even where MNI is not calculated there are still interesting conclusions to be drawn from faunal evidence. Noting the types of species found can be useful. For example at Flixborough there was access to both farming and more marshy aquatic and marine conditions. As a result, the types of animals represented by the faunal remains are more varied than at other sites. Calves and lambs are present in large numbers, as well as adult domesticates.[30] There were also birds of prey, mostly hawks and red kite, and high frequencies of wildfowl, such as geese, ducks and waders. At least eight cranes were also found in a mid-Saxon pit, which possibly indicates a feast.[31] The raptorial birds and wild fowl would also point towards more elite activity on the site, which is further supported by yet more unusual finds, such as the remains from bottle-nose dolphin, minke whale, and perhaps even a killer whale. These finds could be related to the proximity to the Humber, but even so, such finds would be indicative of consumption at a higher social level at the site, as dolphin was likely harder to come by than domesticates or fish. Given the high numbers of 'elite' species at the site, the question of the use of domesticates is raised: these, as well as the many fresh water species found, could represent food rent, a form of tax, brought to the site, rather than animals purposefully raised or hunted there.[32]

The lack of evidence for a species can also provide interesting avenues for discussion (see Table 2 for a summary of site findings). There were no deer remains at Yarnton, where the only wild animals remains were frog/toad and mole.[33] This is not well explained by environmental evidence, as deer would have thrived in the Oxfordshire region. At Higham Ferrers in the late eighth century to early ninth century there is little evidence for deer, only a single skull fragment and a piece of antler.[34] This is not sufficient evidence to establish that hunting was frequent, but it is interesting to note that the find is a non-meat-bearing part of the animal. The low number of deer remains found throughout the different phases at Higham Ferrers makes it difficult to understand changes in deer consumption over time. This is also the case at Goltho, where the nature of the evidence differs between contexts. However, it is clear that deer were present and consumed as red, fallow, and roe deer remains were found in different contexts dating between 850 and 1150 A.D., and some even show evidence for butchery, through cut and chop marks.[35] In contrast to the sites mentioned above, it is at Flixborough and Faccombe Netherton that we see the most evidence for deer consumption. More importantly, at Faccombe Netherton there is sufficient evidence across different periods to analyse changes in redistribution practice – an increase in the proportion of meat-bearing parts over time, which suggests a decline in the sharing of meat in the community.[36] The presence of wildfowl and fish at Flixborough and Faccombe Netherton also indicates elite presence, supporting the classification of these sites as estate centres.

In general, this period also exhibits a longer lifespan for some domestic animals.[37] At Faccombe Netherton, a higher proportion of cattle and sheep/goat were culled between the ages of three and six, when these animals grew to full size and their meat would no longer be tender. This is important to note because there would have been little economic value in feeding fully grown animals longer than necessary.[38] On the other hand however, at Flixborough and Yarnton, there are a large number of remains from younger animals, possibly for vellum production, which indicates a literate body of elite or wealthy individuals. In addition to vellum production, the remains could also indicate dairying as

Site:	Falconry	Hunting	Fishing	Farming
Faccombe Netherton	Wildfowl (including partridge, duck, heron), birds of prey (goshawk, sparrow hawk, peregrine falcon)	High number of deer across all relevant periods (red, roe). Evidence of butchery.	Some fish bones, both aquatic (likely fishing) and marine (likely salting or smoking).	Cattle, sheep/goat (both usually kept until 3-6 years old), pig, domestic fowl.
Flixborough	High numbers of wildfowl (including waders, ducks, geese), birds of prey (buzzard, red kite), eight cranes.	Some deer (red or roe).	Bottle-nose dolphin, Minke whale, perhaps killer whale. Also 28 different species of freshwater fish.	Cattle, sheep/goat (high proportion of calf and lamb), pig, domestic fowl.
Goltho	One buzzard (unclear if wild or for falconry)	Some deer (red, roe, fallow). Evidence of butchery.	Cod (likely salting or smoking rather than fishing, due to distance from sea).	Cattle, sheep/goat, pig.
Higham Ferrers	Some wildfowl (very low amounts).	Deer (in very low amounts)	One eel, one carp.	Cattle, sheep/goat, pig, domestic fowl.
Yarnton	(No evidence)	(No evidence)	One eel.	Cattle, sheep/goat (high proportion of calf and lamb), pig, domestic fowl.

Table 2. Summary of faunal remains (based on data from Fairbrother 1990; Loveluck 2007, 2010; Beresford 1987; Hardy et al. 2007; Hey 2004).

killing young males is an efficient way to raise dairy cattle, or the preferred consumption of younger, more tender meats.[39] Each of the sites offers different evidence for meat or fish consumption, making comparisons difficult, however faunal remains from Flixborough and Faccombe Netherton clearly indicate elite activities, whereas at Higham Ferrers, Yarnton and to some extent Goltho there is little evidence to distinguish the sites from other, non-elite farming sites, as the majority of the remains are domesticates, a common find throughout Anglo-Saxon England.

Plant Remains

Faunal remains usually have better preservation than plant remains. At Flixborough, the number of hand-collected vertebrate remains totaled 41206, compared to 'sparse' crop remains – a trace of barley chaff from one sample, some cereal crop weeds from a twelfth to fourteenthcentury context, and scattered seeds from beans or peas.[40] Excavation techniques have significant impacts upon whether archaeobotanical remains are found – sieving and floatation are the only reliable methods to find small remains like seeds and chaff. It is curious, then, that the number of plant remains at Flixborough was so small, given that sieving did occur, as evidenced by large numbers of fish bone found. This is probably partly because archaeobotanical remains are more likely to survive if charred – cereals that require processing using heat are more likely to be preserved than others. Another important consideration is that an apparent change over time in crop type could instead represent a development in processing techniques.[41]

The nature of the evidence at Goltho and Faccombe Netherton is unclear – at Goltho there is no mention of plant remains other than construction timber, and there is no mention of plant remains at Faccombe Netherton either. The relevant publications date from the 1980s (Goltho)[42] and 1990 (Faccombe Netherton),[43] so linking the lack of evidence to older excavation techniques might be

Site:	Plant remains
Faccombe Netherton	(No evidence)
Flixborough	Trace of barley chaff (cereal crop weeds from later contexts). Small amounts of field bean and pea scattered across contexts.
Goltho	(No evidence)
Higham Ferrers	5th-6th centuries: Some free-threshing wheat (most common), hulled barley and oats (possibly a weed). Some field bean. Late 7th-early 9th centuries: Mostly cereal grain, usually wheat, sometimes barley. Barley made up 90% of the wheat in the malting oven contexts. Few weed seeds.
Yarnton	5th-7th centuries: Hulled barley dominates earlier phases, but also a presence of hulled and free-threshing wheat. At least 13 common weed species, and seven grassland weed species. 7th-mid-10th centuries: Greater dominance of free-threshing wheat. Barley and rye still present. Leguminous crops appear (garden pea, lentil) Possible oats, not clear if domestic or wild. Decrease in weed varieties – smaller species less prevalent. 10th -14th centuries: Medieval remains contained more barley than wheat.

Table 3. Summary of archaeobotanical remains (based on data from Fairbrother 1990; Loveluck 2007, 2010; Beresford 1987; Hardy et al. 2007; Hey 2004).

tempting. However, Flixborough was poor in plant remains as well, and the excavations and publications are more recent (2000s). Perhaps similarly to Goltho and Faccombe Netherton, preservation conditions may have been too poor at Flixborough.[44] Luckily, Higham Ferrers and Yarnton have more evidence available for discussion. At Yarnton, floatation was used to find 58 Anglo-Saxon samples dated to the fifth to tenth centuries. From these samples the archaeologists saw an increase in free-threshing wheats, as well as leguminous crops found in contexts from the end of the period.[45] Overall, this matches wider patterns in the period, with changes from hulled to free-threshing crops being seen as a development undertaken for convenience. This is because free-threshing varieties, though more susceptible to disease, are ready for milling upon threshing and do not require as much processing as hulled types, which require heating, pounding or soaking before use.[46] A decline in perennial weeds at Yarnton could also indicate the development of new ploughing techniques and more intensive agricultural strategies.[47] A similar floatation strategy at Higham Ferrers produced 42 samples which demonstrate an increase in weed seeds over time perhaps indicating an increase in animal husbandry and less focus on maintaining arable lands. Both explanations are plausible, but without more examples and a clear increase or decrease in crop production alongside fluctuations in weed seed numbers, it is impossible to judge. There is also a malting oven to consider at Higham Ferrers – these oven contexts contained barley (90% of the seeds), some of which had sprouted (a key stage in the malting process).[48] This oven is the only evidence for crop processing at the sites, all the other plant remains represent clean seeds, which could indicate domestic, rather than agricultural processes.[49] Table 3 provides a summary of the plant remains at each site.

Conclusion

While Bourdieu's comment may be applicable in some more recent social contexts, it does not appear to be applicable to the Late Anglo-Saxon period, where there simply is not sufficient evidence to support it. This is illustrated especially well when trying to understand what criteria archaeologists use to define estate centres. Looking at faunal and plant remains alone it is not clear why some of these sites are classified as estate centres. The faunal remains at Flixborough are clearly distinctive, however this might be due to the landscape and the ability to access a wide variety of food types. Moreover, there is certainly nothing distinctive about the plant remains at this site. The lack of plant evidence at Faccombe Netherton, Flixborough and Goltho is an all too common feature of Anglo-Saxon sites, meaning that where plant evidence is found it immediately stands out as distinctive in some way, and as a result the site is considered special. At Higham Ferrers, this may be justified, due to the presence of the malting oven, but the lack of distinctive faunal remains at this site (and at Yarnton) provides a contrast to this. This illustrates the importance of interdisciplinary study in archaeology – an approach that looks not only at the landscape and the faunal and plant remains, but also at texts, illustrations and physical remains, for it is all of these in combination that help archaeologists determine the status of a site. The five sites used as case studies were all distinctive in some way, however not all were distinctive through the evidence for diet there. This is not to say that the diets at these sites were not distinctive, just that the archaeological evidence for diet was not conclusive. This could happen for any number of reasons including excavation and sampling techniques, preservation conditions, and excavation locations. Unfortunately some of these reasons, such as preservation, cannot be avoided. However, in the future excavation techniques can hopefully be improved, and archaeologists will have more evidence for diet to interpret.

Endnotes:

1 Bourdieu 2010.
2 Astill 1991 103.
3 Loveluck 2007*, xv*.
4 Hardy et al. 2007, 203.
5 Hey 2004, 114.
6 Beresford 1987, 65.
7 Fairbrother 1990, 513.
8 Fairbrother 1990, 518-519.
9 Banham et al. 2014, 32.
10 Loveluck 2007, 3.
11 Sykes 2011, 335.
12 Loveluck 2007, 91.
13 Fairbrother 1990, 3.
14 Fairbrother 1990, 27-28.
15 Fairbrother 1990, 464-465.
16 Hey 2004, 29.
17 Hey 2004, 55.
18 Hardy *et al*. 2007, 1.
19 Loveluck 2007, 25.
20 Fairbrother 1990, 507.
21 Sykes 2010, 179-180.
22 Sykes 2004, 83.
23 Sykes 2011, 337.
24 Sykes 2006, 58.
25 Beresford 1987, 201.
26 Beresford 1987, 197.
27 Beresford 1987, 197.
28 Hey 2004, 325.
29 Hey 2004, 327.
30 Sykes 2006, 57.
31 Sykes 2011, 333.
32 Sykes 2011, 87.
33 Hey 2004, 326.
34 Hardy et al. 2007, 151.
35 Beresford 1987, 199.
36 Sykes 2010, 185.
37 Sykes 2006, 67.
38 Fairbrother 1990, 471, 477.
39 Sykes 2006, 58, 62.
40 Loveluck 2007, 88, 90.
41 Hardy et al. 2007, 177.
42 Beresford 1987.
43 Fairbrother 1990.
44 Loveluck 2010, 90.
45 Hey 2007, 351.
46 Banham et al. 2014, 22.
47 Banhap et al. 2014, 54.
48 Hardy et al. 2007, 163.
49 Hardy et al. 2007, 169.

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