

RESEARCH PAPER

From Pests to Pets: Social and Cultural Perceptions of Animals in Post-medieval Urban Centres in England (AD1500 – 1900)

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In the past, animals and their products were prominent features of urban life. How people utilised these animals as well as their relationships has continually changed. For example, cats, dogs, pigs and other animals lived in close proximity to people in post-medieval urban centres and were viewed in terms of their functional affordances. Cats were kept to deter rodents and exploited for their fur, dogs were protectors of the home and pigs were not only food, but helped to reduce the amount of rubbish where they were kept. However, perceptions and treatment of urban animals were far from static. The emergent animal welfare movement and legislation heralded a change in the species and numbers of animals present in the urban environment and altered human-animal relationships. Now people are detached from ‘livestock’ (e.g. pigs), but have developed closer bonds with companion animals (e.g. cats, dogs, etc.). In this article I will draw upon zooarchaeological and historical evidence in an attempt to show the timing of this transition and highlight some key factors in the accompanying shift in human-animal relationships, while focusing more specifically on pet-keeping in a city context.

Keywords: Human-animal relationships; Pets; Urban animals; Post-medieval period

Introduction

Zooarchaeological enquiry of animals and their products has largely been neglected in investigations of post-medieval Britain. Even when archaeologically recovered animal bones have been studied, the majority of research tends to discontinue at AD1750, on the grounds that such data are ‘modern’

and therefore unworthy of study because the information is already documented in primary texts (Thomas 2009). Although more recent publications have demonstrated the significance of animals from this era (e.g. Puputti 2010; Thomas 2009; Thomas and Fothergill 2014) there continues to be a lack of appreciation in the role that animals played in transforming the urban environment.

In the past, animals were inherently part of the urban fabric and cohabited with people in post-medieval cities. Many of these animals would have been viewed in terms

of their respective functions; however, perceptions and treatment of urban animals were far from static. In the 19th century, the emergent animal welfare movement and legislation heralded a change in the species and numbers of animals present in urban centres and altered human-animal relationships. In the present day, we have a situation where people are detached from 'livestock' (e.g. cattle, pigs, etc.), but have developed closer bonds with companion animals (e.g. cats, dogs, etc.).

This article forms a succinct account of the preliminary research conducted to produce the poster presentation entitled: *"From Pests to Pets: Social and Cultural Perceptions of Animals in England's Urban Environments"*, presented at the 2014 Postgraduate Zooarchaeology Forum (PZAF) at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. The article will use a contextual approach by drawing upon zooarchaeological and historical evidence in an attempt to detect the timing of our changing perceptions towards animals. Furthermore, it aims to highlight key factors in the accompanying shift in human-animal relationships, whilst focusing more specifically on pet-keeping in an urban context. To do this, the paper will be presented chronologically from the early modern to modern period with the aim to discern when and how fundamental changes in human and animal relationships began to shift.

Zooarchaeological and Historical Evidence of Pests and Pets

Animal bones are frequently found in the archaeological record and are regularly examined in order to illuminate past human activities. Therefore, it is widely accepted that the comprehensive analysis of faunal remains provides insights into the relationship between humans and animals as well as our changing perceptions towards said animals (e.g. Thomas 2005; Salmi 2012). Most faunal assemblages do not exclusively comprise of domestic livestock but will also include other animals

that may represent companions or 'pets'. Publications have set out to identify these animals and have suggested a set of criteria that could aid in their identification (see Puputti 2010; Thomas 2005 and O'Connor 1992). To summarise, this includes consideration of the following: (1) the depositional context of the animal (e.g. whether the bones are found amongst food remains or in a discrete burial); (2) the presence of butchery marks, which could indicate whether the animal was exploited for its marketable products (e.g. fur, skin) or food; (3) the occurrence of pathologies, which may suggest how an animal was treated while it was alive (e.g. traumatic injuries inflicted on animals by humans); and (4) the age of the animal, as a high frequency of young animals could indicate periods of stress or selective culling.

One or more of the above characteristics have been observed in the archaeological record which has assisted in the interpretation of human and animal relationships at excavated sites. Seventy-nine partial cat skeletons (late 11th – 15th-century) recovered from a well in Cambridge, predominantly consisted of juvenile and young adults, which exhibited evidence of skinning and dismemberment (Luff and García 1995). It was suggested that these animals were slaughtered for human consumption. In contrast, the skeleton of an adult dog, interred in a cemetery from Roman Carthage, exhibited healed injuries and pathologies associated with old age, which strongly suggests it was a beloved animal (Mackinnon and Belanger 2006). Although these examples demonstrate how zooarchaeological evidence can be used to inform upon past attitudes towards animals, this does not come without its challenges. There are interpretative problems with defining what qualifies as a companion animal as these qualities vary depending on the chronological period and geographic region. Therefore, one cannot directly apply their own contemporary definition of a pet to the past. More importantly, how an animal was treated while it

was alive may not reflect how it was treated in death (Thomas 2005, 97). Furthermore, using archaeology to investigate human-animal relationships becomes difficult in the later post-medieval period, owing to the paucity of investigations of faunal remains post-dating AD1750 (Thomas 2009; Gordon 2015); this is where historical and artistic sources can be useful.

It is well known that companion animals were popular among the elite and this is evident in historical documentation and artistic representations (Raber 2007, 87). Historical accounts frequently mention members of the royal family such as James I, Charles II, Anne Boleyn and Queen Victoria as avid animal lovers (Thomas 1983, 102–103, 109). The National Portrait Gallery also recently uncovered a painting dating to c. AD 1580, of three Elizabethan children from a wealthy family holding a guinea pig, which is indigenous to South-America (NPG 2013). Animals kept by the elite were indicators of their status and identity because the ability and resources required to own and care for an animal demonstrated their social position. Although historical documents are useful, it is important to be critical and mindful of who such documents were produced by and the intended audience. Therefore, such evidence should not be considered in isolation. Moreover, these sources tend to concentrate on members of the aristocracy and the upper classes and fail to show how people from the lower classes perceived these animals and whether they were commonly kept as companions. For this reason, historical and archaeological evidence should be considered in tangent when investigating human-animal relationships.

Animals in post-medieval urban centres (AD1500–1900)

Urban Pests

Religious doctrines played a prominent role in shaping medieval perceptions of animals by reinforcing the divide between humans and non-humans in an attempt

to separate Christianity from Classical Pagan ideologies (Thomas 2005, 93). These teachings prevailed into the early modern period, a time where cruelty towards animals was believed to be more common compared to other centuries (Kalof 2007, 84; Raber 2007, 74–75). Paradoxically, this period was also a time when pet-keeping became more prevalent among the emerging middle class, particularly in urban areas (Kalof 2007, 88; Thomas 1983, 110). This change in attitude coincided with a new law established during the late 16th to 17th-century, classifying companion animals as private property (Thomas 2005, 94). Although the notion of seeing animals as companions was becoming more widespread, this did not pertain to all animals. In fact, animals such as cats and dogs were seen as an urban annoyance. Cats were commonly hunted with hounds and regularly mass slaughtered when outbreaks of plague were expected, as they were seen as a source for the spread of the disease (Kalof 2007, 88). During the reign of Charles II (AD 1660–1685), the Pope-burning processions would walk the streets with burning effigies stuffed with live cats, whereby their cries were used to create a dramatic effect (Thomas 1983, 109–110). Dogs too were mass slaughtered on a regular basis, particularly when the number of stray dogs were high, as they were seen as unsanitary and disorderly (Kalof 2007, 88). However, the mass slaughtering of animals only extended to those that were 'masterless'. For instance, lapdogs and hunting dogs were spared because they were the dogs of the rich (Kalof 2007, 88). Animal bones of cats and dogs are frequently found disarticulated with food remains and exhibit butchery marks associated with skinning and/or dismemberment, indicating their use as a food source and commodity. Even though cats and dogs were not commonly eaten they were consumed during hard times (Thomas 1983, 116; Woodward 1970, 52–3). At one point, dogs were considered as a 'dainty dish' and the meat of young



Figure 1: First Stage of Cruelty, William Hogarth (1751).

spaniels was favoured in England and France (Thomas 1983, 116; Simoons 1994, 239).

Exotic pets

The exploration of the New World saw an increase to an increase in the variety of companion animals. This exploration opened up the trade in exotic animals bought for private ownership and to be displayed in menageries, zoos, exhibitions and circuses (Simons 2012). Although archaeological evidence of exotic animals is limited, their occurrence is direct proof of their importation (Albarella 2007). At Castle Mall, Norwich, for example,

excavations uncovered two bones of a parrot (mid-late 17th-century) found in a pit (Albarella *et al.* 2009, 89). Guinea pig bones have been found at the Royal London Hospital (early 19th-century) and tortoises have been found at Stafford Castle, Staffordshire (late 19th-century), as well as the Royal London Hospital (Thomas 2011; Morris *et al.* 2011). In addition, monkeys have been discovered in Southampton (c. 1300) and London from medieval and post-medieval contexts (Noddle 1975; Pipe 1992; Armitage 1983). The interpretive issue with the discovery of these exotic faunal remains is sometimes problematic as it is not certain

whether the animal was dead or alive when they were imported as in most cases, the animal is represented by one element and not the whole skeleton (Albarella 2007, 137). Therefore, some of these remains could just represent curios brought back from voyages such as the elephant tibia (late 15th- to mid-17th century) found in a pit at Bridge Street, Chester (Smith 2008, 355).

Animal Cruelty and Morality

Cruel treatment towards domestic and wild animals continued into the 17th to 18th century and was also seen as a form of entertainment (Kalof 2007, 112; Velten 2013). Fairs, festivals and sideshows were popular events which often included animals as attractions, featuring dancing bears and trained and deformed animals (Kalof 2007, 115). Bear-baiting, cock-fighting, dog-fighting and rat-killings were also well attended (Kalof 2007, 89; Thomas 1983, 144; Velten 2013, 99, 104–110). However, spectacles such as animal baiting and fighting contests brought on a rise in moral concerns and philosophical discussions about the treatment of animals. Kalof (2007, 97) attributes this to the following: (1) the practice of vivisection (e.g. dissection of live animals), (2) an increase in urban development and the commercialisation of animal products and labour and (3) the printed media providing a platform for people to voice their opinions about animal cruelty to a mass audience. The emergence of the 'new culture of print' allowed publications such as William Hogarth's *Four Stages of Cruelty* (**Figure 1**) to portray scenes of animal brutality to warn people against the mistreatment of animals and convey the natural progression of animal to human cruelty (Kalof 2007, 129; Donald 1999, 525).

Victorian ideology

Concerns regarding animal treatment carried on into the modern period, during which opposition against animal brutality initiated anti-cruelty legislations and the

establishment of animal welfare organisations. This is evident in the creation of organisations such as the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), the Association for Promoting Rational Humanity towards the Animal Creation and the Animals' Friend Society, each of which emerged in the early 19th-century. Amongst these changes, moral and ethical discussions regarding animal souls were also heavily debated amongst the Victorian populace. Howell (2002, 8) notes how qualities exemplified by dogs such as trust, companionship and constancy, represented character traits that Victorian families sought to emulate. Now, pet-keeping was not only about companionship but became part of the image of Victorian domesticity and civility. Therefore, the pet dog was perceived as a model example of true virtue from which the family could learn Christian values. As a result of the emotional attachments forming between people and their animal companions, it comes as no surprise that their death would have represented a great loss to the family. Owners would seek to commemorate this loss in different ways; however the most notorious was the creation of 19th-century pet cemeteries in Europe and America (Howell 2002). These spaces created for departed animals, gave middle and upper class pet owners the peace of mind and assurance that they would meet their pet in the afterlife (Howell 2002, 12). Other than pet cemeteries, which were rare and restricted to the middle and upper classes, there were limited alternatives for the burying of companion animals. Most would have been buried in gardens, disposed of in rubbish pits or in the river (Howell 2002, 11). This 19th-century phenomenon of pet burials clearly hallmarks a shift in ideology concerning animals, which is also reflected in the archaeological record. Nineteenth-century burials of cats and dogs have been found at Stafford Castle, Bridge Street, Chester and Hungate, York (Thomas 2011; Smith 2008; Rainsford, pers. comm.), which were found in discrete burials suggesting the presence of companion animals. Interestingly, Hungate

is an urban slum; therefore, the occurrence of animal companions is direct proof that these sentiments can be identified archaeologically in poorer communities, where other forms of evidence is often lacking.

Animals in the Modern City

Livestock animals were abundant in cities and towns and could be found in many spheres of the urban landscape (e.g. dairies, knacker yards, markets, etc.). As Britain became more urbanised and crowded, objections arose about the care of livestock animals in urban areas and the health risks they posed. Animals taken to Smithfield Market in London, often travelled for miles without sufficient food and water and sometimes collapsed in the street as a result of exhaustion (Velten 2013, 22). Smithfield Market was ill-equipped to deal with the volume of animals that were being held there, therefore cattle were often forced into compasses or ring droves, where they would stand facing each other, and sheep and pigs were wedged into hurdles on top of one another (Velten 2013, 22–23). London residents were also becoming frustrated by the disorder created by urban livestock. Occurrences of runaway animals were reported in the press which described incidences of damaged property and injuries inflicted to bystanders (Illustrated London News 1847, 23; Velten 2013, 21–22; Metcalfe 2012).

The reformation of sanitation had a major impact on the government's awareness regarding the direct connection between poor sanitation and disease. In London, there was a public outcry over the number of slaughter-houses based in the city, as the majority of butchers killed animals on their premises and failed to get rid of the waste, which remained on the streets to putrefy (MacLachlan 2007). Concerns over the smell and potential disease caused by slaughter-houses eventually led to the creation of The Nuisances Removal Act (1855), which gave local authorities the consent to demand the removal of waste from residential and business areas (MacLachlan 2007,

241). Slaughter-houses began to be replaced by public abattoirs and while the number of abattoirs increased, slaughter-houses declined (Atkins 2012: 88; MacLachlan 2007: 253). In addition, urban dairies, piggeries and livestock markets eventually disbanded, and along with them, so did urban livestock (Atkins 2012; MacLachlan 2007).

Discussion and conclusion

Throughout the post-medieval period it is evident that attitudes towards animals had shifted, where the perception towards species like cats and dogs had progressed from a functional role to one whereby they were valued for companionship. Although 'pets' were kept as early as prehistoric times (Russell 2012, 259–296) it could be argued that the concept of having a companion animal had evolved and become more widespread by the Victorian era. This process would have been gradual; however, it is possible that the rise in moral concerns about animal welfare and Victorian ideology, regarding domesticity and civility, facilitated this shift. The post-medieval period was also a period that witnessed major social and economic developments (e.g. The Industrial Revolution, the rising middle class, demographic growth, etc.) (Gordon 2015). Therefore, with more wealth, people would have been able to afford to keep an animal for reasons beyond functional purposes.

Furthermore, there is much to be said about the process of urbanisation and how it affected peoples' relationship with livestock animals. Social reformers' trepidation over urban sanitation played a supporting role in the restriction/removal of urban livestock to the suburbs and countryside (Atkins 2012; MacLachlan 2007). Whereas the popularity of companion animals were growing, urban livestock were receiving unfavourable attention. It is apparent that by the end of the post-medieval period people adopted a compartmentalised view towards animals (e.g. pedigree, exotic, endangered, livestock, and companion).

This was very different to the medieval perception which believed animals were created to be exploited by humans and seen as irrational and unintelligent beings (Thomas 2005, 93–94).

Scholars have proposed that the process of urbanisation led to a divorce from the natural world and prompted kinder inclinations toward animals such as cats, dogs and horses (Donald 1999, 514; Thomas 1983, 181; Atkins 2012, 34–35). As Thomas (1983, 181) perceptively states this change in attitude, ‘...was closely linked to the growth of towns and the emergence of an industrial order [which caused animals to become] increasingly marginal to the processes of production’.

The purpose of this article is not to present a foolproof argument about the transformative changes that led to a shift in human-animal relationships. Investigating 400 years of changing perceptions toward animals is no easy feat and cannot be achieved in a single article. Indeed, many of the points/ideas raised in this paper can be explored in greater detail, such as the trade in exotic animals, the impact of animals on the urban infrastructure, the rising and falling popularity of animal species and the removal of livestock from the urban landscape. There is also work to be done to explore the extent to which archaeology and history can be fully employed to gain a better understanding of these enquiries. Nevertheless, this article sets out to highlight how a holistic approach can enhance our understanding of urban environments, and how archaeology and history can be utilised to disentangle the symbiotic relationship between humans and other animals as well as enrich our knowledge of the origins of the emotional significance of animals.

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Competing Interests

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