Some remarks on the provision of animal products to urban centres in medieval Islamic Iberia: The cases of Madinat Ilbirah (Granada) and Cercadilla (Cordova)

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the first results of an on-going research project that attempts to elucidate, amongst other aspects, how medieval Islamic urban centres in Southern Iberia obtained animal products. The analysis is focused here on the examination of the taxonomic distribution in a set of zooarchaeological assemblages dated between the 8th and the 12th centuries and recovered from two different sites: the town of Madinat Ilbirah (Atarfe, Granada) and the quarter of Cercadilla (Cordova). The results reveal major differences in the most consumed species in these two urban sites. Caprines (sheep/goats) account for the majority of the identified animal bones at Ilbirah, although chicken and rabbit remains are also present in high proportions. The results from Cercadilla reveal a substantial variation over time in the frequency of the primary mammal species, possibly reflecting meaningful trends in the animal economy of this Cordova quarter. Furthermore, the analysis of food consumption patterns sheds some light on the changing eating habits and food practices of urban consumers during the period following the Islamic conquest of Iberia in 711 AD, which allows us to study the socio-economic, cultural and religious transformations deriving from the process of ‘Islamisation’ from a relatively unexplored perspective.

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1. Introduction

Al-Andalus was the name given to the area of the Iberian Peninsula under Islamic control in the Middle Ages. After the Arab and Berber conquest in 711 AD, the socio-economic and cultural structures of the Visigothic kingdom underwent a profound transformation, leading to the incorporation of the best part of Iberia into the Islamic world (Guichard, 1976). Featuring among the issues that have received a great deal of attention in historical and archaeological studies on al-Andalus is the emergence and development of urban centres (Cara, 2000; Martínez and Torremocha, 2002). Andalusian towns developed quickly as a result of the region’s integration in the international trade network of the Islamic Empire (Glick, 1979). Moreover, urban centres played a fundamental role in the Andalusian state’s political and administrative governance, functioning as centres of key fiscal and economic relevance from which production surplus was controlled (Malpica, 2015). Indeed, al-Andalus has been defined as ‘a country of cities’ (Acién, 1989; Izquierdo and Carrobles, 2008) and, consequently, historians and archaeologists have focused mainly on the study of urban sites.

Although the pre-eminence of the urban world over the rural environment is often recognised as one of the most common features of Islamic cultures, the economic functions of the medieval Islamic town in Iberia are not well understood, particularly as regards the basic characteristics of the food production and distribution systems that supplied urban residents. From historical sources we know that it was through the Andalusian cities that the agricultural surplus was channelled and controlled, since peasants used the urban market to sell their surpluses in order to obtain cash with which to pay their taxes (Barceló, 1984; Chalmeta, 2010). However, urban authorities and the Andalusian state itself might have developed specialised food procurement strategies to provision city dwellers which are unknown to us. Since the development of specialised food production and distribution systems is acknowledged as one of the central
features of complex societies (Renfrew, 1972; Zeder, 1991), its study must be addressed in the case of Islamic Iberia.

Archaeological animal remains not only provide valuable information about how food production and distribution systems were regulated (Crabtree, 2014; O’Connor, 2014; Grau et al., 2016), but also about how consumption patterns underwent changes with the shift in social and cultural identities (Grant, 1988, 1991; Valenzuela et al., 2014; Sykes, 2015). In Spain, the potential of zooarchaeological analysis — along with other bioarchaeological studies — as a source of information has been traditionally neglected (Quirós, 2014), even though the need to incorporate the analysis of the bioarchaeological record into the archaeological research of medieval Iberia has been repeatedly stressed by one of the country’s most influential medieval historians (Barceló, 1988, 1998).

Accordingly, this paper aims to explore the nature of food production and distribution systems in medieval Islamic Iberia through the analysis of a set of archaeofaunal assemblages dated between the 8th and the 12th centuries and recovered from two urban sites situated in the present-day autonomous community of Andalusia, Southern Spain (Fig. 1). It focuses on one of the variables of zooarchaeological enquiry, in this case the frequency of the most represented taxa, specifically medium-sized and large mammals and birds. A major goal is, therefore, to gain insight into the animal economy and distribution systems of these two medieval urban sites, drawing from the premise that both elements can be interpreted, at least in part, by the animal species represented in urban assemblages (Zeder, 1988; Crabtree, 1990; deFrance, 2009). Furthermore, as animal bones from archaeological sites generally reflect patterns of food consumption rather than production (Baker and Clark, 1993; Albarella, 2005), the analysed material also offers us a glimpse into the social and cultural identities of consumers during a period of changing eating habits and food practices resulting from the process of ‘Islamisation’ (Insoll, 1999).

1. The sites

1.1. Madinat Ilbirah (Atarfe, Granada)

Madinat (which means ‘city’ in Arabic) Ilbirah is located in the Vega of Granada, a region in Southeast Spain featuring a fertile plateau surrounded by minor mountain ranges and dissected by the River Genil. The site is situated at the foot of one of these ranges known as Sierra Elvira, and consists of one walled mound and a plateau where the town developed. Both archaeological evidence and written sources indicate that Ilbirah functioned as a city from the late 9th century until its gradual decline from the early 11th century onwards (Malpica, 2006).

Archaeological digs in Ilbirah have focused so far on the characterisation of the basic structure and general plan of the settlement in a few areas of the site (Malpica, 2012). The petrographic analysis of cooking wares recovered from a set of sites in the Vega of Granada, including Ilbirah, revealed the existence of an organised and formalised network of ceramic distribution revolving around this settlement during the 10th century (Carvajal and Day, 2013), reflecting the central role that Ilbirah played in this region during the early medieval period. After the fall of the Caliphate of Cordova in the 11th century, the earlier kurah (province) of Ilbirah came under the control of the Zirid dynasty that moved the capital from Ilbirah to Madinat Garnata, the current city of Granada.

Fig. 1. Map of Southern Spain (present-day autonomous community of Andalusia) showing the location of the sites mentioned in this paper.
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