BESTIAL MIRRORS

USING ANIMALS TO CONSTRUCT HUMAN IDENTITIES IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE
ANIMALS AS MATERIAL CULTURE IN THE MIDDLE AGES 3

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RELIGION, LEGISLATION, AND MEAT: THE ‘POLITICS’ OF FOOD AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CIVIC IDENTITY OF LONDON’S BUTCHERS.

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Abstract
There are few more lucid examples - than that of butchers - of how associations with animals, meat, and carcass products influenced the ‘civic identity’ of a particular group within society. I will focus not only on how butchers were defined by the products they sold, but how religion and politics influenced the way butchers traded. This will be approached from the perspective of how legal and ecclesiastical institutions used perceptions of animals, meat and butchery, as a conduit to promulgate their own ideals. Canon law, for example, used meat consumption to create conceptual attitudes, such as a pious nature, through abstinence (Ervynck 2004: 217). Conversely, the royal and civil polity employed symbolic parts of animal carcasses to captivate the imagination of the ‘elite’ populace during feasts. Whether abstaining from meat or promoting its consumption, the twin influences of Christian religious conditioning and legislation moulded the identity of the butcher and was underpinned by a manipulation of underlying cultural attitudes towards animals. This paper will focus on London from the early medieval period. Using historical and archaeological evidence it aims to outline the increasing influence of religious and political attitudes on individuals who traded in animal carcasses, seeming to be simultaneously admonishing and depending on butchers because of their unique relationship with animal bodies. This then is used as a point of departure for addressing how their trade influenced the civic identity of butchers, and was perceived by the populace.

Introduction
From a zooarchaeological perspective the medieval period presents one of the most interesting time spans in terms of integrating archaeological and historical lines of evidence. This collaboration is increasingly used as the benefits of integration become evident. While caveats need to be addressed when looking at either historical or archaeological data, each can corroborate the other in order to provide a more lucid picture of the views held of animals (Thomas 1983) and the civic identity of those involved in the food businesses.

The organisation of tradesmen into guilds is a development that is clearly defined as a characteristic of the 11th century (Pearce 1929: 3). The Guild of Butchers’ was established in the 1300’s although earlier historical references indicate ‘in the Ward of Farringdon Without there are divers slaughterhouses and a Butchers’ Hall where the craftsmen meet’ in 975 (Hammett & Nevell 1949, 11). Historical documentation can provide a great deal of useful information regarding how butchery and butchers functioned, and how they were perceived within medieval society. Furthermore, they can be instructive on the general practice and locations of specific craft specialisms. London, as with cities such as York, developed occupational topographies; the butchers of the capital were located predominantly around Eastcheap and Newgate (Pearce 1929: 8-9).

By the 12th century many urban butchers had aligned themselves with the Guild and this had afforded them a certain degree of respect within the community and power against political interference into their daily affairs. Butchers, perhaps more then most craftsmen of the day, were under scrutiny because their particular trade resulted in waste products and odour likely to cause offence, or be seen as unhygienic. Thus, with these proposed controls we have an insight into the political and economic influence of the London Butchers; they are recorded as owing one mark to the Crown, a token gesture implying Royal control and punitive punishment for operating outside of Royal jurisdiction (Jones 1976: 2-3). Two interesting points arise from this nominal figure. The first is that Goldsmiths for example, were recorded as owing forty marks, indicating that the figures requested by the Crown were calculated either through the amount a specific Company was thought capable of paying, or as a factor of the number of members within the Company. Clearly, despite the wealth that must have been generated from the increased trade in meat, butchers, perhaps not surprisingly, were not remotely as wealthy or perceived to be, as Goldsmiths. Secondly, with the exception of the Weavers, who already had a claim of Royal Charter, none of the Livery Companies paid the debt (ibid).
Thus, despite the indication that the Butchers Company was of limited economic standing, evidently, they still maintained a degree of political autonomy.

**The role of political legislation and ecclesiastic law**
The issue of politics is an interesting one. The Butchers’ Guild, as with others, had an Alderman, someone who represented the interests of the Company on a political level. In 1180 the Alderman of the Company was William Lafeite who came from a family considered prominent in the 12th century. Using such a term as Alderman is a significant issue in itself; an Alderman of the City of London was invariably assigned a Ward (a district that was under his jurisdiction) and had to be someone of significant social standing, usually with some involvement with the Church. As testament to this, William Lafeite not only contributed monies he made from renting residential property to the Holy Trinity Priory, he also subsequently became a canon. Thus, there is little doubt that despite serving a trade that some might have thought of as arduous, William Lafeite and subsequent Aldermen were from the upper ranks of society (*ibid*, 4).

The Aldermen clearly needed to be of considerable rank as the butchery trade was increasingly flexing its political prowess, mostly as a way of dealing with the increasing restrictions placed on the traders, but also as a means of increasing, developing and controlling their trading capabilities. For example, the London butchers were successful in their petition to prevent ‘foreign’ (denoting any butchers from outside the City of London walls) meat traders from selling within the Newgate and Eastcheap areas. Effectively, this allowed them to gain control of all London meat trading, which was a considerable coup (Hammett & Nevell 1949, 13). However, with an increase in trade there was an inevitable increase in waste and this drew the attention of local, and subsequently national, authority. In 1369 for example, Royal Order forbade the slaughter of animals at St Nicholas Shambles and ordered Butchers Bridge to be removed, thus preventing waste material from being carted from St Nicholas through the streets to the jetty commonly termed Butchers Bridge. In 1371 Royal command held that large animals should only be slaughtered in Stratford or Knightsbridge, although it was not until the Reign of Henry VII that the decree became an Act of Parliament. This indicates that the butchers were finding ways around the original command and thus forced legislative intervention (*ibid*, 14).

Controls on where the butchers could ply their trade and dispose of waste were not the only restrictions placed upon the industry. The days and even the hours during which they could function was under strict control, in particular for the butchers of the City. Pricing controls were imposed, and even retail practice came under legislation. Butchers were prohibited from pre-market selling or re-sale within the markets, and were not allowed to sell to one another. Many reasons existed for these restrictions, but in the main they revolved around ensuring a steady supply, fair price, and ease of inspection of the meat being sold. To ensure these ideals were maintained, in times of insufficient supply it was prohibited to slaughter calves, and in some instances ewes (Jones 1976, 123). Health was also a main concern and the Butchers Company was entrusted with making sure that the meat sold in London was fit for consumption and ‘good for mans body’. To this end, a closed season for pork was imposed. Despite the fact that the butchery trade was essential to other trades, it was the butchers who came under control of how they could sell the by-products of their trade. This was designed to ensure that the cordwainers, curriers, taywers, chandlers and wool merchants all gained the raw materials they needed for perpetuation of their respective trades (*ibid*). No doubt they too came under governmental and royal decree, although it is likely that they had more political backing then the butchers.

Religion, perhaps more so in this period then previous, played an important role on the way the butchers of London were able to trade. Ritual and religious activity have always had an influential role in the way meat is processed, however, in the medieval period the religious dogma had an impact on the trade as a whole, affecting the butchers considerably. Much debate was entered into during the 15th century with regard to the selling of meat during Lent and on Friday and Saturday. Prior to the 15th century it appears that neither butchers nor the general public were perturbed by having to abstain from meat during Lent. Butchers were prevented from killing, dressing or selling meat during these religious periods. However, by the mid 15th century the butchers must have seen this as stifling to trade and used a loophole to continue trading. This loophole was in the form of a licence that could be petitioned for in order to provide meat to those in need for health, or other suitable reasons. This system was obviously being abused as there was increasing call for the butchers who were granted such licence to be of irreproachable character, and with means to pay for any fine that might be incurred.
By 1571 the licences were causing obvious problems for those interested in maintaining religious piety, as well as for fishmongers who petitioned Parliament citing the problems the licences were causing to their own trade as well as the breakdown in religious devoutness (Jones 1976, 125).

From the above, what was arguably a passive profession in previous periods had become far more structured and organised. The butchers of large medieval cities such as London or York were actively developing their trade. Both within and outside the city limits the butcher had become an integral part of medieval society. This was expressed in many ways: on the one hand the butchers had formed themselves into an organised collaboration and were a key component of the food network. Their wares were seen as a symbol of status and standing and where used by some as a tool for social positioning. With the increased commercialism of the medieval period there was an increased level of control and regulation, but more so than other industries the butchers came under the legislation of both the Church and the State. The result was a level of restriction that affected the development of the trade considerably and required both legal and illegal activity on the part of the butchers.

Despite the restrictions, the butcher was essential for providing raw material to other trades who depended on them for their own long-term development. This is best illustrated with recent work by Yeomans (2007), below.

While in most instances the interaction with other industries was constructive, this was obviously not always the case. The more powerful wool, tanning, and chandler trades took steps to keep restrictions tight on the butchers in order to maintain prices. Clearly, interaction with certain trades was less than amicable resulting in numerous disputes. In particular the fishmongers were the main protagonists in making sure that the butchers did not trade on religious days. This was seen as not only a total disregard for religious doctrine, but perhaps more importantly (and cynically), as impacting on their trade. In much the same way that the wool merchants were able to exert pressure on the butcher through indirect legislation, so to it appears that the butchers were able to make the most of their own business. By circumventing the religious laws prohibiting the consumption of meat, through the licensing system, they took trade that was traditionally reserved for the fishmongers.

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**Fig. 1: Carcass parts entering different trades following butchery (adapted from Yeomans 2007: 112).**
Evidently, economic hierarchy was an important and potent factor within medieval trading and finance.

Aside from the more easily recognised trade considerations, what is clear from the historical records is that the butchers were also important to the nobility and generally maintained links and associations with royalty. Playfote in 1545 was a Flesh Purveyor to the Royal Household, despite the fact that he was reported to the Court of Aldermen for slaughtering animals during Lent (Jones 1976, 124). Evidently his royal connections shielded him from serious punishment, and he was in fact conferred the title of senior Warden of the Butchers in 1546. To illustrate the long established royal connection, around 1369 Royal order granted butchers who provided offal for the bears of King Edward III a piece of land on which the entrails could be washed (Hammett & Nevell 1949, 13).

The butchers’ civic persona

Perhaps more so than any other profession within an urban trade environment, butchers are identified not only with their craft, but also with their saleable goods, and to a certain extent, the tools of their trade. It is almost universally accepted that butchers are hearty and healthy; even butchers’ dogs are fit! The economic potential of the butchery trade made it the focus of legislative control, and in much the same way the perceptual role of meat resulted in specific religious attitudes. However, the underlying and infinitely subtler day-to-day opinions of the general population played an equally important part in defining and refining the civic identity of the butcher.

This is evidenced in a positive sense within the context of festivities and holidays. As in previous periods meat was a crucial component of feasting and festival fare (Billington 1990; Thomas 1999; Albarella & Thomas 2002; Lehman 2003). In contrast with the cultic activity of the Romano-British period, where sacrifice of the animal was a key component, such activities were forbidden on religious grounds in medieval Christian society. However, rather than undermine the significance of animals, this served only to augment the value of meat.

Again, to reiterate the underlying theme regarding the way the particular material that butchers dealt with, animal carcasses, had implications for the way the butchers were viewed – it is fair to say that this is at its most overtly symbolic with regard to festivities. The butchers’ role during Carnival, a later medieval development in London, called for very specific animal emblems, in particular and perhaps the most impressive, was that of the boar’s head.

In 1343 the Guild were asked to provide a Boar’s head in perpetuity to the Lord Mayor every Christmas day (Hazlitt 1892, 399). This offering marked the opening of festivities and clearly the butchers had a very important function within this paradigm, within there capacity as providers of this uniquely significant gift, their provisioning of meat throughout the festive occasion, and it might be argued, a particular role as bringer of good cheer. The Boar’s head itself was of such significance that it eventually became part of the emblem of the Guilds, as depicted Figure 2.

Fig. 2: The emblem of the Butchers’ Guild with Boar’s head.

The above illustrates the butcher in the guise of merry maker and the purveyor of joviality as well as meat. However, as seen in the modern world, butchers also faced vilification for the trade they were involved in. This is evidenced abundantly within the text of the time, as these examples illustrate:

“…people would rather have ten pimps than one butcher for a neighbour…” Erasmus, Colloquy: A Fish Diet (1526; Thompson, 1965: 316)

“Physicians ought not to give their judgement of Religion, for the same Reason that Butchers are not admitted to be Jurors upon Life and Death…” Swift (1843: 385)

“Many have a great Aversion to those whose Trade it is to take away the Lives of the lower species of Creature. A Butcher is a mere Monster, and a Fisherman, a filthy Wretch…” Seccombe (1743)

Clearly there were those in society who did not see the butcher as a jolly character, associating the person with the positive roles that meat can play in society: good for the health, and an important aspect of the diet, both in day-to-day life and on special occasions. Rather, the butcher was associated with the act of slaughtering, and the processes involved in butchery, terms that are often couched with negative connotation.
Somewhere between these two views is the one least emphasised but arguably most accurate, that which associates the butcher with the tools (and techniques) of the trade. This view underlines the skills associated with an important and essential craft specialisation. Certainly by the medieval period carcass processing has specialist tools and expertise (Seetah 2007, 25-30) and the butcher must be adept and skilful with the knife, cleaver and saw in ways that are specific to the trade. This expertise turns a carcass from non-descript pieces of meat into named joints, table centrepieces or even symbols essential for festive declaration. However, whilst not necessarily indicative of a specific mind-set (if we take the view of the statements above) these same skills are also used to slaughter, skin and eviscerate an animal.

Both vilified and praised in equal measure, the butchers’ of medieval London were arguably deserving of these opposing views. They were on occasion surreptitious and the public face of a ‘trade in death’. At the same time they provided a commodity considered essential by most, were integral to social occasions and formed the repository for the knowledge associated with a highly skilful craft. It is little wonder that their public persona was complex and multifaceted. What is evident is that the butchery trade played a pivotal role in the broader commercial development of medieval industry and was an integral part of day-to-day occurrences of medieval life. In the various guises assumed by the butchers of period, it is clear that they held an important civic identity and where key characters within London’s medieval society.

References

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