

## SOME OBSERVATIONS ON BUTCHERY IN ENGLAND FROM THE IRON AGE TO THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Annie GRANT\*

### Résumé

*Cet article présente une synthèse des données archéologiques sur la boucherie en usage en Angleterre, de l'Age du Fer au Moyen-Âge, et décrit l'évolution des techniques au long de ces périodes. Il montre également comment l'étude de la boucherie peut documenter de nombreux aspects culturels importants, tels la manières d'exploiter la carcasse animale et son efficacité, les techniques culinaires et le développement d'un commerce boucher organisé.*

Butchery in England, and in much of Western Europe, is today considered as a craft with its own tools, traditions and training courses for apprentices. While the major constraint on any butchery technique is the vertebrate anatomy, clear national and even regional differences exist in the practice of this craft. This is demonstrated in figure 1, drawn from a butchery manual published in England in the twenties (HAMMETT and NEVELL, 1929), which shows the differences in pig cutting in southern England and the midlands. Regional and national butchery traditions are preserved in such books and in training courses for apprentices to the meat trade.

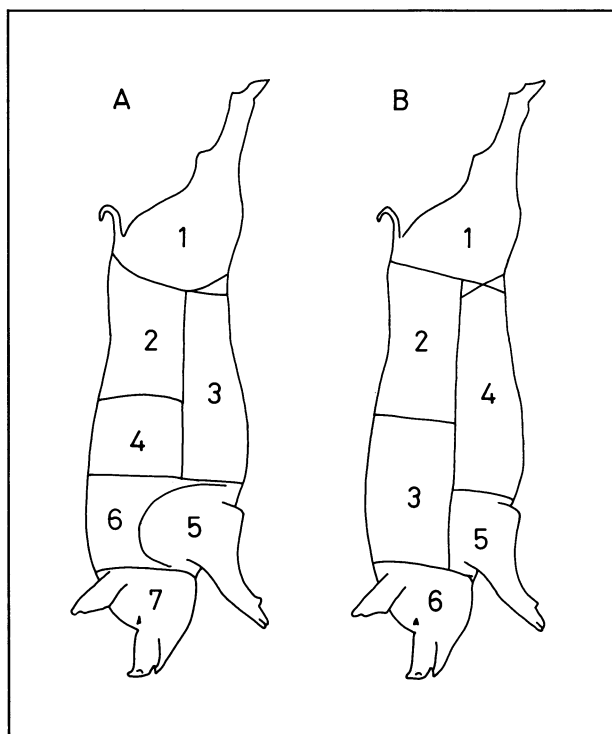


Figure 1: Pork cutting in southern England (A) and in the Midlands (B), from HAMMETT and NEVELL (1929). Illustration drawn by Averil Martin-Hoogewerf.

Schémas de découpe du Porc dans le Sud de l'Angleterre (A) et dans les Midlands (B), d'après HAMMETT et NEVELL (1929). Dessin Averil Martin-Hoogewerf.

\* Dpt of Archaeologie, University of Reading, Whiteknights, Reading, RG6 2AA, Grande Bretagne.

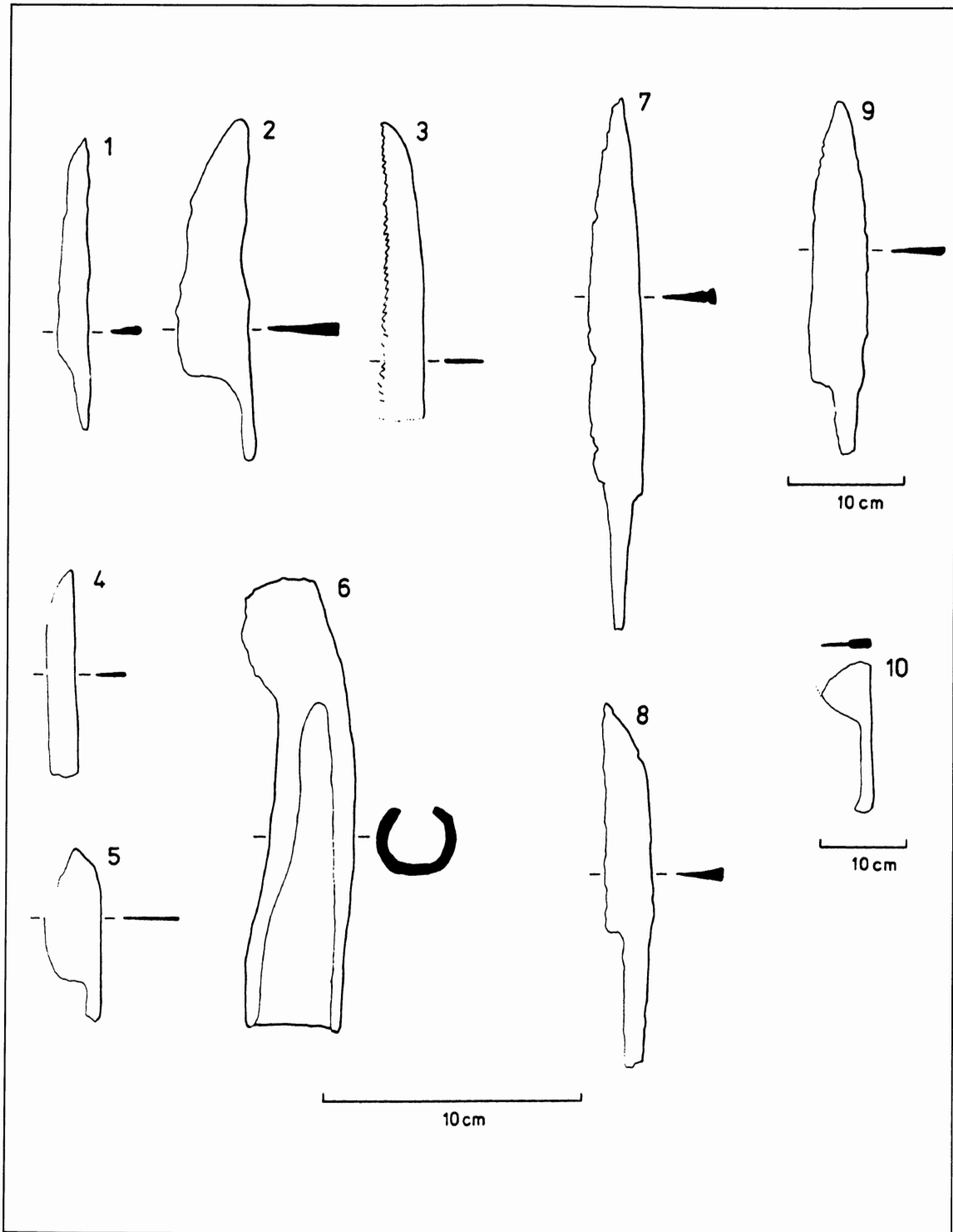


Figure 2 : Iron Knives, cleavers and saws: 1-3, Iron Age (CUNLIFFE, 1984); 4-6, Roman (CUNLIFFE, 1975a); 9-10, Medieval (9, CUNLIFFE, 1977; 10, MAYES and BUTLER, 1983). Illustrations drawn by Averil Martin-Hoogewerf.

Couteaux, couperets et scies en fer: 1-3, de l'Age du Fer (CUNLIFFE, 1984); 4-6, romains (CUNLIFFE, 1975a); 7-8, saxons (CUNLIFFE, 1975b); 9-10, médiévaux (9, CUNLIFFE, 1977; 10, MAYES et BUTLER, 1983). Dessin Averil Martin-Hoogewerf.

One of the most important objectives of modern western European butchery practice is the separation, as precisely as possible, of those parts of the animal carcass that can be sold for high prices from those parts that command lower prices. The relative values assigned to different cuts of meat are very much culturally determined. For example, sheep's eyes, eaten as a highly prized delicacy in many Near Eastern countries, are discarded as inedible in western countries.

The importance of the international trade in meat is now reflected in the butchery techniques used on meat which has had to be frozen to preserve it during transportation. In order to cut the frozen carcasses ready for sale a more extensive use of saws is required than would be used for the butchery of fresh meat. Different techniques may be employed for meat sold fresh and meat which is to be preserved for later consumption. In England, pig carcasses sold as pork are split into two down the centre of the vertebral column, while the vertebrae are removed from carcasses to be sold for curing as bacon and ham by sawing on either side of the vertebrae.

Butchery also reflects traditions of cooking – different methods may be used for meat that is to be roasted and meat that is to be casseroled. It is also important to remember that there may be several stages in the cutting of a carcass, and that these may take place in different locations. A modern animal carcass may be cut at the abattoir, at the butcher's shop and in the domestic kitchen. Each stage may have left particular cut marks on the bone and different deposits of rubbish behind.

There are other important cultural elements reflected in the butchery practices of any society, including social status and even sexual status. In the majority of human societies, the cooking, at least the ordinary domestic cooking, is done by the women, while it is usually the men who kill the animal and are the butchers (GOODY, 1982, p. 71).

In the context of this short paper it is not possible to discuss all these issues in more detail. We must now see whether the archaeological evidence allows such matters to be discussed in relation to butchery in the past.

Throughout the period under discussion a well established iron technology existed and while it is possible that some of the Iron Age butchery could have been carried out with flint tools, it seems very likely that butchery marks observed on animal bones were made by iron tools. Three main types of tool marks, made by three different types of tools, are seen in each period. There are fine cuts, that appear to have been made by sharp knives, heavier cuts made by tools such as axes and cleavers and saw marks. Saw marks are very much less common than the cuts of the other types of tool, and in all periods are found almost exclusively on bones or deer antler that have been used for tool manufacture. In contrast, in modern butchery practice, saws are fairly commonly used. The usual butchery tools of the past thus seem to have been knives and choppers. The finds of such tools in archaeological contexts (see Fig. 2) suggests that there was very little change in the form of these tools over the period discussed here, and so any changes in butchery traditions are unlikely to have been due solely to technological developments.

The evidence for butchery in the Iron Age suggests a very careful technique, with knives used more commonly than heavier tools. The majority of cut marks are found close to the epiphyses and the long bones seem only rarely to have been deliberately cut through the shafts, although cattle pelvises are not infrequently severed through the acetabulum. Butchery traditions at quite widely separated sites seem to have been remarkably similar (e.g. WILSON, 1978; GRANT, 1984a). It would be unwise at this point to talk of an established butchery tradition for the Iron Age, since the technique employed, which seems to have been one of careful disarticulation and the subsequent removal of the flesh from the bones, is largely directed by anatomical considerations. There does however seem to have been a unity of purpose in the butchery, and perhaps

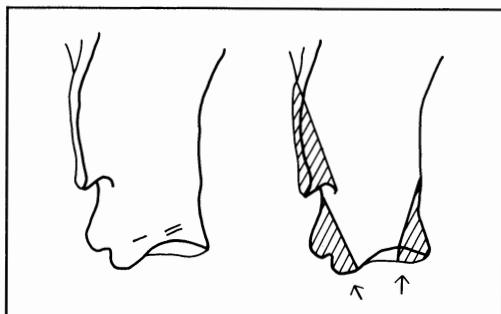


Figure 3: Typical butchery cuts on cattle scapulae from (left) Iron Age Danebury (GRANT, 1984a) and (right) Roman Portchester (GRANT, 1975a). Illustrations drawn by Averil Martin-Hoogewerf.

Traces de découpe bouchère typiques sur scapulas de Bœuf : à gauche, Age du Fer de Danebury (GRANT, 1984a) ; à droite, époque romaine de Portchester (GRANT, 1975a). Dessin Averil Martin-Hoogewerf.

a common method of cooking. The relative scarcity of burnt bone at the Iron Age site of Danebury (GRANT, 1984a) suggests that meat may have been boiled rather than roasted over an open fire.

During the Roman period, there is evidence for a change to a rather different butchery tradition. Heavy chopping tools are used much more frequently than in the preceding period and, particularly in the case of cattle, the limb bones are often chopped apart rather than carefully separated with knives (Fig. 3). The butchery marks on the bones from the late Roman site of Portchester Castle, Hampshire, showed a very consistent pattern, and allowed the reconstruction of a butchery cutting chart for cattle (GRANT, 1975a, p. 390).

A remarkably similar butchery technique was used on the animals whose remains were found at the Roman town of Exeter in Devon (MALTBY, 1979, p. 38). Also at Exeter were found two large deposits of skull bone and metapodials, dated to the first and fourth centuries A.D. These deposits may be evidence for an organised wholesale meat supply, which grew up in response to the growth of towns. There was some military occupation both at Exeter and at Portchester, and it is possible that the army was an important element in the establishment and maintenance of butchery techniques and in the organisation of a trade in meat.

At Portchester several finds of almost complete cattle skulls with consistent damage to the frontal bone gave clear evidence that the method used for killing cattle was poleaxing.

Evidence for the change from the Iron Age to the Roman methods of butchery were seen at a small farmstead site at Odell in Bedfordshire (GRANT, in press), occupied from the first century B.C. to the eighth century A.D. The butchery marks on the bones of the late Iron Age and early Roman periods were, like those of Danebury, predominantly knife cuts, while during the later Roman occupation heavier cuts become increasingly common.

For the centuries following the end of Roman occupation there is comparatively little evidence. At Portchester, the bones dated to the Saxon period (GRANT, 1975b) are much more fragmented, and the butchery technique seems more haphazard, than in the Roman period. Choppers are again used more frequently than knives, and the bones are often split down the length of the shaft, suggesting that the extraction of the marrow was important. While knife cuts are more common on sheep bones than on cattle bones, heavy tools are frequently used in the butchery of these smaller animals.

While it may be possible to speculate on the presence of a distinct butchery craft and even an organised trade in meat for the Roman period, there is no clear evidence for their continuation into the Saxon period. This is perhaps not surprising when the markets and roads established and maintained under Roman rule, fell into disuse and decay after the Roman withdrawal.

In the Medieval period there is, for the first time, indisputable evidence for the establishment of butchery as an organised craft. In a document of A.D. 1179 mention was made of the corporation of butchers of London (JONES, 1976, p. 1). Most of the documentary references to butchers during the Medieval period are concerned with the nuisance caused by the unpleasant waste of the butchery trade, but some references make it clear that butchers were important members of society. Despite this evidence for the presence of butchers in London at least from the early Medieval period, there is little archaeological evidence for the large deposits of waste bones like those found in Exeter in the Roman period that one might expect in the parts of the towns where butchers were active.

The archaeological evidence suggests that the techniques of butchery followed those of the Saxon period, in the extensive use of heavy chopping tools rather than knives, although knives are also used. Bones found on Medieval sites are typically very fragmented, which has in many cases made reconstruction of the cutting procedure for the carcass very difficult. At a few sites a consistent practice has been observed, and interestingly, two of these were religious sites (THAWLEY, 1981; WALL, 1980). The traditions of the religious orders may well have included a distinct butchery craft.

While the reconstruction of the butchery technique may frequently be difficult from the available archaeological evidence, there is some evidence for changes of a more general nature. Perhaps the most clearcut of these is to be seen in the treatment of the vertebral column. Until the Medieval period, almost all major cuts seen on the vertebrae show that the backbone had either been cut across at right angles, or that cuts had been made to either side of the spine. Vertebrae split down the mid-line are relatively rare. However during the middle ages, split vertebrae become increasingly common. The splitting of a hoisted carcass through the vertebrae from the sacrum to the cervicles is common modern practice. The gradual change to split vertebrae in the Medieval period may be related to an increasing influence of professional butchers,

with special tools and special premises where large carcasses could be hoisted and split (cf. same observations at La Charité-sur-Loire ; AUDOIN and MARINVAL-VIGNE, this volume).

The investigation of Saxon and Medieval butchery is frequently hindered by the marked fragmentation of the bone material. Bones found on Roman and especially Iron Age sites are frequently much less fragmented and bones, such as metapodials, which support very little meat are often found complete and unbutchered in Roman and Iron Age deposits, but are frequently butchered or broken in later deposits, implying that the meat and marrow content of even these bones may have been fully utilized. This suggests a much more intensive use of the animal carcass in the later periods, and may be a result of the increase in population and the growth of towns in a period where there is very little evidence for a real increase in agricultural efficiency or in the size of the animals themselves (GRANT, 1984b, p. 183).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- CUNLIFFE B. (1975a): *Excavations at Portchester Castle. Volume I: Roman*, Society of Antiquaries édit., London.
- CUNLIFFE B. (1975b): *Excavations at Portchester Castle. Volume II: Saxon*, Society of Antiquaries édit., London.
- CUNLIFFE B. (1977): *Excavations at Portchester Castle. Volume III: Outer Bailey and its Defences*, Society of Antiquaries édit., London.
- CUNLIFE B. (1984): *Danebury, an Iron Age Hillfort in Hampshire*, Council for British Archaeology Research Report 52, London.
- GOODY J. (1982): *Cooking, Cuisine and Class*, Cambridge University Press édit., Cambridge.
- GRANT A. (1975a): The Animal Bones, in: B. CUNLIFFE (1975a) pp. 378-408.
- GRANT A. (1975b): The Animal Bones, in: B. CUNLIFFE (1975b), pp. 262-287.
- GRANT A. (1984a): The Animal Husbandry, in: B. CUNLIFFE (1984), pp. 496-548.
- GRANT A. (1984b): Medieval Animal Husbandry – the Archaeozoological Evidence, in: J. CLUTTON-BROCK and C. GRIGSON, édit., *Animals and Archaeozoology: 4. Husbandry in Europe*, BAR Int. Series, 227: 179-186.
- GRANT A. (in press): The animal bones, in: B. Dix, Excavations at Harrold Pit, Odell, Bedfordshire, *Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal*.
- HAMMETT A. and NEWELL W. (1929): *Handbook on Meat and Textbook for Butchers*, Meat Trades Journal Company Ltd. édit., London.
- JONES P. (1976): *The Butchers of London*, Secker and Warburg édit., London.
- MALTBY M. (1979): *The Animal Bones from Exeter, 1971-1975*, Department of Prehistory and Archaeology, University of Sheffield édit., Sheffield.
- MAYES P. and BUTLER L. (1983): *Sandal Castle Excavations 1964-1973*, Wakefield Historical Society édit., Wakefield.
- THAWLEY C. (1981): The mammal, bird and fish bones, in: J. MELLOR and T. PEARCE édit., *The Austin Friars, Leicester*, CBA Research Report 35, London, pp. 173-5.
- WALL S. (1980): The Animal Bones from the Excavations of the Hospital of St. Mary of Ospringe, *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 96: 227-265.
- WILSON B. (1978): The Animal Bones, in: M. Parrington, édit., *The Excavation of an Iron Age Settlement, Bronze Age Ring Ditches and Roman Features at Ashville Trading Estate, Abingdon (Oxfordshire) 1974-1976*, Council for British Archaeology édit., London, pp. 110-138.

## DISCUSSIONS

**P. MENIEL** : *La transformation des techniques de découpe que l'on observe en Grande-Bretagne est valable aussi pour le Nord de la France. Cependant cette transformation apparaît quelques décennies avant la conquête (par exemple à Variscourt, fouilles J.-L. Massy), de même que les traces de relations commerciales développées avec le monde romain.*

**J.-H. YVINEC** : *Existe-t-il en Grande-Bretagne, des boucheries ou dépôts de boucheries exclusivement bovines, semblables à celles que l'on connaît en Picardie et dans le centre de la France.*

**A. GRANT** : *Non, je n'ai jamais trouvé de grand site de boucherie ne comportant qu'une seule espèce en Grande-Bretagne. En général, il y a au moins Bœuf, Mouton et Porc. Seuls quelques petits dépôts ne comportent qu'une seule espèce.*

*P. MENIEL: Y a-t-il consommation du Chien ou du Cheval?*

*A. GRANT: Il existe certes des traces sur les os des chiens et des chevaux de l'Age du Fer. Mais il semble que, même si ces animaux ont parfois été consommés, ce ne soit pas toujours le cas. Assez souvent, les os sont complets et sans traces.*

*D. HELMER: La consommation du Chien s'observe aussi dès le Néolithique ancien (Cardial) du midi de la France.*

*D. MORENO: Y a-t-il des études d'ossements post-médiévaux en Grande-Bretagne?*

*A. GRANT: Oui, mais elles sont rares. Par exemple, il y a quelques études sur les ossements post-médiévaux des villes de Londres (ARMITAGE P.L. (1977): The mammalian remains from the Tudor site of Baynards Castle, London: a biometrical and historical analysis, Ph. D. Thesis, Univ. London), d'Exeter (MALTBY M. (1979): The animal bones from Exeter, 1971-1975, Dept. Prehist. Archaeol., Univ. Sheffield édit., Sheffield), Northampton (HARMAN M. (1979): The mammalian bones, in: J.H. Williams, St. Peters Street, Northampton, Northampton Devel. Corp. éd., pp. 328-332) et York (O'CONNOR T.P. (1984): Selected groups of bone from Skeldergate and Walmgate, York Archaeol. Trust & Council for British Archaeology édit., London).*

---