

A NOTE ON EXOTIC ANIMALS FROM MEDIEVAL AND POST-MEDIEVAL LONDON

Alan PIPE*

The Museum of London Greater London Environmental Archaeology Section (GLEAS) carries out large-scale study of animal remains from archaeological sites of a wide range of periods throughout the Greater London area.

Although much of this material is derived from the domestic species, local faunas and other, edible, wild species, a few truly exotic forms have been recovered. These include invertebrates, fish, reptiles and mammals.

These notes describe some of the more exotic remains recovered in recent years.

Invertebrates

As travel, and the trade which arose from and often motivated it, increased during the medieval and post-medieval periods, many exotic invertebrate species were imported into London. These may have been purchased for their decorative appearance as curiosities, or for the esteem in which they were held in their areas of origin.

Gastropod molluscs are particularly good examples in that they are often, particularly when fresh, brightly coloured, ornately sculpted or shaped, and robust enough to be easily transported and durable. The species listed below are particularly striking.

Textile cone (*Cylinder textile*)

A post-medieval context from the Royal Mint, Tower Hamlets, yielded an example of the Textile cone. This species is widely distributed, particularly in the Indo-Pacific Province, and occurs on sandy or muddy sea-beds in the infra-littoral to circa-littoral zones. It has a poisonous bite which may cause serious illness or death in Man. The shell, when fresh, is very decorative and this example may have been collected or bought for that reason.

Conch (*Strombidae*)

A post-medieval context from Calvert's Buildings, Southwark, contained an incomplete example of a large marine conch, probably belonging to the family Strombidae. Many of this group are very decorative

with markedly expanded margins to the aperture. They are widely distributed in tropical seas and occur at a variety of depths and on a range of sea-bed types.

Money Cowrie (*Monetaria moneta*)

This small yellowish-whitish species is widespread throughout the Indo-Pacific Province, and has been used as currency in some areas, hence its name. It occurs on a variety of substrata in tidal pools and in the infra-littoral zone. An example was found in a post-medieval context from Billingsgate, City of London.

Gold-ringed Cowrie (*Monetaria annulus*)

The same Billingsgate context yielded an example of this species, which is comparable in size and distribution to the money cowrie. The shell is marked with a distinctive orange-yellow ring.

Vertebrates

Skeletal evidence of exotic vertebrates may be derived from the discarded bodies of pets, performing animals or menagerie specimens; or they may be the waste from processing animal carcasses for consumption or further industrial use. Some species will have fulfilled more than one such function.

Broadbill swordfish (*Xiphias gladius*)

A "sword" from this species was recovered from a post-medieval context at Alderman's Walk, City of London. This species is oceanic and normally occurs in warm waters worldwide, although it may occasionally wander into northern European areas. It is a very esteemed food species and a sought-after angler's fish, very occasionally attaining a length of 5 metres.

Green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*)

A large section of the left anterior of the carapace of a Green Turtle was recovered from a post-medieval pit at the Royal Mint, Tower Hamlets, and identified by Dr. N. Arnold of the British Museum (Natural History). The

* The Museum of London, London Wall, London EC2Y 5HN, UK.

carapace is fully ossified and was probably about 1.3 metres in length when complete. This is very large for the species and certainly indicates a fully mature individual, probably of at least approximately 55 kg in weight (ARMITAGE, 1980).

The species is pan-tropical in distribution and has long been esteemed and traded as a delicacy (ARMITAGE, 1980). Most Green Turtles imported into Great Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were caught in the West Indies although Ascension Island was an additional source of supply for the London market. A hole had been drilled right through one of the anterior costal bones - presumably to allow the shell to be hung on a wall as a decoration. As the pit also contained cattle horn cores, which were possibly horn-working waste, it may be that the carapace had finally been discarded after removal of the horny "tortoise-shell" for use as a raw material in the manufacture of small articles. This species gives thin clear or amber coloured plates of little commercial value, except as an inlay for furniture. The thicker, patterned and strongly coloured material more commonly used is obtained from other species, particularly the Hawksbill turtle.

Barbary ape (*Macaca sylvana*)

A medieval context from Friars' Street, City of London, contained fragments of the skull, particularly the maxilla, of a Barbary Ape. This species currently occurs in Morocco and Algeria and also, probably by introduction, on the Rock of Gibraltar.

This individual, as in the other European archaeological occurrences of the species, was possibly kept in a menagerie or as a performing animal. Some of the cheek teeth show small pits indicating enamel hypoplasia, a condition that may arise as a result of malnutrition, eg. a deficiency in vitamins A or D.

This is only the second known archaeological find of a non-human primate in London, the first being a South American capuchin monkey (*Cebus nigrivittatus*) recovered from a mid to late 17th century context at Brooks Wharf, City of London, (ARMITAGE, 1983).

Greenland Right whale (*Balaena mysticetus*)

For many years London was closely connected with the whaling industry. Much of the trade concentrated on this species, the "right" whale to hunt. The animal was an important source of oil and baleen (wrongly called whalebone). The major bones were ground to produce bone meal and high-quality oil (JACKSON, 1978) and

were occasionally used as building material eg. for gateposts and ornamental arches.

A sawn section of the mandible of this species was recovered from a probably post-medieval context in the Canary Wharf area, Isle of Dogs, and identified by M. Sheldrick of the British Museum (Natural History).

A nineteenth century context from Vintry House, City of London, contained a small collection of mammal bones which probably represent waste from a furrier's workshop. The material consisted entirely of skull and mandible fragments, all derived from carnivores as in the examples listed below.

Brown bear (*Ursus arctos*)

This species still occurs widely across Europe, northern Asia and North America, although it has been extinct in the British Isles for many centuries. It is probably the main species represented archaeologically and historically in menagerie collections, as performing animals, and in "bear-baiting". At least 5 separate animals of different ages were represented in this context. Traces of very shallow knife-cuts, possibly skinning marks, were noted on the skull of one individual.

Leopard (*Panthera pardus*)

This species is still widely distributed throughout Asia and Africa. A skull from a sub-adult individual bore clear knife-cuts, probably skinning marks, on the temporal. Mandibles from sub-adult and adult individuals had been sawn through posteriorly. This was perhaps a result of preparation of the head and skin into a rug or wall-covering.

Similar preparation was also seen in fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) mandibles from the same context

These examples probably represent a very small fraction of the exotic species that were brought into London during the medieval and post-medieval periods. Little such material has yet been recovered from Roman London and its environs. The sheer extent and intensity of trade involving London imply that other species may be expected to occur.

Finally, it is worth bearing in mind that much exotic animal material cannot be expected to leave any archaeological traces. Good examples are feathers, reptile and mammal skins, and rhinoceros horn. These are still internationally traded for great, very often illegal, profit and were presumably present in some quantity as luxury materials from the first development of London as a major capital city and trading port.