# Associated bone groups; beyond the Iron Age

James Morris

## Abstract

*As zooarchaeologists move away from the purely economic towards 'social zooarchaeological' interpretations, the consideration of articulated/associated faunal remains has become more common-place. This paper presents results from a research project which investigated the nature of these associated bone groups (ABGs). The majority of current work on these deposits has utilised Iron Age material, with ABGs becoming synonymous with certain Iron Age sites, particularly Danebury. This paper moves beyond the Iron Age and discusses their presence on sites from the Neolithic to the Medieval period. It utilises the results of a survey of published sources from southern England and Yorkshire and shows that ABGs are commonly recovered from other periods. Their composition is shown to differ between time periods and regions. Finally in light of the data presented it questions how we should view these deposits.*

## Introduction

During the last decade interest in what could be called 'social zooarchaeology' has developed and increased. The study of faunal remains, although still primarily concerned with economic/subsistence matters, is now utilised by archaeologists to look into socio-cultural areas, such as 'ritual' behaviour, as this volume and others show (Anderson and Boyle 1996; O'Day *et al.* 2004; Ryan and Crabtree 1995). Long recognised during archaeological excavations, articulated/associated faunal remains have become increasingly utilised in the interpretation of cultural aspects of society. These types of deposits have been subject to a number of descriptions, often heavily loaded with interpretation. Examples include 'animal burials' (Wheeler 1943, 115), 'butchery waste' (Maltby 1985), 'culled deposit' (Maltby 1981a), 'fall victim' (Maltby 1994), 'sacrificial offerings' (Ross 1968) and 'special animal deposit' (Grant 1984, 533; Wait 1985, 122).

One of the most influential pieces of work on the subject was Grant's (1984) study of the faunal material from the Iron Age hillfort of Danebury, Hampshire. A large number of articulated animal skeletons were encountered during the excavation, which Grant (1984) labelled as 'special animal deposits' and argued they resulted from a distinct type of ritual activity. Grant's work has been discussed and built upon by Hill's (1995) study into the nature of possible 'special' deposits within Iron Age pits from sites in Wessex. In order to be more objective in his analysis, Hill (1995, 27) utilised the term Articulated/Associated Animal Bone Group (ABG). This countered the problem of previous descriptions in that it removed the inherent assumption that the deposit is of a 'special' or 'ritual nature'.

Throughout this paper the term ABG is also utilised for the same reason. However, it is necessary to define what types of deposits have been recorded as ABGs. Previous studies such as those of Grant (1984; 1991) and Hill (1995) have included deposits of single bones in their examination of ABGs. This is because they were examining 'special animal deposits' within Iron Age features, which were defined by Grant (1984, 533) as consisting of three types; animal burials, skulls (plus horse mandibles) and articulated legs. However, the inclusion of individual elements, such as skulls or in some cases mandibles is inconsistent with the 'associated' nature of these deposits. It is this feature which distinguishes ABGs from the rest of the faunal material. Therefore, single bone deposits are not included in the analysis within this paper. This does not mean that skull deposits are discounted, but they will only be included if they are in association with other elements. For this study ABGs were defined as constituting three types of animal remains:

1. Remains that were deposited with some portion of the flesh or connective tissue still attached, causing them to remain in articulation.

2. Remains that became disarticulated post-deposition via taphonomic processes and were consequently recognized as constituting a single animal by the zooarchaeologist.

3. Disarticulated remains deposited in association, and subsequently identified as being from the same animal by the zooarchaeologist.

Data for this project were collected from southern England (Dorset, Hampshire and Wiltshire) and Yorkshire in northern England. The current results are derived from a systematic search of monographs, journals and English Heritage Ancient Monument Laboratory (AML) reports dating from 1945 onwards (a full list appears in Morris 2008b). This paper presents some of the results of this survey and aims to discuss the nature of ABGs from the above regions from c.4000BC to AD1550.

## A common type of deposit

The majority of previous literature regarding ABGs has had a predominantly prehistoric focus, with deposits from the Iron Age receiving a large amount of attention, probably because of the well known work of Grant and Hill mentioned above. Although deposits from the

**Table 3.1 Number of ABGs recorded per region and period.**

| Region | Neolithic | Bronze Age | Iron Age | Romano-British | Early Medieval | Later Medieval | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Southern England | 54 | 61 | 746 | 820 | 78 | 104 | 1863 |
| Yorkshire | 1 | | 38 | 88 | 14 | 58 | 199 |
| Total | 55 | 61 | 784 | 908 | 92 | 162 | 2062 |
| Total % | 2.67% | 2.96% | 38.02% | 44.03% | 4.46% | 7.86% | |

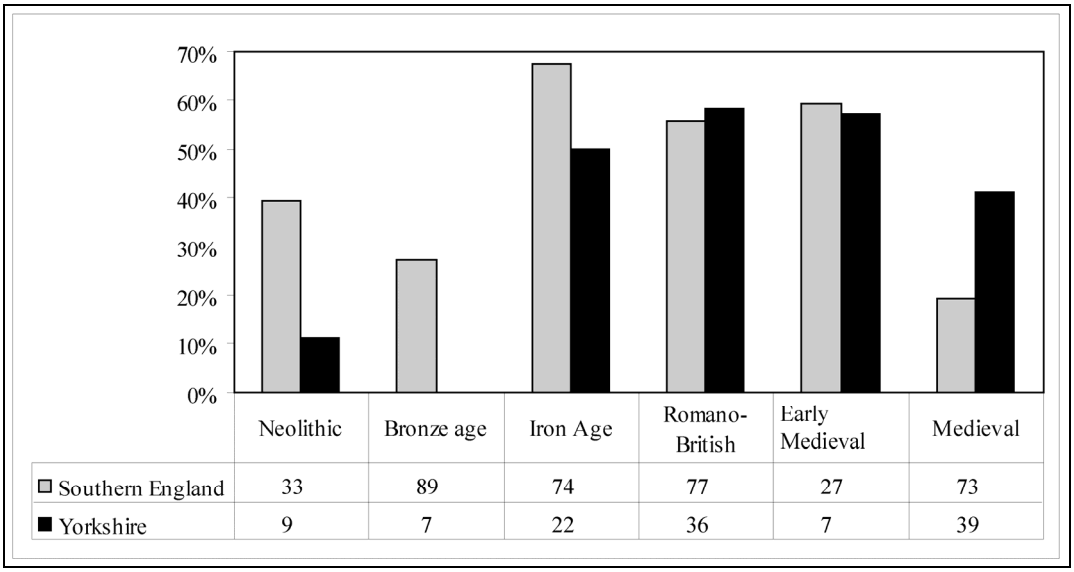


**Figure 3.1 Percentage of sites per region and period with ABGs present.**

Romano-British (Fulford 2001; Woodward and Woodward 2004) and early Medieval periods (Hamerow 2006) have also been discussed, a survey of the published literature would lead one to believe ABGs are an almost purely prehistoric phenomenon. However, this survey of excavation reports indicates this is not the case. Overall this project has recorded more ABGs from Romano-British sites than from any other period (Table 3.1).

In total, 2,062 ABGs were recorded in this study, the vast majority of which (90%) are from sites in southern England. This, however, is not an indication that they are more common in southern England. It is more likely a refection of the nature of the archaeological datasets from both regions. Simply, more data were available from southern England compared to Yorkshire and therefore more ABGs have been recorded. Overall the reports from 493 sites were examined for this study, 213 of which have ABGs recorded.

As already stated, the largest number of ABGs were recorded from Romano-British contexts which represents 44.0% of the total assemblage; those from Iron Age contexts constitute the second largest group (Table 3.1). Together, deposits from Iron Age and Romano-British contexts make up 82.0% of the ABGs recorded for this study. Surprisingly, ABGs from the Medieval period constitute a larger proportion of the assemblage, for both southern England and Yorkshire, than ABGs from the Neolithic and Bronze Age. In fact, a larger proportion of deposits were recorded from historic, as opposed to prehistoric contexts. Although a large proportion of the literature is concerned with prehistoric, ABGs, they appear to be just as common from historic contexts.

One of the problems with looking at just the total number of ABGs recorded per period is that the sample can be biased by large assemblages from individual sites. This is especially true for southern England where, for example, 62.8% of the Iron Age ABGs are recorded from seven sites (Morris 2008b). To negate this, we can use presence and absence data, which displays three interesting trends. Firstly, ABGs on Neolithic and Bronze Age sites are rarer in Yorkshire than southern England (Figure 3.1). However, this is more likely to simply reflect the small amount of faunal material that has been recorded from the area. Stallibrass (1995), in her review of animal remains from northern England, pointed out that although large quantities of animal bones may have been present at many sites, they were not collected or curated, as many sites were investigated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition, the underlying geology of many sites is not conducive for good bone survival.

Secondly, ABGs are more common on Medieval sites in Yorkshire compared to southern England (Figure 3.1). This is also indicated by the raw counts for Yorkshire, where, in contrast to southern England, the second largest assemblage is from the later Medieval period. There is always the possibility that the differences are due to publication or recording biases, with many pre-1980's excavations not reporting or recording ABGs. However,

the majority of the southern England (94.2%) and Yorkshire (94.7%) reports were published from the 1980's onwards. The difference may be one of scale and detail of the excavations and reports, as the majority of Yorkshire later Medieval ABGs are recorded from the excellent York excavations, which produced large quantities of animal bones (O'Connor 1983; 1984a;b; Ryder 1970).

Finally, the presence and absence data indicate that a high proportion of Iron Age, Romano-British and early Medieval sites in both southern England and Yorkshire have ABGs present. Although the total number of ABG deposits is higher for the Romano-British period compared with the early Medieval period, a similar proportion of sites have them present. This indicates that although ABGs are found in greater concentrations in the Iron Age and Romano-British periods, they are still present on a high proportion of sites in later periods, albeit in smaller concentrations.

## Constants and variables

One of the constants in the ABG data is the domination of domestic animals. Overall, 1,679 are from domestic animals which represent 81.4% of the total assemblage. There are slight variations between periods and regions, with the lowest percentage (85.5%) coming from later Medieval Yorkshire and the highest (100%) from Iron Age Yorkshire. Wild animals therefore rarely appear to be deposited as ABGs. This trend matches observations from the total faunal assemblages, with wild animals relatively rare in all periods, apart from some high status sites, particularly of Medieval date (Grant 1989; Hambleton 1999; Maltby 1981b; Pollard 2006; Sykes 2006). Although domestic animals consistently make up a large proportion of the ABG assemblages, there is substantial regional and chronological variation in the relative abundance of different domestic species represented.

## Constants and variables; southern England

The majority of the southern England Neolithic ABGs are from cattle, which make up 53% of the assemblage. Pig and dog are the second and third most common species respectively. We must note that of the 55 Neolithic deposits, 26 (43%) are from Windmill Hill (Grigson 1999), 17 of which are cattle. However, cattle would still be the most common species if the Windmill Hill data were excluded. Cattle are also the most common species in the total faunal assemblage from the Neolithic. They make up 45.7% of the combined NISP count from the 13 sites included in this study (Figure 3.2), a percentage not very different from the ABGs (Figure 3.3).

Examination of the Bronze Age ABG data shows a different pattern with sheep/goat the most common species (45%), followed by cattle (36%) (Figure 3.3). This represents a large rise in the percentage of sheep/goat. In the Neolithic they represent just 7% of the assemblage with only four ABGs recorded from three different sites, Whitesheet Hill (Maltby 2004), Windmill Hill (Grigson 1999) and Marden enclosure (Harcourt 1969; 1971b). The increase in sheep/goat ABGs during the Bronze Age again mirrors the trends seen in the overall faunal material. In the combined NISP count from the 43 Bronze Age sites included in the study (most without ABGs present) sheep/goat make up 51.4% of the assemblage. In contrast sheep/goat represent only 12.8% of the combined Neolithic assemblages from 13 sites (Figure 3.2).

Therefore the pattern in the proportion of cattle and sheep/goat ABGs appears to follow the trend seen in the overall faunal data. The pig data shows a slightly different pattern. Pigs are the second most common species found as ABGs in the Neolithic. They are also the second most common species in the total faunal assemblage. However, whereas the percentages for cattle and sheep/goat are similar in the ABG and total faunal assemblages, pig make up a much higher proportion of the non-ABG faunal assemblage. The majority of pig ABGs are from early and middle Neolithic sites. None are present from late Neolithic sites examined in this study, despite the evidence that the late Neolithic sees a rise in the utilisation of pigs (Albarella and Serjeantson 2002). This is not clear in Figure 3.2, as the graph is only designed to show broader inter-period trends. The surprising lack of pig ABGs in the late Neolithic may reflect differences between site types of the early and late parts of the period and the limited size of the sample. The majority of the sites producing later Neolithic faunal assemblages in southern England are henge enclosures, but only two ABGs have been recorded from this site type, a dog and a sea eagle, both from Coneybury Henge (Maltby 1990). Durrington Walls (Harcourt 1971a) has produced one of the largest faunal samples from a henge enclosure, however no ABGs were recorded from that site. This may be a reflection of the original faunal analysis and report's limitations rather than a real absence. Recent excavations on the site indicate some pig ABGs are present (Parker-Pearson *et al.* 2007). Only one pig ABG is present in the Bronze Age sample, from the late Bronze Age settlement at Bell Street, Romsey, Hampshire (Coy 1993). The proportion of pig in the overall faunal assemblage also decreases in the Bronze Age (Figure 3.2).

Sheep/goat (35%) remain the most common ABG species in the Iron Age sample (Figure 3.3). They also remain the most common species (53%) found within the total faunal assemblage (Figure 3.2), which is dominated by the large datasets from Wessex chalk downland sites (Hambleton 2007). Cattle and pig respectively are the second and third most common animals represented in the total

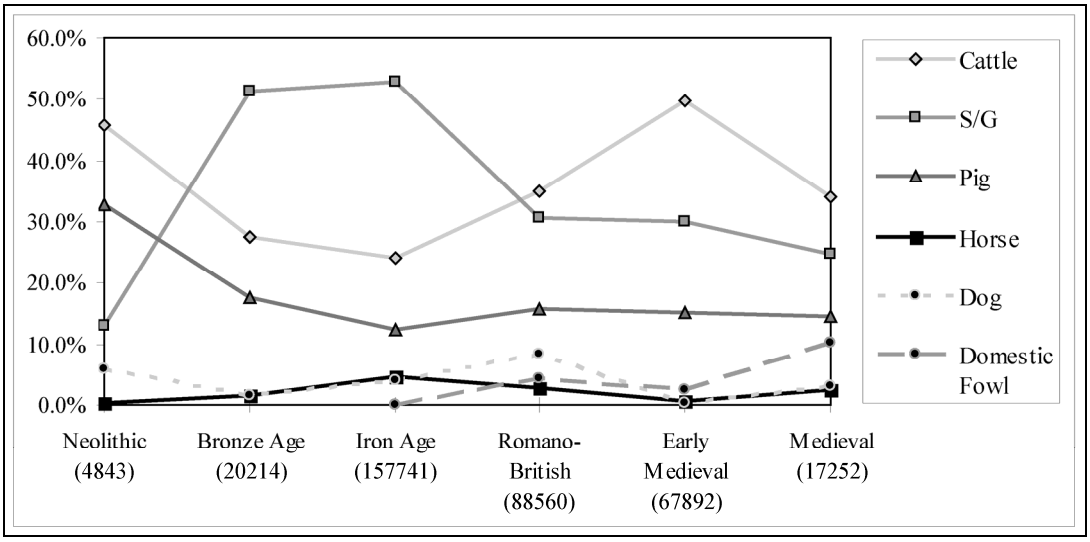


**Figure 3.2 Total percentage NISP for the most common species per period from southern England sites included in this study. ABGs are included in the NISP counts. Total sample size in brackets.**

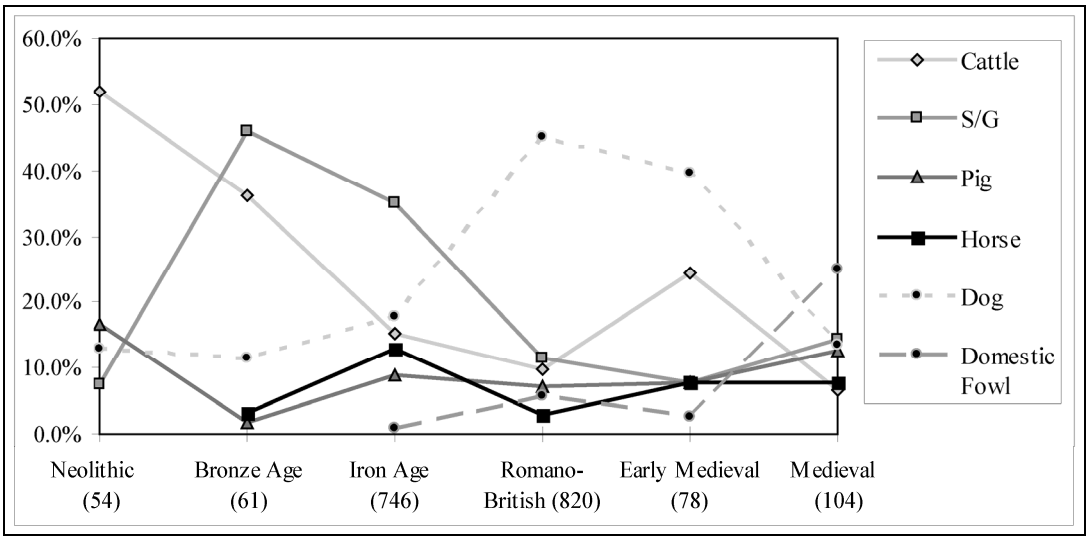


**Figure 3.3 Total percentages of ABGs from each period for southern England. Number of ABGs per period in brackets**.

faunal assemblage. However, the Iron Age is the first period when there are major differences between the total faunal and the ABG assemblages. Dog followed by cattle are the second and third most common ABG species.

The increase in dog ABGs continues into the Romano-British period, where they make up 45% of the assemblage. The proportion of sheep/goat drops sharply to 11.6%. Cattle remain the third most common species, although their proportion decreases from 15.1% to 9.6%. The proportion of horse ABGs reaches its highest level in the Iron Age sample (13%), but drops to its lowest level (2.2%) in the Romano-British assemblage. Significant changes occur to the ABG species representation in the transition from the Iron Age to the Romano-British period. However, these changes did not occur quickly. In the early Romano-British period, sheep/goat remain the most common species (Morris 2008a). The ABG results are in stark contrast to the species proportions in the total faunal assemblage in which cattle, sheep/goat and pig respectively are the three most common species.

The proportion of dog ABGs (39.7%) drops slightly in the early Medieval assemblage, although, they remain by far the most common species (Figure 3.3). There is a rise in the percentage of cattle ABGs, which had decreased in every period since the Neolithic, but in the early Medieval period cattle are the second most common species (24.4%). It is possible that the small sample from the early Medieval period may affect the results. For example, the majority of the dog ABGs are from the upper fill of pit 56 at Clifford Street, Southampton (Bourdillon 1990). The proportion of dog deposits drops significantly in the later Medieval period to 13.5%, although this still makes dogs the second most common ABG species. For the first time a bird species makes up a significant proportion of the assemblage with the rise of

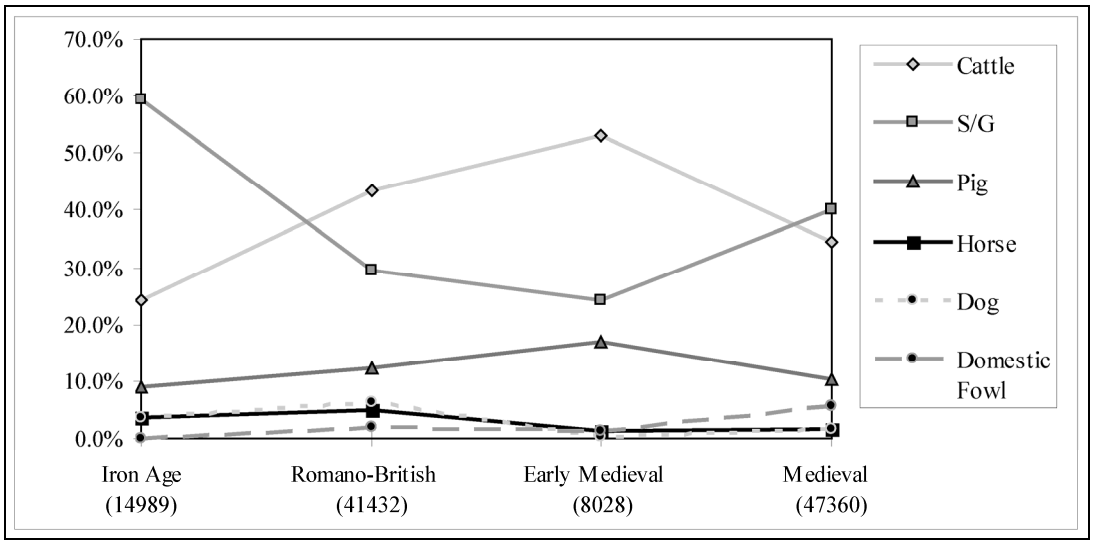


**Figure 3.4 Total percentage NISP for the most common species per period from Yorkshire sites included in this study. ABGs are included in the NISP counts. Total sample size in brackets.**

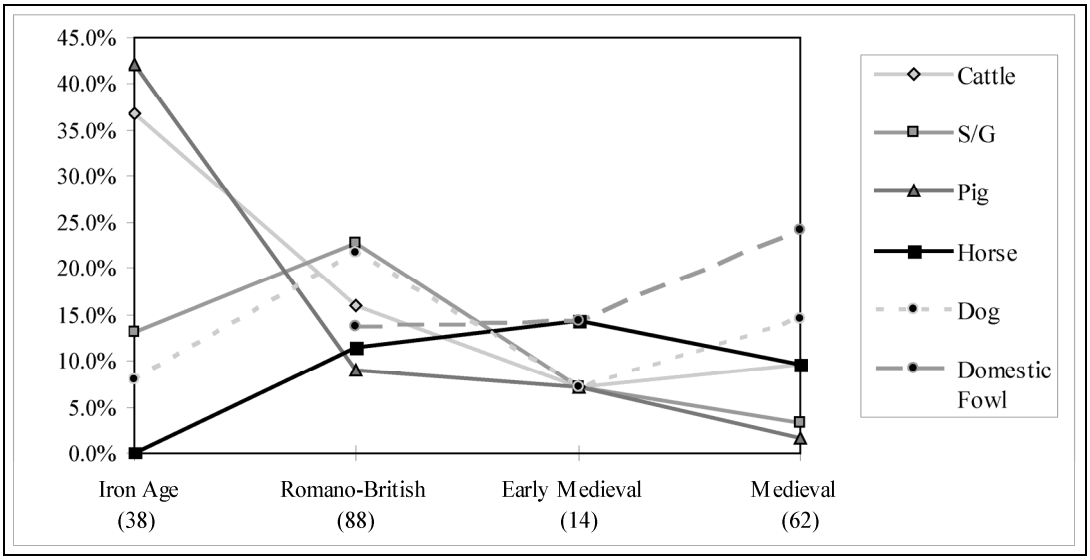


**Figure 3.5 Total percentage of ABGs from each period for Yorkshire. Number of ABGs per period in brackets.**

domestic fowl from 2.6% in the early Medieval period to 25% in the later Medieval. However, this is possibly due to the small and restricted sample with all but three domestic fowl ABGs being recorded from the manor of Faccombe Netherton, Hampshire (Sadler 1990).

Again the ABG species proportions from the early Medieval and later Medieval periods contrast with the overall faunal assemblage data. The proportion of cattle peaks in the early Medieval period and cattle, sheep/goat and pig remain the three most common species. There is a rise in the total number of domestic fowl in the later Medieval periods. This may be slightly exaggerated by the inclusion of ABGs in the overall faunal assemblage NISPs, as analysis of the faunal assemblages from sites with no ABGs present give the proportion of domestic fowl at 6.3% as opposed to the 10.2% from the overall faunal assemblage utilised in Figure 3.2.

## Constants and variables; Yorkshire

The Yorkshire data record differs from the southern England one. Although sample size is an issue for the Yorkshire assemblage, it does show that regional differences need to be taken into account regarding ABGs.

Only one deposit consisting of a partial fox skeleton from Whitegrounds Barrow 1 (Riggott and Williams 1984) was recorded from the Neolithic. None were recorded from the Bronze Age Yorkshire dataset. However, this may be due to the small number of samples available for these periods. Fortunately a larger dataset is available from the Iron Age, with the majority of the ABGs consisting of either pig (42.1%) or cattle (36.8%) (Figure 3.5). This is in sharp contrast to the total faunal assemblage from the period, which has similar species

percentages to the southern England data, with sheep/goat dominating (Figure 3.4). Pig remains therefore make up a much larger proportion of the ABG assemblage from Iron Age Yorkshire than in the southern England sample. Such a large difference is probably due partly to the small Yorkshire sample size and perhaps more significantly to the dominance of funerary sites. Of the 38 ABGs recorded, 16 come from five separate funerary sites. Four are from Stead's (1991) excavations around the Yorkshire Wolds area, north and west of Driffield, the other site is Grindale square barrow II, North Yorkshire (Manby 1980). However, even on settlement sites cattle ABGs are more common than those of sheep/goat at a ratio of 2:1, which is the complete opposite of the southern England results.

Another contrast is that no horse ABGs have been recorded from the Iron Age of Yorkshire, whereas a total of 97 were recorded from southern England. Horse remains are present in the total faunal assemblage, albeit in small numbers. Again, the difference may be due to the limited size of the sample and the high proportion of ABGs from funerary contexts. None of the horse ABGs from southern England were recovered from features that could be defined as funerary and only three of the horse ABGs from southern England are in association with articulated human remains, one from pit 113, Suddern Farm (Poole 2000b) and two from pit 5, Viables Farm (Maltby 1982).

The Romano-British period produced the largest ABG assemblage from Yorkshire. The species represented change dramatically compared with the Iron Age. The proportions of sheep/goat (22.7%) and dog (21.6%) rise. The percentage of cattle (15.9%) falls so it is only the third most common species, and the proportion of pig falls to only 9.1% (Figure 3.5). The decease in the number of pig ABGs could be due to an increase in the amount of data from settlement sites, as well as changes in the ABGs deposited within funerary settings. Domestic fowl and horse are also present in the Yorkshire assemblage for the first time in this period.

In contrast, the main change in the overall faunal assemblage from Yorkshire is a decrease in the proportion of sheep/goat with cattle becoming the most common species (Figure 3.4). This mirrors the change seen in southern England (Figure 3.2). However, the ABG assemblages show a very different species makeup. One of the main differences is that the Yorkshire sample does not display the dog-dominated pattern seen in the southern England data. This may be due to differences in the type of site and features excavated. Compared with southern England a limited number of faunal assemblages from urban contexts are available from Yorkshire. The majority of the dog ABGs from southern England are from pit/well deposits within Dorchester, Winchester and Silchester. Maltby (2010) discusses the evidence from 16 Romano-British towns, noting that dog ABGs are most often found within deep pits and wells. A large number of similar features from urban contexts have not been excavated in Yorkshire. However, to test this supposition we will have to wait for further Romano-British urban excavations to be carried out in Yorkshire, or extend the comparison by feature type to other regions.

Moving onto the early Medieval period, the ABG species proportions change again. Cat, domestic fowl and horse become the most common species, with cattle, sheep/goat, pig and dog being represented by only one deposit each. The change in species proportion is likely to be due to the very restricted ABG sample for this period, with over half, including all the cats, coming from the excavations at 16-22 Coppergate, York (O'Connor 1989). However, the trend does continue into the later Medieval period with domestic fowl and cat being the two most common ABG species respectively, followed by dog. The higher proportion of domestic fowl and dog deposits from later Medieval Yorkshire does correspond with the pattern for the same period in southern England (Figure 3.3). However, the high proportion of cat remains is different, with cat ABGs making up 22.6% of the assemblage from Yorkshire, but only 4.8% from Wessex. The high proportion of cat deposits from later Medieval Yorkshire may be due to the dominance of York data where excavation and particularly sieving standards were high. As with the southern England data, there is little correspondence between the ABG assemblage and the total faunal assemblage (Figure 3.4 and 3.5).

## Composition; the changing nature of a deposit

As well as variation in species, these deposits also vary in form. Previous authors have also noticed such a trend. Grant (1984), Wait (1985), Maltby (1985) and Hill (1995, 57) all recorded different types of ABG deposits. This project took two different approaches. Firstly ABGs were defined simply as complete or partial, with complete not necessarily meaning all bones were present, but that all body areas are represented. The second approach was to record which body areas were present for each partial ABG. This has the advantage of using the data to define the types of ABG rather than trying to fit individual deposits into a specific category. The partial/complete results are presented in this paper.

As noted by Hill (1995, 59) the deposition of complete carcasses was rare in the Iron Age, and this appears to be the case for the other periods covered in this study. Overall, the majority of ABGs consist of non-complete skeletons of varying degrees (Table 3.2). However, this varies between species and periods.

The vast majority of the domestic mammal deposits recorded are incomplete. Cattle and horse are the domestic mammals that are most often found as partial ABGs. It is probably no coincidence that these are also the two largest mammals represented. This may simply be a refection of the practicality of depositing a complete

**Table 3.2 Percentage of complete, partial and unknown ABGs for the total assemblage (southern England and Yorkshire), per species (Number of ABGs per species in brackets)**

| Species | Complete | Partial | Unknown |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cattle (303) | 16 | 82 | 2 |
| S/G (437) | 20 | 77 | 3 |
| Pig (181) | 35 | 61 | 4 |
| Horse (155) | 8 | 92 | 1 |
| Dog (593) | 30 | 39 | 31 |
| Cat (77) | 35 | 57 | 8 |
| Domestic Fowl (109) | 56 | 42 | 2 |
| Other Domestic Bird (9) | 89 | 11 | 0 |
| Wild Mammals (76) | 59 | 32 | 9 |
| Corvids (69) | 9 | 72 | 19 |
| Other Wild bird (50) | 2 | 36 | 62 |
| **Total (2059)** | **26** | **61** | **13** |

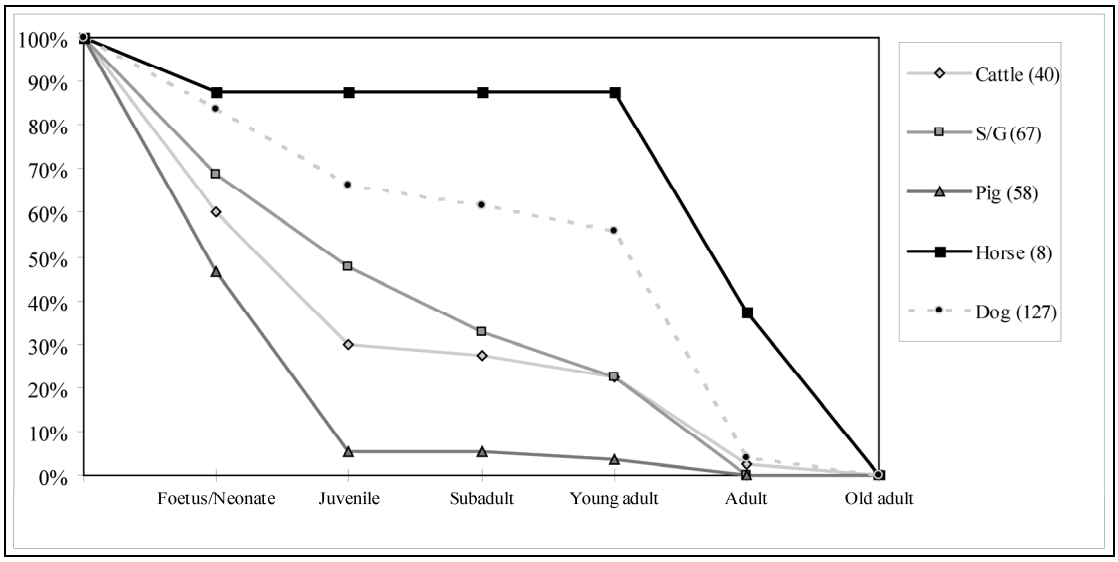


**Figure 3.6 Mortality profiles of complete ABGs per species (combined results from all periods and regions with ageing data available).**

cow or horse. The majority of complete cow ABGs encountered in this study have been from neonatal or juvenile individuals (Figure 3.6). In comparison, 42.4% of partial cattle ABGs are from adults (Figure 3.7). This pattern has been noted in a number of periods, in particular, the southern England Iron Age assemblage, where many of the ABGs have been interpreted as natural deaths (Morris 2008b).

Horse remains show a very different pattern with the majority of complete and partial ABGs coming from individuals that have reached maturity. This may be a reflection of the differences in status and utilisation of the two animals, with little evidence for the consumption of horsemeat in Britain and a low kill-off of immature animals. There are generally very few cases where bones of young horses have been found in non-ABG assemblages (e.g. Maltby 1981a; 2010).

A higher proportion of sheep/goat and pigs have been recorded as complete ABGs. There is little difference in the mortality profile of complete or partial sheep/goat. There is however a noticeable difference for pigs. Only 8.6% of the complete pig deposits are from individuals that lived beyond the juvenile stage of development (Figure 3.6). In comparison 18.8% of partial pigs are from individuals older than juvenile (Figure 3.7).

Surprisingly a higher proportion of complete pigs are recorded than dogs. However, the completeness of a large proportion of dog remains is unknown (Table 3.2) the majority of which are from Romano-British contexts. Their 'unknown' status is in a large part due to taphonomic factors, in particular post-depositional movement and mixing of multiple depositions within the deep pits/wells where they were often deposited. Maltby (1987; 1993, 326) has suggested that the majority of the dog ABGs (within this study recorded as unknown or partial) would have been originally deposited as complete skeletons. This would explain the even spread of dog elements in the partial ABGs and non-ABG faunal assemblages from many of the Romano-British sites.

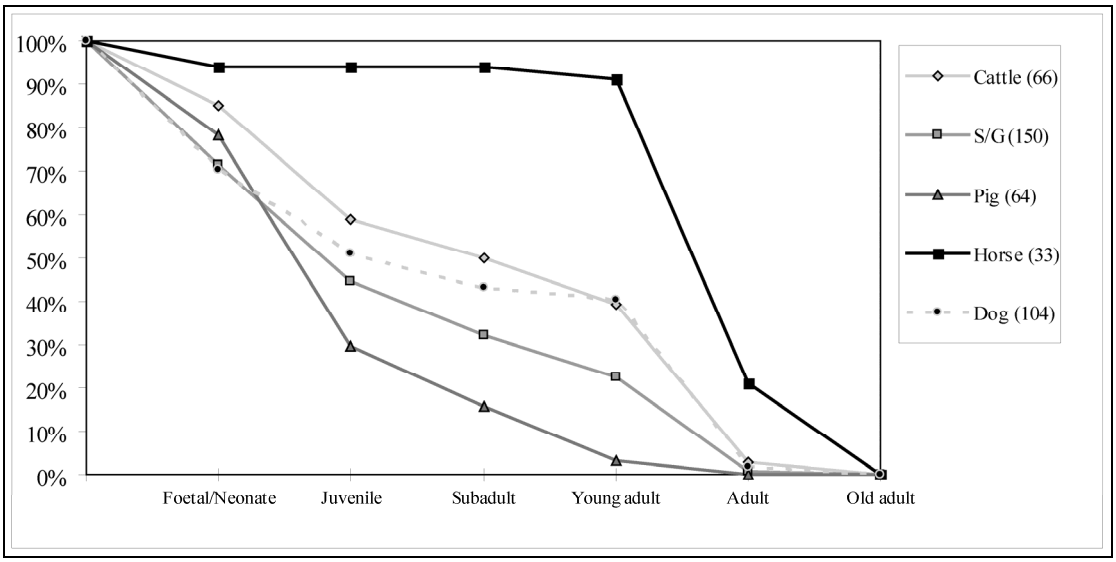


**Figure 3.7 Mortality profiles of partial ABG per species (combined results from all periods and regions with ageing data available).**

There also appears to be little overall age difference between complete and partial dog ABGs.

The majority of domestic bird ABGs recorded in this study consist of complete skeletons (Table 3.2). Complete domestic fowl have been recovered from sites in southern England and Yorkshire from the Romano-British period onwards. However, all the other poultry and raptors probably kept in captivity (goose, goshawk, peregrine falcon and sparrowhawk) are recorded from the Medieval site of Faccombe Netherton, Hampshire (Sadler 1990).

A higher proportion of the wild mammal ABGs recorded consists of complete skeletons. However, this is due to a small number of Iron Age and Romano-British sites affecting the data. No complete wild mammals are present in the Neolithic or Bronze Age assemblages. However, 76% and 65% of the wild mammals from Iron Age and Romano-British sites respectively are complete. However, both samples are heavily affected by individual sites in Hampshire. Thirteen of the 21 Iron Age wild mammal ABGs (excluding cat) are from a single deposit of 12 foxes and one red deer at Winklebury Camp (Jones 1977). In the Romano-British sample, 20 of the 24 complete wild mammals are from Oakridge Well (Maltby 1994). It is interesting to note that the Winklebury Camp red deer is the only one encountered in this study that consists of a complete skeleton. The majority of the complete wild mammals are from small carnivores, such as fox, stoat and weasel. There is little evidence of small carnivorous mammal consumption from the Neolithic onwards. Butchery marks are only present on one deposit. The lower front and hind limbs of a complete fox at the Iron Age site of Nettlebank Copse, Hampshire bears knife cuts, which are thought to indicate skinning of the animal (Poole 2000a). These ABGs may be complete because the carcasses have only been skinned and no further processing has taken place. This of course assumes that they are the result of human activity, some deposits have been interpreted as pitfall victims. Although the overall assemblage shows some species are more commonly found as complete skeletons, there is also much variation between the periods.

The Neolithic and Bronze Age assemblages have a very different pattern to those from the Iron Age and Romano-British periods. Sheep/goat have the highest proportion of complete ABGs in the Neolithic assemblage (Figure 3.8). However, this is due to the very small sample of four sheep/goat in total, two of which are complete. Seven complete sheep/goat ABGs are also present in the Bronze Age sample, the majority of which are from the Crab Farm enclosure, Dorset (Locker 1992). The highest proportion (32%) of complete cattle is also recorded from the Bronze Age. With the exception of the Down Farm Pond Barrow, Dorset (Legge 1991), all the complete cattle ABGs are from settlement sites (Legge 1991; Locker 1992; Maltby 1992).

During the Iron Age and Romano-British periods, domestic fowl are often found as complete ABGs. The Iron Age sample is small with only six recorded, three of which are complete. The number of domestic fowl ABGs increases in the Romano-British period to 58, with 21 complete. In this period there appears to be a specific pattern of deposition, with the majority recorded from funerary sites such as Poundbury, Dorchester (Buckland-Wright 1993) and Trentholme Drive, York (Fraser and Ryder 1968).

A relatively high proportion of the pig ABGs also consist of complete skeletons in the Iron Age and Romano-British periods (Figure 3.8). In this regard the Iron Age assemblage is dominated by the results from Danebury, from which over half the complete pigs are recorded. The majority of these were neonatal and dated to the middle

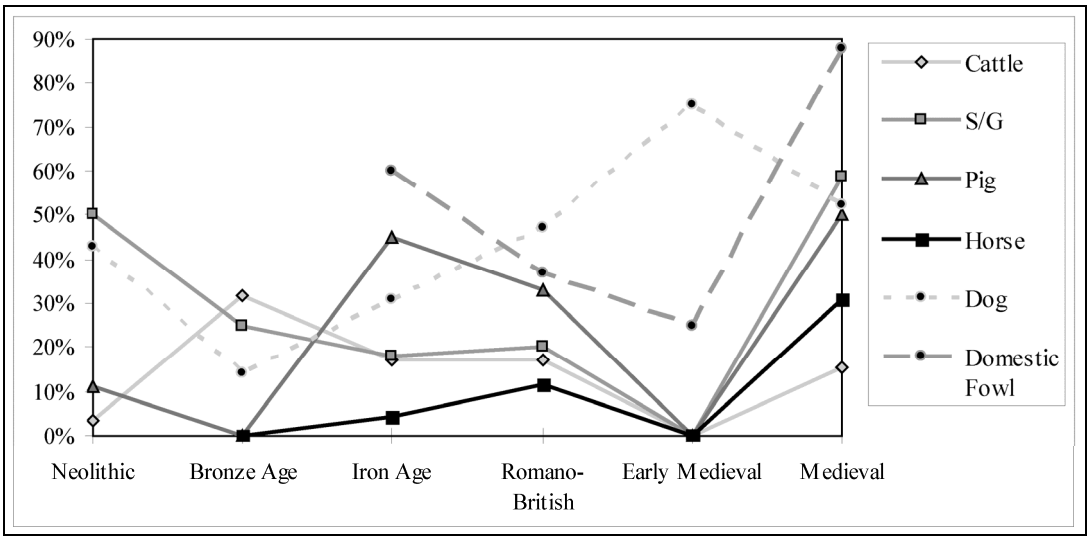


**Figure 3.8 Percentage of complete ABGs present for the main species per period.**

Iron Age. No one site dominates the Romano-British assemblage. Again, all the complete and partial pigs are from neonatal or juvenile individuals. Perhaps significantly, of the 22 complete pig deposits, all except two, one from Silchester (Grant 2000), and one from Portchester, Hampshire (Grant 1975) are from rural settlements.

A substantial proportion of dog ABGs in each period consist of complete skeletons, although it is not until the early Medieval period that the proportion of complete dogs is higher than for any other species. But overall more complete dogs were recorded than any other species. Also, as discussed, many of the partial dog ABGs may have originally been deposited as complete skeletons.

In the later Medieval sample domestic fowl are the most common ABG recorded as complete. However, as with the Iron Age and Romano-British wild mammal data, this is heavily affected by the data from a small number of sites. All the complete domestic fowl from southern England are from one site, Faccombe Netherton (Sadler 1990). A similar pattern is seen in the Yorkshire data where all the Medieval domestic fowl ABGs consist of complete skeletons, but all are recorded from two sites in York, The Bedern Foundry (Bond and O'Connor 1999) and 58-59, Skeldergate (O'Connor 1984b). In fact, only one domestic fowl from the Medieval ABG assemblage has been recorded as a partial skeleton. There is generally a high proportion of complete ABGs for most species in the Medieval period, with 59% of sheep/goat and 50% of pig consisting of complete deposits (Figure 3.8). However, as with the domestic birds, these figures are dominated by a restricted number of southern England sites.

## Conclusions; Beyond the Iron Age

As discussed at the beginning of this paper, the majority of the literature utilising ABGs concerns prehistoric deposits. However, the results presented above have shown that such deposits are recovered from sites ranging from the Neolithic to Medieval periods. In fact they are more common on historic rather than prehistoric sites. As this study utilised only published sources, there are undoubtedly many more examples of ABGs present in 'grey literature' and the results presented here may be seen as just the minimum numbers. Although this paper has shown that such deposits have a long history, they are also extremely variable. They differ not only in the species which were deposited but also in the composition of the deposit. Some trends do exist within each period, but it could be argued that no two ABG deposits are exactly alike. At this point we must start to consider the implications for the interpretation of these deposits.

As discussed at the beginning of this paper, previous names for ABGs have been heavily loaded with interpretative descriptions such as 'sacrificial offerings' (Ross 1968). The utilisation of such descriptions is one of the main problems when it comes to interpreting ABG deposits and has led archaeologists to be stuck into circular arguments. In many cases the interpretation of the deposit has been defined by the current preconceptions of certain time periods which can be summarised as prehistoric ABGs are 'ritual' whereas historic ABGs are 'functional'. There has also been a trend towards more 'ritual' interpretations of Romano-British ABGs in the last decade (Morris 2008a; in press). This has resulted in the interpretation not been led by the evidence from the individual ABGs. It is therefore important to emphasise that the above discussion deals only with the physical make-up of the deposits rather than the preconceived metaphysical ideals applied to them.

This lack of separation between interpretation and description is also one of the main reasons the interpretation of these deposits is often stuck in a dichotomy between 'ritual' and 'functional'. It has also led to the interpretation of those ABGs thought to be part of a ritualised activity to rarely move beyond what could be called 'meta-level' ritual explanations. 'Ritual' as a term is an overarching generalisation made up of a number of different events. For example, sacrifice, feasting and offerings are all forms of ritual activity. Therefore by using the term 'ritual' as both an explanation and description the archaeologist is not theorising what actions may have resulted in the ABG, but are rather assigning it to a vague overarching category.

To try and move away from such problems, only the ABG composition data has been presented in this paper. Hopefully this has shown that the nature of ABGs is extremely variable. We must therefore question whether the blanket interpretations often applied are suitable. If the deposits are so variable, then they may have undergone a number of different human actions in their creation. We could also hypothesize that the actions may have different meanings. Taking such an approach would therefore lead us away from trying to interpret ABGs as a concept rather than interpreting individual deposits.

Therefore, although this paper offers no answers as to the actions and meanings behind ABGs, it hopefully demonstrates that they are not just Iron Age phenomena. Additionally, the variable nature of the deposits across all time periods suggests that we should start to view ABGs as individual deposits, incorporating not only zoological, but taphonomic (i.e. butchery, gnawing, weathering) and contextual information. Therefore the question we should be asking is not 'what do ABGs mean' but rather 'what does *this* ABG mean'.

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## Authors' Affiliations

James Morris
Museum of London Archaeology
Mortimer Wheeler House
46 Eagle Wharf Road
London
N1 7ED
UK