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Journal of Archaeological Science

Volume 32, Issue 1, January 2005, Pages 39-48

Fast or feast: reconstructing diet in later medieval England by stable isotope analysis

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2004.05.007>

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Abstract

In this pilot-study, which was designed to assess the range of isotopic variation in English medieval populations, we present the results of stable isotope analysis of carbon and nitrogen of human and animal bone collagen from three later medieval sites in Northern England.

The isotopic values observed for the rural hospital of St. Giles by Brompton Bridge (N. Yorks.), the Augustinian Friary at Warrington and a mass-grave with casualties from the Battle of Towton (N. Yorks.) are significantly different from those reported for other archaeological populations in Britain, namely by their very enriched $\hat{I}^{15}\text{N}$ ratios which are combined with almost entirely terrestrial carbon signals. We discuss possible explanations for the unusual human data and argue on grounds of the available faunal data, that a mixed diet of terrestrial, marine and freshwater resources is most likely. This may indicate the significant impact of the medieval fasting regulations on everyday

may indicate the significant impact of the medieval fasting regulations on everyday subsistence. We conclude that stable isotope analysis can complement the available historical information on diet in the Middle Ages.



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Keywords

Stable isotope analysis; Carbon; Nitrogen; Bone collagen; Palaeodiet; Aquatic foods; Middle Ages

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Fast or feast: reconstructing diet in later medieval England by stable isotope analysis, however, the closed set is periodic.

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