**‘Unmaking’ the Deer in Medieval Europe: Historical and Archaeological Evidence**

**Umberto Albarella & Veronica Aniceti**

Supplementary Material

**Deer Species and their Hunting in Medieval Europe**

Some deer (family Cervidae) currently living in Europe are recent introductions but four species—Elk (*Alces alces*), Reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*), Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus*) and Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*)—have occupied the continent throughout the Holocene (Yalden, 1999). A fifth species, the Fallow Deer (*Dama dama*), has had a historical and, more marginally, prehistoric presence in Europe. Unquestionably this is a consequence of human introduction (Masseti & Vernesi, 2015).

All European deer species have contributed substantially to human history and, in turn, their population dynamics have been significantly modified through human agency; Reindeer, however, is the only species to have been domesticated. Elk and Reindeer distributions are restricted to northern Europe. Although the Elk used to live at lower latitudes up to early medieval times (Schmölcke & Zachos, 2005), neither of these northern species is relevant to our subject and will therefore not be considered.

The Red Deer (Figure 2) is the largest of the three species under discussion and is characterized by substantial sexual dimorphism: females are smaller and, like all other deer species except Reindeer, lack antlers. Red Deer are highly adaptable and, although they mainly live in woodland, they are known to have adapted to open habitats too (Nowak, 1999, Vol. 2: 1110). This species was an important human prey during the Mesolithic and has continued to be hunted to this day. During the Middle Ages in Europe, Red Deer hunting was a highly prestigious activity, imbued with symbolic meanings. Red Deer meat (venison) was highly prized and regularly served on the aristocratic table. The relative frequency of Red Deer hunting in relation to other cervid species varied according to geographic region, time, and the social status of the hunters.

The Fallow Deer (Figure 3) is phylogenetically close to the Red Deer and equally sexually dimorphic. Though a smaller animal, the pronounced sexual dimorphism of both species means that large male Fallow can overlap in size with small female Red. The Fallow Deer habitat is not dissimilar to that of the Red Deer, namely this is a woodland dweller capable of living in more open environments (Nowak, 1999, Vol. 2: 1098). The Fallow Deer is a western Asian species that lives alongside the similar Mesopotamian Fallow Deer (*Dama mesopotamica*), although during the Pleistocene and—in restricted areas—in the early Holocene it was present in Europe too (Masseti, 1996). In historic times, it was reintroduced into Europe by the Romans (Sykes et al., 2006, 2011). In this period, Fallow Deer were probably mainly kept in tamed conditions as a curiosity, though a few viable and independent populations were arguably also present in the countryside (Sykes et al., 2011). The beginning of the second millennium ad saw a more substantial spread, probably facilitated by Norman expansionism. In the later Middle Ages, Fallow Deer became naturalized in many European areas, giving rise to the many populations that still survive on European soil, although more recent introductions also took place (Lever, 2009: 105). Fallow Deer became a typical animal kept in deer parks, where it was hunted—sometimes intensively—largely for the benefit of the aristocracy, if not directly by them (Sykes, 2010).

The Roe Deer (Figure 4) is, phylogenetically, a more primitive species with much smaller antlers and body size (Putman, 1988: 23). The sexual size dimorphism is less pronounced, which means that the remains of this species are rarely confused with those of the larger species. For zooarchaeologists, the main problem is distinguishing Roe Deer remains from those of the ubiquitous and similarly sized sheep (*Ovis aries*) and goat (*Capra hircus*)—easy on some elements but potentially difficult on others. Roe Deer can be found in many different environments, more so than the other two species (Putman, 1988: 23). Its presence in the European Pleistocene is rather elusive but it was commonly hunted by Mesolithic people in the early Holocene (Albarella, 2019: 26; Bridault et al., 2020). It was also regularly hunted during the Middle Ages but was less prized than Red or Fallow Deer (Albarella, 2019: 206).

Two main techniques were used to hunt deer in the Middle Ages, and these are amply described in the literature (e.g. Cummins, 1988; Almond, 2011). The older but less prestigious method is ‘bow and stable’ hunting in which deer were driven towards a pre-defined area by horsemen where they would become vulnerable to a small number of archers. The deer was unlikely to die on the spot, so a dog known as a ‘brachet’ was used to track and locate the wounded animal. This method was used to hunt both Fallow and Red Deer and was practised until the fourteenth century at least. It was not especially ritualized and its main aim was meat procurement.

The nobler hunting strategy was known as ‘*par force*’(by strength), which consisted of chasing the deer to the point of exhaustion. Historical descriptions largely focus on the fully grown Red Deer stag (the hart), regarded as the most prestigious animal to hunt. A greater number of people, horses, and hounds was involved than in the ‘bow and stable’ method. This hunt combined practical and ritual elements and was formally divided into several stages. The first was ‘the quest’, when the pre-eminent stag in the area was identified. Then, on the morning of the hunt, the hunting party would gather for breakfast and agree on their strategy, a phase known as ‘the assembly’. This would be followed by the ‘relays’, when packs of hounds would be placed in strategic positions along the potential path followed by the stag. During the ‘fynding’, a scenthound would have the task of finding the chosen hart and lead the Master of Game (often the lord) and the rest of the party towards it. Finally came the proper ‘chase’, when horsemen and hounds would pursue their prey up to the point it could no longer escape. Eventually, the hart would be ‘at bay’ and have no other choice but to defend itself. The hounds were not allowed to attack the hart, which would instead be killed by the leader with a sword or spear. Two other stages of the hunt would follow and, since those are key to the topic discussed here, they are illustrated in greater detail in the next section.

**References**

Albarella, U. 2019. *A Review of Animal Bone Evidence from Central England* (Historic England Research Report Series, 61). London: Historic England.

Almond, R. 2011. *Medieval Hunting*. 3rd ed. Stroud: The History Press.

Bridault, A., Binois-Roman, A., Drucker, D. G. & Pion, G. 2020. Investigating the Exploitation Pattern of a Newly Established Species, the Case of the Late-Glacial Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) at La Fru (Savoie, France). *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences*, 12: 229. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12520-020-01168-1>

Cummins, J. 1988. *The Hound and the Hawk. The Art of Medieval Hunting*. London: Phoenix Press. Lever, C. 2009. *The Naturalized Animals of Britain and Ireland*. London: New Holland.

Masseti, M. & Vernesi, C. 2015. Historic Zoology of the European Fallow Deer, *Dama dama dama*: Evidence from Biogeography, Archaeology and Genetics. In: K. Baker, R. Carden & R. Madgwick, eds. *Deer and People*. Oxford: Windgather, pp. 13–22.

Masseti, M. 1996. The Postglacial Diffusion of the Genus *Dama* Frisch, 1775, in the Mediterranean Region. *Supplemento alle Ricerche di Biologia della Selvaggina*, 25: 7–29.

Nowak, R.M. 1999. *Walker’s Mammals of the World*. 6th ed. Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press.

Putman, R. 1988. *The Natural History of Deer*. London: Christopher Helm.

Schmölcke, U. & Zachos, F.E. 2005. Holocene Distribution and Extinction of the Moose (*Alces alces*, Cervidae) in Central Europe. *Mammalian Biology*, 70: 329–44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mambio.2005.08.001>.

Sykes, N. 2010. European Fallow Deer. In: T.P. O’Connor & N. Sykes, eds. *Extinctions and Invasions. A Social History of British Fauna*. Oxford: Oxbow, pp. 51–58.

Sykes, N., White, J., Hayes, T.E. & Palmer, M.R. 2006. Tracking Animals Using Strontium Isotope in Teeth: The Role of Fallow Deer (*Dama dama*) in Roman Britain. *Antiquity*, 80: 948–59. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00094539>.

Sykes, N.J., Baker, K.H., Carden, R.F., Higham T.F.G., Hoelzel, R. & Stevens, R.E. 2011. New Evidence for the Establishment and Management of the European Fallow Deer (*Dama dama dama*) in Roman Britain. *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 38: 156–65. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2010.08.024>.

Yalden, D. 1999. *The History of British Mammals*. London: Poyser Natural History.