

Researchers Trawl The Origins Of Sea Fishing In Northern Europe

April 19 2006

For decades the study of fish bones was considered one of the most esoteric branches of archaeology, but now it is helping to reveal the massive significance of the fishing trade in the Middle Ages.

New research co-ordinated by archaeologists at the University of York will spotlight the earliest development of Europe's sea fisheries and, given the continuous expansion of sea fishing since the Middle Ages, the ultimate origin of today's fishing crisis.

The three-year project, financed by the Leverhulme Trust and also supported by HMAP, the historical branch of the Census of Marine Life, will involve researchers across Northern Europe.

It builds on earlier research by the project team which discovered that extensive sea fishing began in Europe 1,000 years ago. A major shift from freshwater to sea fishing was due to a combination of climate, population growth and religion.

Dr James Barrett, of the University of York's Department of Archaeology, who is co-ordinating the project, has pinpointed the century between 950AD and 1050AD as the critical period when this fisheries revolution took place.

By studying fish bones from archaeological sites such as York, Gent in Belgium, Ribe in Denmark, Schleswig in Germany and Gdansk in Poland, the researchers hope to establish what long-term impact this

rapid switch to intensive sea fisheries had on medieval trading patterns. In York, the vast collections assembled by York Archaeological Trust will provide material for the bone study.

Dried cod was traded from the Arctic in the Middle Ages and, around 1000AD, trade routes opened up across the Viking world to allow long-range trading of bulk staple goods.

Dr Barrett said: "We are using the fish trade as a way of understanding long-term economic and social changes in Northern Europe. We want to look at how a large-scale trade in commodities developed and the way it has been influenced by so many socio-economic and environmental factors."

"We shall use both traditional zooarchaeological techniques and new biomolecular approaches. Dried cod for trade was cut up in certain ways, which can be detected by the cut marks on the bones. Moreover, we will use biomolecular tests to establish whether fish found in towns such as York originated locally from the North Sea or from distant sources such as Arctic Norway."

The biomolecular studies may also provide a direct insight into changes in marine ecosystems and help to improve understanding of the early human impact on fish stocks. The project aims to link an understanding of medieval economic development with the pressing current need to know what marine ecosystems were like before the impact of over-fishing.

The project will depend on interdisciplinary and international cooperation. Its core members, drawn from five European countries, include zooarchaeologists, biomolecular methods experts and a fisheries ecologist, supported by a team of international collaborators, whose expertise covers Northern Europe, from Estonia to Arctic Norway.

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Citation: Researchers Trawl The Origins Of Sea Fishing In Northern Europe (2006, April 19)
retrieved 18 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2006-04-trawl-sea-fishing-northern-europe.html>

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