How food waste helped us discover the existence of a Christian community in 12th century Islamic Iberia

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Zooarchaeological data recording. Credit: Marcos García García and Guillermo García-Contreras Ruiz

In the 12th century, Cercadilla, a neighborhood outside Cordoba in southern Spain, was under Islamic control. At this time populations of Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities lived together in a region known as al-Andalus.

There are two presiding schools of thought on how the interfaith society in al-Andalus operated. The most popular view, held by most historians of the period, is that there were no serious and open inter-religious conflicts in al-Andalus between the three main religious communities. This idea, known as La Convivencia (The Coexistence) was first proposed by the Spanish philologist Américo Castro in the 1940s.

However, La Convivencia has been criticized by a few as an idealized view of a much more complex period of history. This group believe that medieval Spain is best characterized by conflict rather than cooperation. This idea is backed up by written sources which reveal that much of the 12th-century Christian community in Islamic Iberia would have disappeared as a consequence of either persecution, deportation, emigration or their forced conversion to Islam.

But recent zooarchaeological research (the study of animal remains from archeological contexts) points to the persistence of some Christians in the area showing that the period was much more complex and cannot simply be characterized as only happy coexistence or total conflict.

Food and identity in al-Andalus

"Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are." This saying, attributed to french jurist Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, highlights the remarkable importance of food habits in the shaping and definition of the identity of both people at an individual level and societies at a collective one.

Zooarchaeology contributes to the study of these and other topics from a historical perspective. Generally speaking, zooarchaeology deals with the analysis of material remains recovered from dumps of refuse, containing food rubbish related to domestic environments. For this reason, the material that we study contains extremely valuable information concerning what people ate in the past, and much more.
Zooarchaeology is particularly helpful for the study of culturally complex societies such as al-Andalus. Apart from the specific beliefs of Muslims, Christians and Jews, belonging to each of these ethnoreligious groups depended upon the adoption of daily practices. Among these defining habits are the dietary norms that set out the different approaches each ethnoreligious group followed concerning animals.

The analysis of food refuse might allow us to gain insights into the socio-cultural identity of groups of people in the past. This is done by assessing the frequency of certain species in the waste. In this regard, the presence of pig remains in dumps of refuse from medieval Iberia is of particular significance as pork is banned by the religious laws of both Muslims and Jews and thus represents a marker of ethnic identity in medieval times.

Our investigations, therefore, suggest the persistence of a Christian Andalusi group (also known as "mozárabes") on the outskirts of Córdoba until the 12th century, challenging the idea that all but a few had disappeared due to persecution, deportation, emigration or their forced conversion to Islam.

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