Livestock has been a fundamental resource for humanity since breeding spread during the Neolithic period and until the recent debates about the ecological impact of animal production. Meat and leather answer basic needs such as food and clothing, but they have long been neglected by economic history in favour of cereal production and textile. The two volumes of the Cambridge Economic History of Europe about the Middle Ages devoted specific chapters to agriculture, the woolen industry, mining and metallurgy or “building in stone” but none to cattle or leather. Isolated historians and archaeologists have nevertheless demonstrated how important meat and leather were in the medieval economy. The average meat consumption was probably higher in many European cities in the Middle Ages than in the 19th century and the taxes on leather were often among the most profitable. New breeds and new techniques circulated between East and West: the Merinos sheep were probably introduced in Spain from the Near East in the 12th century and leather tawed with alum became associated with the city of Cordoba. However only a few studies have addressed the leather crafts in the medieval Islamic world because of the scarcity of information from the available sources. In the Christian areas, the variations in the species used for meat, hide or leather remain a fruitful field of research. What was the proportion between cattle and sheep? To what extent could goats, horses, or even chamois and small wild mammals like rabbits be resources in this industry?

Considering the leather production, archaeological artefacts can now enlighten the characteristics of the animals and of the pastoral farming systems, the technics of production, or the nature of the objects. Historians still investigate meat supply, the leather trade, shoe-making or the numerous products derived from leather (belts, parchments, book covers, furniture…). But those research fields often stay apart. We would like to impulse a transversal analysis of that branch by an international group of researchers who are specialised on different geographical areas and on different steps of production, in order to consider various questions.

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2 A summary of the previous works about Central Europe or Italy and a well-known case study can be found in Louis Souff, “La viande, Ravitaillement et consommation à Carpentras au XVe siècle” in Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations, t. 24, n° 6, 1969, p. 1431-1448. More recently: Ramón A. Banegas López, “Consumption of meat in Western European cities during the late Middle Ages : A comparative study”, Food & History, t. 8, n° 1 2010, p. 63-86.
5 A recent study is based on a 19th century text: Marcus Milwright, “The Qāmūs al-ṣināʿīṭ al-Shāmīyya as a record of the leather-working crafts of late Ottoman Damascus” in The Arts and Crafts of Syria and Egypt from the Ayyubids to The World War I. Piscataway (NJ, USA). Gorgias Press. 2018.
8 For example: David Nicolle, Late Mamlûk Military Equipment. Damascus. IFPO. 2011.
What kind of animals (cows, sheep, goats, small mammals…) were used and for what kind of production? What were the raw material and resources used during the leather making process (tan, alum, dye…)? What was the impact of these activities on the urban landscape? How did the techniques circulate? What were the relations between butchers and the crafts that transformed skins or other animal by-products (bones, fat, horn…)? What was the structure of the commercial networks of those products and how did they adapt to the distribution of the resources?

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