Written in Bones

Studies on technological and social contexts of past faunal skeletal remains

edited by
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Despite numerous ideas and tools applied, including presumptions that in many instances, ritual or any action does not affect any perceptible change of material culture and that the latter does not reflect socio-cultural phenomena in a direct and objective way, there are two main criteria of distinguishing remains of ritual activities: unusuality of a given find and/or its context.

The paper presents the initial results of studies on animal bone deposits recorded in the Roman period settlement at Magnice near Wrocław which in my opinion are remains of rituals performed within the settlement area and being thus an integral part of its inhabitants’ everyday life. For the sake of the study I applied a functional definition of ritual which I understand as a process including its performative and communicative aspects regarded as symbolical-expressive behaviour mode in communicating and consolidating certain social relations.

I applied the criteria of structured deposits proposed by L. K. Horwitz and T. Węgrzynowicz including: the presence of whole, unbutchered animals or articulated portions of animals, the presence of very young or very old animals, a selection of specific parts, an abundance of one sex and/or a particular taxon, the presence of rare taxa, association with human remains and/or grave goods.

Key words: animal bones, deposits, settlement, Roman Iron Age, SW Poland

Introduction

The last two decades have demonstrated an increased interest in ritual and religion studies. As a result the traditional division of sacred and profane areas of human activity has been rejected. Ritual (including, for example, such aspects as storage patterns, diet, refuse management and technology) are seen as part of daily life and not as being separated from domestic life. T. Insoll argues that the archeology of religion can encompass all aspects of material culture: “all can be influenced by religion. They are today, why not in the past?” (Insoll 2004:22).

Methods

In this study I applied a functional definition of ritual. I understand ritual as a process including both performative and communicative aspects which is regarded as a symbolical-expressive behaviour mode used to communicate and consolidate particular social relations. Ritual activity and collective activity in particular, “communicates something about social relations, often in a relatively dramatic or formal manner” (Wuthnow 1987:109). The characteristics of ritual understood in this way, include formalism,
Fig. 1. Overall excavation plan of the site
traditionalism, invariance, rule governance, sacral symbolism and performance – recalling the definition by C. Bell (1992:94). However, as R. Rappaport argues, the use of symbols is not a necessary component of rituals (2007:55).

How do archaeologists regard and study ritual? The main departure point in recent studies is an assumption on the inseparability of the ritual/religious and mundane spheres (Brück 1999; Kiriakidis 2007) Ideas and methodological tools from the history of religion, anthropology, sociology, cognitive sciences, performance and so on have been incorporated. The new interest in ritual and the conceptual world has been represented in numerous publications representing various theoretical perspectives ranging from the purely theoretical (e.g. Garwood et al. 1989); descriptive and explanatory views (e.g. Kosack 1999; Podborski 2006; Beilke-Voigt 2007) as well as combined theoretical and material based approach (e.g. Biehl, Bertemes 2001; Kaul 1998; Bradley 2005; Kaliff 2007).

Despite the numerous ideas and tools applied, including presumptions that in many instances, action does not affect any perceptible change of material culture and that the latter does not reflect socio-cultural phenomena in a direct and objective way, there are two main criteria for distinguishing the remains of ritual activities: the unusuality of a given find and/or its context. Bone remains belong frequently to the most abundant archaeological evidence yielded by excavations. In studying ritual activities based on bone evidence, context is essential however this can be misleading as well (e.g. Kiriakidis 2007:18).

The paper aims to present and interpret several bone deposits discovered at a Roman period settlement in Magnice near Wroclaw. On the basis of criteria developed by L.K. Horwitz (1987) and T. Węgrzynowicz (1982) presented below, the finds are believed to be the remains of rituals performed at the settlement.

As many scholars note the identification, analysis and interpretation of bone material is carried out in order to understand features of subsistence, consumption and economic organisation – mostly from a processual perspective (e.g. Crabtree 2004:62). This approach has been criticised as reductive even compared to modern attitudes to animals which often go far beyond the economical considerations or may represent mixed – economic and non-economic use (for further bibliography on this issue see e.g. Crabtree 2004; Lauwerier 2004).

However even archaeologists focusing strictly on consumption and economy in animal use come across animal bone sets that are considered as deposits. Depending on their contexts, they are interpreted as offerings made for dead members of a group, the remains of foundation/closure sacrifices or religious feasts (in Polish literature e.g. Węgrzynowicz 1982; Andrałojć 1986, 1992; Makiewicz 1987). The frequent association of food – meat in this case – with ritual makes it a difficult task to distinguish ritual activities involving food from daily meat use.

What makes the bone deposits different from common food debris? L.K. Horwitz (1987 after Kansa, Campbell 2004) mentions such criteria as: the presence of whole, unbutchered animals or articulated portions of animals, the presence of very young or very old animals, a selection of specific parts, an abundance of one sex and/or a particular taxon, the presence of rare taxa, association with human remains and grave goods. According to T. Węgrzynowicz, the criteria of the ritual nature of deposits include the unusuality of the features, traces of structured and deliberate deposition, lack of any practical aspects in killing and deposition of animals, selection both on taxon and body part level (1982:20-21). In other words, the deposits are distinguished on the basis of the nature and context of their deposition or their association with other archaeological remains of an unusual or religious nature. Obviously any of these characteristics can often be attributed to non-ritual behaviour, however the co-incidence of some of them may indicate ritual activities of various kinds.

The site

As it was mentioned above, the paper presents the initial results of studies on animal bone deposits discovered at a Roman Iron Age settlement at Magnice near Wroclaw. The site at Magnice is located 1 km northwest from the contemporary village of Magnice, 5 km south from Wroclaw (SW Poland). Rescue excavations were carried out in advance of construction works associated with a planned bypass (Fig. 1). The excavation was performed in 2007 and covered an area of 1.1 ha which produced 330 pits most of which were dated to the Roman period (in this case from the second half of the first century up to the second half of the fourth century). The pits show typical settlement features such as pit houses, storage pits, fireplaces, post holes, pottery kilns and wells (Baron et al. 2011).

One main point of interest is the spatial organisation of the settlement. There are at least three groups of pit and semi-pit buildings surrounding an empty square in which only common features such as wells
or fireplaces were situated (Fig. 2). The pit houses in each cluster were not of the same chronology and thus they are not remains of farmsteads consisting of several buildings but instead they reflect constant and long lasting settlement tradition. Such bonds with the area might have resulted from a fact that a large “industrial” settlement with dozens of lime kilns, bloomeries and ore-roasting pits was discovered just about 200 hundred meters northwest from the discussed site.

In course of the excavations 4738 animal bones and teeth were recovered, mainly from storage pits and wells, that were apparently re-used for rubbish disposal. Most of the remains represent a high degree of fragmentation and come from domestic animals (97,85%) among which cattle bones prevailed (47,52%), followed by pigs (32,31%), small ruminants (8,6%), horses (7,87%) and dogs (3,67%). One bone belonged to a cat (Fig. 3). In the case of cattle, pig and small ruminants all parts of the skeleton were identified (Romanow 2011).

In the pits situated in what may be called the common space of the settlement, several bone deposits were discovered (Fig. 4).

Two horse skulls without mandibles were found: one in a shallow pit house and one in a well. In both cases they were recorded in the bottom layers of the pits while in the well, apart from the skull, one quern stone was recovered. Both skulls belonged to individuals aged 5-6. The skull from the house was arranged upside down (Fig. 5).

![Fig. 2. Functional division of excavated pits](image)

![Fig. 3. Percentages of the domestic animal remains (after Romanow 2011)](image)
Fig. 4. Distribution of the bone deposits within the site area

Fig. 5. Horse skull in pit 27. Photo: J. Baron
In the pits situated in the central part of the settlement a cattle skull (including mandible and fragments of cervical vertebrae) and two dog skulls (both from individuals aged 5-6) and horse limbs were found.

In two relatively deep pits, determined previously as having been dug for storage purposes, the complete skeletons of 11 piglets (at least 2 individuals in pit 93 and 9 in 48) were recovered. In one case (pit 48) these were accompanied by dog limb bones. Bone distribution within the narrow and deep pits suggest they were thrown rather than carefully deposited (Fig. 6). No anatomical order was noticed which rather excludes ‘a burial’ of dead animals resulting from their natural death (e.g. caused by a disease).

**Discussion**

If we apply the criteria of structured deposits proposed by L.K. Horwitz and T. Węgrzynowicz, these pits seem to contain remains relating to various ritual activities performed at the site.

1. The presence of whole, unbutchered animals or articulated portions of animals.

An overall comparison of animal bone fragmentation in the mentioned pits and the site in general
shows that the deposit pits contained a higher number of complete animal bones. Relatively speedy deposition in the pits protected the bones from weather, trampling and scavenging animals as happens in the case of household refuse. On the other hand, if they are waste these complete bones demonstrated completely various consumption model (they were not crushed for marrow for instance). Taphonomic analysis carried out proved that none of these bones bore butchering marks.

2. Selection of specific parts of animal body.

The bones from these pits contained skulls and limbs, only the piglet skeletons were complete. One interesting question is where are the elements of post cranial skeletons (comp. table 1)? Usually bone deposits contain skulls and limbs which are considered as non meat parts offered during or after feasts and ritual meat consumption.

3. Selection of a particular and rare taxa.

Among the animal bones considered as remains of ritual activities, pigs, horses, cattle and dogs predominate. These start in the Mesolithic with recorded dog burials (e.g. Larsson 1990 with further references) and horse bones deposits from the Bronze Age onwards. Also at many sites beginning from the Bronze Age, the majority of bones of these animals (dogs and horses) are relatively rare in comparison with the occurrence of the bones of cattle and sheep for instance. Moreover, they are very often found together. Dogs and pigs, present in ritual context at Magnice are commonly interpreted as the most frequent type of offered animals (e.g. Choyke et al. 2004; Galik 2004; Hamilakis, Konsolaki et al.

In the early Iron Age and roman period dogs are seen as being traditionally associated with the healing and protection of humans. This is shown both by finds of dog skeletons in offering shafts and pits at the settlements and by dog figurines (e.g. de Grossi Mazzorin, Minitti 2004; Woodward, Woodward 2004:77-79). The latter authors in their paper on Romano-British urban centres argue that the shafts containing dog bones are often situated in the central parts of the sites (Woodward, Woodward 2004:78). Similar functions for such deposits has been proposed in the Polish literature by authors who argue the dogs buried at settlement space were guardians of humans or foundation sacrifices (Makiewicz 1987; Węgrzynowicz 1982:249; Andrałojć 1986, 1992).

Horses are considered to play a special role for whole Indo-European world. Horse sacrifice starting from Indian Āśvamedha is seen as being necessary to keep the cosmic balance (e.g. Puhvel 1978). The echoes of this sacrifice can be easily observed both in archaeological and ethnological evidence and there is extensive bibliography (e.g. in Węgrzynowicz 1982, 241).

The deposits from Magnice may be thus interpreted as the remains of ritual activities which, were incorporated into the daily life of the site inhabitants based on their spatial distribution.

What kind of rituals were performed at the discussed site?

Based on the distribution of the deposits I believe they reflect at least several types of rituals.

I would like to start with foundation sacrifices. As anthropologists argue, building rituals belong to the activities which reflect the transformation of nature into culture and wild into tamed. Many scholars demonstrate that rituals constitute an inherent essence of technology and thus cannot be separate from daily life activities (Bajburin 1990:62; Bradley 2005). This is ritual what endows an object with meaning and, finally, connects it with an area of senses which are comprehensible for a given community. Foundation offerings, recognised as the material remains of building rituals, are recorded worldwide in various cultural traditions. Despite the enormous variety of the symbols and procedures offering the basic sense of the rite remains the same. The offering values the space, distinguishes the area of highest sacral significance, purifies it and allows to initiate the construction. Thus erection of a house is directly connected with the offering that was made. The horse skull in one of the pit house is a typical example of such offering. Similarly arranged horse skulls are known for instance from the roman period settlement dated to the 3rd cent. at Feddersen Wierde in Germany (Haarnagel 1979:226).

Another type of ritual reflected in archaeological evidence are the closing rituals which were performed for example when changing the some pit functions. Unbroken quern stones and animal skulls found in the bottom layers of wells have been interpreted as offerings made to close or change the pit function from a well to a rubbish pit. The presence of complete quern stones in deep pits such as wells and storage pits is known from many prehistoric sites (por. Målmer 2002:41; Bradley 2005:130). Horse skulls in deep wells are also interpreted as the remains of regularly deposited offerings. In this case we are not dealing with wells but rather sacrifice shafts. The site of Kasterbrunnen in Lower Saxony, despite its later chronology, might be a good example of such a shaft. In the deep pit, selected parts of animal bodies including horse skulls and limbs were found (Müller-Wille 1972:180). On the other hand, analyses done for some Scandinavian sites from the early Iron Age demonstrated that the remains of horse skeletons are mostly discovered at sites of
relatively higher status or/and ritual character (Pettersson 2006, Fig. 18)

In the case of the Magnice site, the well was just filled after making the deposit, and there was no stratigraphical evidence of the pit remaining open. The fact that the horse skull was found together with a quern stone at the bottom of the well seems to support the idea of closing offerings.

Finally, there were rituals performed in the open common area which are reflected in the presence of pits containing cattle and dog skulls and limbs and piglet skeletons. There are several possible interpretations, however obviously the bones (both selected parts and complete skeletons) were deposited deliberately in small pits and thus are preserved much better than rest of the bone collection from the site. In case of piglets one cannot exclude a deposition of complete animal bodies. No bones from the deposits bear traces of cutting and crushing while dog skulls, as they have no mandibles, must have been deposited after the soft tissue had been removed. Skull and limbs deposits are very often interpreted as the remains of feasts including ritual feasts. Feasts are events essentially constituted by the communal consumption of food and/or drink which is entirely different from everyday domestic meals including food preparation, consumption, social and spatial context in which foods were consumed. Common feasting, highly ritualized and initiated on various occasions are seen as being essential in creating relationships – from alliances and the manifestation of prestige to the confirmation of marriages and compensation for transgressions (Hayden 2001:30). According to B. Hayden, the archaeological evidence for feasts include both the food remains and the various distinctive types of vessels localised among others in the central community spaces (2001:table 2.1).

It has been argued that “for most farming societies, meat was an expensive commodity to produce and the offering a part of the animal’s body operates as a purification ritual and represents the consumption of a valuable commodity as an experience shared with powers the offer was dedicated to. Thus, the sacrifice is often connected with feasting, when the animals were consumed. In my opinion the deposits of complete skulls or limb bones reflect very meaningful feasts because there are many crushed skull bones at the site but only some of them were deposited in a deliberately way” (Hamilakis, Konsolaki 2004:145).

The example of Magnice site demonstrates not only animal bones as ritual consumption remains but also shows animals being situated within a much wider ritually constructed view of the world.

Table 1. Body part representation for each major taxon (after Romanow 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CATTLE</th>
<th>PIG</th>
<th>SHEEP/GOAT</th>
<th>HORSE</th>
<th>DOG</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>HORSE</td>
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References


