
Archaeozoology is the science based on the study of faunal remains from the past, so archaeozoological records reflect the meat-eating patterns of the contemporary inhabitants of the settlements under investigation and also animal husbandry practices, which is seen as an economic activity, a lifestyle, and part of the socioeconomic integration. Considering the quality and quantity of the available data, in her book, which is based on her PhD dissertation, Kyra Lyublyanovics has made a substantial contribution to this science. She has provided an overview of the delicate process of the integration of the Cumans as seen through the mirror of animal husbandry, animals use, and meat consumption patterns.

In the first section of the book, the reader is given a short but thorough overview of the history of the Cumans, from the Eurasian steppe (their place of origin) to their migration to the Carpathian Basin, which is followed by a short history of the Hungarian scholarship on the Cumans at the end of the chapter. Lyublyanovics then summarizes the aims and questions of her research and clarifies the methodological concerns of the work. While she notes the problems in the scholarship and points out the limits of the research on Cumans in Hungary, she also clarifies main definitions, including for instance what the term Cuman actually means from an archaeological point of view and what the main problem of nomadism in archaeology is.

The main part of the volume is the third chapter, which includes a very impressive description of the archaeological sites investigated. Lyublyanovics precisely summarizes the available data, both written sources and archaeological and archaeozoological records. Altogether, 11 sites are compared from Greater and Lesser Cumania (Central Hungary) and their periphery and one site from Transdanubia. She provides a historical introduction to each larger geographical territory, illustrated with maps, from the arrival of the Cumans till the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These summaries precisely show the social and economic structures of this ethnic group and their ability continuously to adapt to historical shifts.

Some of the archaeozoological data comes from earlier published research, but the other part of bone find has been analyzed by the author herself. Although
in some cases very little material was available, Lyublyanovics follows her methodological intentions consistently and productively in her analyses. Perhaps due to this consistency, some disproportions can be seen in the archaeozoological interpretations. When reading these section of the chapter, one has the feeling that it came to an end, but it was not finished.

Lyublyanovics uses some statistical and osteometric comparisons to demonstrate the ratios and size-variability of the main domestic species from different archaeological sites from the period in question, using colorful graphs and diagrams. These diagrams clearly demonstrate the homogeneity of the distribution of animal bone fragments from different species, and these distribution patterns fit the trends prevalent in the medieval rural settlements. In almost all osteometric comparisons only two metric dimensions of the bones were used. Although there are strong correlations between the used metric dimensions proved by statistical methods, sometimes they did not provide precise answers to the research questions. It is possible that Lyublyanovics would have done better to have used some multivariate methods to demonstrate her findings.

The conclusions reached in this rather long chapter, however, are methodologically flawless. Step-by-step, Lyublyanovics compares the taxonomic richness, the structures of the herds, and the ratios of the main domestic species (cattle, sheep and goats, pigs, and horses) from the Cuman sites and places them in the animal husbandry economies of medieval Hungarian villages. She claims that the key factor in the characterization of Cuman animal keeping is the ratio of the triumvirate of the horse, the pig, and sheep, which has been proven by statistical tests. However, as she writes, while the “Cuman and Hungarian samples are statistically different from each other,” (p.165), the archaeological material does not clearly demonstrate the presence of distinct breeds, and “domesticates kept by Cumans fit into the medieval domestic populations of Hungary in general” (p.171).

In the subsequent chapters, Lyublyanovics examines the exploitation of the environment and the management of resources. This short section is an introduction to the significant factors of animal keeping. Pastures and water resources, forests, wetlands, and grazing rights all influenced the everyday lives of the contemporary animal keepers. On the other hand, hunting and fishing were ways of using wildlife as a resource.

Lyublyanovics dedicates an entire chapter in the second half of the book to the processing of an animal carcass. She identifies two different approaches to
this process: the functional type, which includes the consumption patterns and the utilization of the non-edible parts of the animals (e.g. bones), and the ritual type, when the body of an animal is given a role that differs significantly from its conventional roles. As she rightly states, “the arbitrary dichotomy between ‘ritual’ and ‘functional’ deposits threaten arguments with circular reasoning as it involves an inherent interpretation in itself” (p.191). In this chapter, she examines similarities and dissimilarities in the butchering techniques and the preferred body parts of the main domestic species. For the purposes of classification, she uses Uerpmann’s meat categories: low, medium, and good quality.

One functional aspect of her observations is the analysis of the worked bone tools. The animals, after all, weren’t simply sources of meat, but were also sources of many potential raw materials (bones, hides, and wool, for instance). Numerous tools made out of bone, which were discovered in the settlements under investigation, indicate the importance of bones as a raw material.

Lyublyanovics also presents the reader with a short summary of the animal bodies from Cuman ritual contexts. In this section, she examines burial customs involving animals (e.g equestrian graves, dog burials, food offerings, etc.). The last chapter is dedicated to discussion of the observed osteopathological lesions on the bones, which reflect the health conditions of the contemporary domesticates.

Finally we can say that Lyublyanovics is leading us through the book with a secure hand, and no doubt that her work is an important contribution to Hungarian zooarchaeology. She persuasively shows the complexity of the Cuman socio-economic integration in medieval Hungary from a neglected perspective, that of animal husbandry.

Péter Csippán
Eötvös Loránd University