

A Matter of Taste? Some Evidence for the Butchery of Horses, Dogs and Bears at the La Tène Settlement of Jenišův Újezd

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Abstract

Recent analysis of animal bones from La Tène pit houses at Jenišův Újezd in NW Bohemia has revealed traces of butchery marks to horse, dog and bear bones. This paper describes the cut and chop-marks visible to these specimens and attempts to interpret the butchery activities taking place at the site. The study demonstrates how the occurrence of particular material, as well as the analysis of butchery data, can provide valuable information concerning the use (or ? misuse) of animals within the domestic sphere. This provides an interesting insight into man-animal relations during the La Tène period in NW Bohemia.

During recent work carried out on the faunal assemblage from Jenišův Újezd, a number of interesting butchered specimens have come to light. It is these which form the subject of this present contribution.

The site of Jenišův Újezd is situated in NW Bohemia in the elongated valley of the Lomský-potok (Lom stream), within a region devastated by the open cast mining of brown coal. A well known La Tène cemetery is situated in the area, which represents one of the richest sites of this period within Central Europe (*Waldhauser et al. 1978*). Between 1977-86 a number of rescue excavations took place at the site, which also revealed traces of a multi-period settlement with deposits ranging from the Neolithic to Medieval period (*c.f. Beneš 1987, 1992; Beneš - Koutecký 1987; Bubeník - Velínský 1986*). A total of 1,255 animal bone fragments were recovered from these excavations, out of which 469 (37.4%) were identifiable to the level of mammalian species. Only small quantities of material were recovered from most of the chronological phases represented, e.g. during the Neolithic, Únětická (Early Bronze Age), Hallstatt and Roman Iron Age periods, although more bones were identified within the La Tène and Early Medieval periods (*Beech, 1993*).

During the analysis of animal bones from several La Tène pit houses and their associated features a number of interesting specimens were identified. Macroscopic examination of several horse (*Equus ferus f. caballus*), dog (*Canis lupus f. familiaris*) and bear (*Ursus arctos*) bones revealed apparent traces of butchery cut-marks and chops. These specimens are described as follows:

HORSE (*Equus ferus f. caballus*):

Excavation: J. Beneš

Year: 1984

Date: La Tène B-D

Description: Layer - pit house

Feature no.: 4/84

Catalogue no.: 103/84

Two horse mandible fragments had small cutmarks to their medial ascending ramus margins, one to the lateral surface of its coronoid process, and the other to its lateral ramus, adjacent to the posterior margin of the crypt of its third molar (Binford butchery code no. M-4, *Binford 1981, 280*). Such marks are typically produced during dismembering activities, which suggests that horse mandibles were being deliberately separated from their skulls.

A horse metatarsal, within the same context, had a transverse medio-lateral cutmark to its anterior proximal midshaft (similar to Binford code no. MTp-1, *Binford 1981, 286*). This cutmark was also probably made during the process of dismembering activities, the lower leg being separated from the upper limb.

Excavation: J. Beneš

Year: 1984

Date: La Tène B-D

Description: Layer - pit house

Feature no.: 7/84

Catalogue no.: 106/84

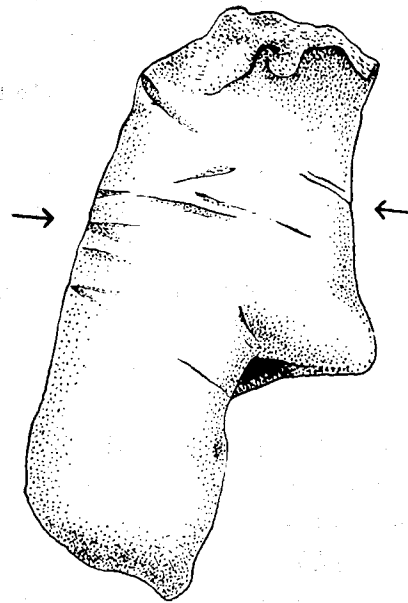


Plate 1. / Obr. 1. Horse (Equus ferus f. caballus) calcaneus (lateral view). Extensive transverse and oblique anterior-posterior cut-marks are visible to the lateral face of its midshaft (Excavation: J. Beneš, 1984; Date: La Tène B-D; Description: Layer - pit house; Feature no.: 7/84; Catalogue no.: 106/84)

A horse calcaneus had extensive transverse and oblique anterior-posterior cut-marks to the lateral face of its midshaft (see Plate 1 / Fig. 1). Such marks were probably made during the dismemberment of the lower limb, indicating similar butchery activities to the afore-mentioned butchered horse metatarsal in feature 4/84 (see above).

DOG (*Canis lupus f. familiaris*):

Excavation: J. Beneš

Year: 1984

Date: La Tène A

Description: Layer - pit house

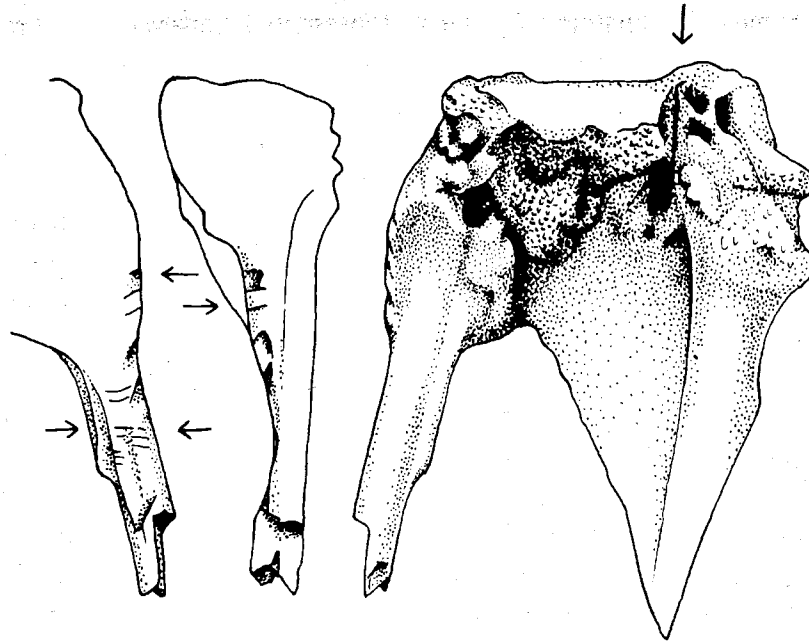
Feature no.: 3/84

Catalogue no.: 102/84

A dog tibia had traces of two oblique anterior-posterior chop-marks through its upper lateral midshaft. Such marks were probably made during dismembering of the leg, these chop-marks being made just below the knee joint.

BEAR (*Ursus arctos*):
 Excavation: J. Blažek
 Year: 1985
 Date: La Tène A
 Description: Layer - pit house
 Feature no.: 1/85
 Catalogue no.: 76/85

Plate 2. / Obr. 2. Bear (*Ursus arctos*) proximal tibia/fibula fragment (posterior view). An axial chop is just visible to the midpoint of its proximal epiphysis (Excavation: J. Blažek, 1985; Date: La Tène A; Description: Layer - pit house; Feature no.: 1/85; Catalogue no.: 76/85)



A proximal tibia/fibula fragment was positively identified as belonging to bear (*Ursus arctos*) on account of its relatively flattened proximal epiphysis (a phenomenon typical in carnivores), the marked ridge down the posterior medial margin of its proximal diaphysis, as well as its connected strongly developed fibula. The specimen had a number of clear traces of chops and cut-marks. The posterior surface of its proximal tibial epiphysis had traces of an axial chop at its mid-point (see Plate 2 / Fig. 2). In addition, the proximal midshaft of the anterior surface of its fibula had traces of a series of small oblique chops and cuts. Such marks were probably made during dismembering activities, the leg being chopped just below the knee joint in order to separate it from the upper limb.

Discussion

The above described specimens all suggest that horse, dog and bear carcasses were at least partially dismembered for some reason or other. There are several possibilities which might explain the butchery traces to these animals:

(a) Consumption or Bone working/other craft activities?

The afore-mentioned bones could have been butchered for their meat. This might therefore suggest that the inhabitants of the La Tène settlement at Jenišův Újezd were perhaps impoverished, leading them to eat animals that were not normally consumed. Perhaps supporting this notion was the presence of a cattle cervical vertebra, from feature 5/84 (pit-house, La Tène B-D), with traces of severe eburnation and pitting to the articular surface of its centrum (see Plate 3 / Fig. 3). Such pathologies are typical during the development of osteoarthritic associated diseases. This particular vertebra may have been from quite an old animal or from an animal which was exposed to severe prolonged traction activities. It is interesting to note that the vertebra was completely chopped through at an oblique angle, suggesting that the animal was subsequently eaten, even if it would have been considered to be an old, diseased individual.

Some of the anatomical elements represented, however, do not represent the best meat-bearing bones (e.g. the horse mandible, metatarsal, calcaneus). Butchery of such elements may have therefore been carried out for some other purpose. Cut-marks to mandibles facilitating their separation from skulls may have been carried out in order to provide access to the tongue, which may have been considered a delicacy. Chop and cut-marks to the metatarsal and calcaneus are harder to explain. They may have perhaps been carried out in order to provide access to the metatarsal bone. Metapodials are commonly used as raw material for bone working during all prehistoric and historic periods. In the case of the butchery marks to the proximal tibia of both dog and bear, their interpretation is also problematic. They certainly appear to be primarily for dismemberment of the hind limb which may have been related with the exploitation of meat, although they may have also been connected with the use of the bones as material for bone working.

Evidence for the presence of other craft activities was also identified within the La Tène pit houses from Jenišův Újezd. Transverse medio-lateral cut-marks were identified to the anterior midshafts of several cattle 1st phalanges (two examples in both features 2/85 and 3/84 (La Tène A), and one specimen in feature 5/84 (La Tène B-D)). Such cut-marks are normally interpreted as providing evidence for the activity of skinning. Similar cut-marks have been found on cattle phalanges elsewhere at other La Tène settlements in Bohemia, e.g. Velké Hostěrádky (Peške 1984).

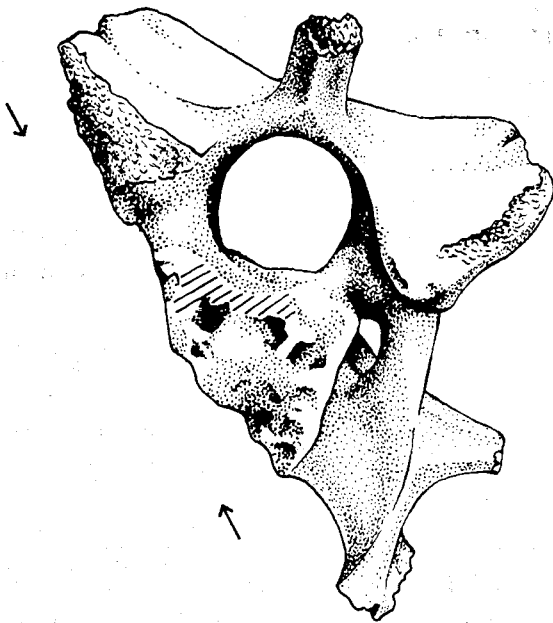


Plate 3. /Obr. 3. Cattle cervical vertebra with traces of severe eburnation and pitting to the articular surface of its centrum. Note that the vertebra is also split diagonally by an oblique chop-mark (Excavation: J. Beneš, 1984; Date: La Tène B-D; Description: Layer - pit house; Feature no.: 5/84; Catalogue no.: 104/84)

(b) Ritual/Cultic activities?

Ritual or cultic activities, even within the domestic sphere, can often involve the use of animals (Grant 1991). Particular animal bones may have been deliberately buried within certain contexts. In addition to the afore-mentioned material, it is worth noting that an almost complete pair of horse mandibles was found within feature 1/84 (La Tène A). It was from a female, judging by the fact that

the canine crypt was not developed, and seemed to be from quite a large sized animal. The deliberate deposition of horse remains has also been observed elsewhere, e.g. in Britain at the Iron Age hill-fort of Danebury in Hampshire, where horses appear to have played an important symbolic role (Grant 1984).

In addition to the afore-mentioned bear tibia/fibula, an almost complete bear (*Ursus arctos*) 2nd metacarpal was identified within feature 5/84 (La Tène B-D). The occurrence of bear bones within domestic contexts may represent the remains from skinning of the animals, although certain elements may perhaps have been also retained as hunting trophies, talismans/amulets or for some other symbolic purpose.

Conclusion

The occurrence of butchered horse, dog and bear bones in La Tène pit houses at Jenišův Újezd is of some interest. It seems likely that a combination of factors led to their butchery and subsequent deposition within these domestic contexts. Clearly basic dismemberment butchering activities were taking place at the site. These may have partly been for economic reasons (meat, bone/hide-working) but one should not also exclude the possibility of some ritual/symbolic role. The interpretation of this material clearly illustrates the problem of distinguishing the precise „economic“ use of animals, as well as the separation of „economic“ from „symbolic“ activities. Archaeozoologists working in Central Europe have traditionally only tended to analyse material in terms of subsistence, consumption and economic practices (e.g. Peške 1993). Little attention has been paid to the symbolic aspects of animals and ritual behaviour. The present study has demonstrated how the occurrence of particular material, as well as the analysis of butchery data, can provide valuable information concerning the use (or ?misuse) of animals within the domestic sphere. It undoubtedly sheds important light upon man-animal relations during the La Tène period, when the inhabitants of Jenišův Újezd seemingly occasionally „consumed“ horses, dogs and bears.

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Věc chuti?

Doklady porážky koní, psů a medvědů na laténském sídlišti v Jenišově Újezdě

Analýza osteologického materiálu z laténských zemnic v Jenišově Újezdě v SZ Čechách odhalila stopy řeznických zásahů na kostech koní, psa a medvěda. Článek popisuje zářezy a záseky na kostech a pokouší se je interpretovat jako doklady způsobů porážky. Práce dokládá význam informací, které lze získat studiem tohoto neobvyklého materiálu pro otázky využívání zvířat v hospodářské oblasti; poskytuje zároveň zajímavý náhled na vztahy člověka a zvířete během laténského období v SZ Čechách.

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ERRATA:

p.166 - Plate 1 = Fig. 1
(see Plate 1 / Fig.1) = (see Fig. 1)

p.167 - Plate 2 = Fig. 2
(see Plate 2/ Fig. 2) = (see Fig. 2)
(see Plate 3 / Fig. 3) = (see Fig. 3)

p.168 - Plate 3 = Fig. 3

p.169 - References omitted:

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p.170 - Acknowledgements:

"Particular thanks also go to Kateřina Macková and V. Jilková (Institute of archaeology, Prague) for promptly preparing the illustrations and photographs." =

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