

Novelties in animal herding and consumption in Bronze Age Europe

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Due to its broad chronological boundaries in Europe, animal exploitation during the Bronze Age has turned out to have been very diverse on the continent, showing adaptations to local geographical environments. Demographic changes and the emergence of settlements with high concentrations of human populations stimulated the diversification of animal-related resources beyond mundane meat consumption directly reflected by ordinary food refuse brought to light at settlement excavations.

Subsistence hunting had lost a lot of its significance compared to the Neolithic, while domesticated animals gained in importance not only as a source of meat: the use of their renewable, “secondary” animal products also became widespread. Innovations such as dairy use, wool production and animal labour had already developed earlier. However, the roles of these resources in local economies stabilized during the Bronze Age. Among these protracted changes, the emergence of horse keeping stands out as it had revolutionized warfare, trade and human mobility in general. On the other hand, this precious, often high-status animal tends to be unreliably represented in general zooarchaeological find assemblages: horse flesh consumption seems to have been far less consistent than the meat exploitation of ordinary livestock (domestic bovids and pig) regularly identified in food refuse.

Quantitative comparisons between animal remains and archaeobotanical macro finds are notoriously difficult. Reconstructions of mobility as represented by zooarchaeological assemblages may be profitably compared with occurrences of millet, a special crop of short growing season and a C4 plant also detectable by means of isotopic identifications in the human diet.