

SUMMARY

The Avar Cemetery at Vienna Csokorgasse was excavated under the direction of Ludwig Streinz and on behalf of the Historical Museum Vienna (today the Wien Museum) in the years 1976 and 1976 within the scope of a building project. In the course of the excavation, 705 burials were unearthed and documented, and the cemetery was excavated completely. Up to now, an archaeological analysis of the Avar necropolis has not been carried out, but a catalogue of the burials⁷⁸¹ exists, as well as, unpublished, the results of the anthropological analyses of the human remains⁷⁸². Recently, Falko Daim and Ludwig Streinz worked out a chorography of the cemetery based on the mapping of leading types (see the article by Ludwig Streinz and Falko Daim in the appendix). According to their findings, the cemetery was continuously used: the first burials in the northeast date to the Early Avar Period II (2nd quarter 7th century AD) and the last graves in the west and south of the burial area stem from the Late Avar Period II to III (2nd and 3rd third 8th century AD). The burial type – inhumation burials orientated west-east, displaying a variety of partially gender-specific burial goods – conforms to the usual customs of the Middle and Late Avar Periods.

Animal bones were found in 491 (70 %) of the 705 burials. In most cases, these were remains of chickens (319 graves, 45 %) and of sheep or goats (313, 44 %), two species of small ruminants that are difficult to tell apart osteologically. Bones of cattle (240 burials, 34 %) and of pigs (84, 12 %) also occurred in many burials. The chicken was interred in different degrees of skeletal completeness. Of the domestic mammals mentioned, primarily the thigh portion containing the femur was selected as a burial good. In the course of the cemetery's use, the beef portions containing cattle femora were replaced by parts with kneecaps still attached. The location of cut marks shows that the meat must have remained on the bones. In case of the numerous femora, they stem from carefully disarticulating the thigh from the pelvis and the lower leg, and not from a removal of meat.

The faunal material also comprises some comparatively rare species: some birds (domestic or greylag geese, Western jackdaw, Northern Goshawk, Eurasian skylark, a pigeon, white-tailed eagle, smew, grey partridge, Eurasian woodcock, as well as some unidentified bird remains), and some fish (pike, a wels catfish, and different cyprinids – among these common nase, European chub, common bream [?], asp [?], common carp, common roach, and common barbel [?]).

Four outstanding rich Late Avar burials in the south of the cemetery area (burials 650, 690, 692, and 693) contained harnessed horses of an age fit for riding usage. In addition, three of these included complete skeletons of fully-grown large male dogs. From the fourth equestrian burial (692) only a single dog tibia was recovered. Furthermore, a partial skeleton of a young puppy was found in the digging shaft of burial 650. Another one was recovered from a Middle Avar period child burial (burial 462). The equestrian graves contained adult men with belt fittings and in one case (burial 690) two children and an adolescent, the latter presumably also with belt fittings. The graves had been robbed, and it can be assumed that it was during this act that one foreleg of the horse from burial 690 was transferred to the adjacent burial 689.

Apart from the mentioned finds, three burials yielded remains of hares or rabbits; furthermore some bones of small vertebrates occurred, primarily stemming from sousliks and field hamsters, but also from water vole, European toad, green toad and grass snake. These can be classified as intrusions.

While the pigs were generally slaughtered young and perennially, the small ruminants were primarily killed in their third year when they were fully or almost fully-grown. The age of death of the cattle shows no

⁷⁸¹ Streinz 1977.

⁷⁸² Grossschmidt 1990. – See also: Herold, M. 2008.

prevalence of a particular age group; there are young calves as well as aged individuals. Most of the chickens, which grow quickly, show a completely ossified skeleton. However, based on the still numerous skeletons of not yet fully grown chickens, the skeletal ossification sequence of this chicken population could be established. This provided new evidence for the relative ossification time of different skeletal elements (appendix 4).

The sex ratio could be established for only a few species: three-quarters of the chickens were female, many of which carried traces of medullary bone in their bones, an indication for the laying period. The few roosters primarily stem from the later periods of the cemetery. Among the four horses, there were two stallions, and possibly a gelding and a mare. The three adult dogs were male.

The size of the domestic species conforms to the usual size range of the Early Middle Ages. The sheep reached withers heights of about 60 cm; the dogs were 4 to 5 cm larger than this. With average calculated withers heights of 106 cm, most cattle were comparatively small. With calculated withers heights between 127 and 132 cm, three cattle individuals, however, were out of the ordinary. These animals could either be imported, remains of Roman livestock, or outliers within their population (e. g., due to castration). With withers heights of 138 to 144 cm, the horses buried at Vienna Csokorgasse also conform to the usual size-range of their Early Medieval conspecifics.

Based on burial finds, economic conclusions regarding the non-religious usage of the animals in Avar daily life can only be grasped indirectly, through »hidden« information, since the selection of animals and animal parts for a ritual context might not reflect economic aspects. The numerous hen bones with medullary bone and the quite high proportion of bone fractures (as a potential symptom of a calcium deficiency due to egg-shell generation) is an indication of intensive egg production as well as of humans and chickens living at close quarters. Joint diseases of the elderly cattle point to their use as draught animals. The fusion processes observed in the vertebrae of the older horses should be the result of their use as mounts. The large dogs could have served as herding or hunting dogs: The impression fracture on the snout of the individual from burial 693 might stem from an unruly ruminant. The bell that the dog from burial 650 was buried with also points to these spheres of rural life. The few bones of a Northern goshawk from this burial could stem from an individual that had been trained for falconry. The regular removal of the goose wingtips points to a use of the flight feathers, for instance to fletch arrows or make lures for falconry⁷⁸³. Lastly, the identified wild birds and fish testify to an occasional exploitation of natural resources in the surroundings of the village to which the cemetery belonged. It remains unresolved whether the livestock comprised animals brought from the steppes or of autochthonous origin – no distinctive features could be identified.

The main objective of the dissertation – besides the publication of the faunal data – is to gain knowledge of the role of animals in Avar funeral rites. For this purpose, correlations between animal burial gifts and »functional« burial data, that is the age and sex of the deceased, as well as a higher social status recognisable by belt fittings, were sought. Purely quantitatively, the grave furnishings of men with belt fittings are richer than of men without such belts. With the exception of the very first period of the cemetery, which yielded richly furnished burials of men, the burials of men and women were generally endowed similarly with grave goods of animal origin. Usually, babies did not receive any grave gifts containing animal bones. With advancing age, the richness of the furnishing increases and achieves its maximum in the age classes adult and mature (that is, between 20 and 60 years). Avars that reached a high age (age class senile) again received fewer grave gifts of animal origin. The grave goods of men, in particular of men of high status, are most diverse because the majority of the uncommon grave goods of animal origin were found in their graves.

⁷⁸³ Cf. burial 343, Chapter Gänse und Wildvögel/Synthese, p. 211 f.

Only very few of the faunal grave goods seem to have been specific⁷⁸⁴ to a social group: the burials with horse and dog are restricted to a small fraction of the belt bearers, and the late Avar roosters with very long spurs are also specific to a group of high-status men. The degree to which burial goods were typical⁷⁸⁵ for a social group is also quite low. Furthermore, the aspects that show a correlation mostly lie in the details. At the beginning of the cemetery, pig femora were typical grave goods for children, but over the course of time, this prevalence dwindled. Chickens can be considered a grave good typical for women, and cattle femora were – in the early periods of the cemetery – typical for men. Among the chickens, the hens were more often found in the burials of women, while the correlation between men and roosters increases towards the Late Avar period. The preparation of the roosters and hens diverges in this late burial phase: men receive roosters whose feet are always still attached, while the skeletons of hens unearthed from the graves of women often lack the feet. Geese are another sex-typical burial good, as they primarily occur in burials of mature men. In the case of the cattle and small ruminants, a high occurrence of aged individuals in the burials of women can be detected. Vaguely, a prevalence of predatory species in the burials of men can be observed: the pikes, as well as the two predator birds identified, Northern goshawk and white-tailed eagle, and the only carnivorous mammal identified, the dog, were primarily laid in the graves of men.

The unequal distribution of the faunal grave goods among different social groups as regards these parameters can indicate why the animals and animal parts were selected. For these considerations, it is presupposed that not only the requirements of the deceased shaped by religious ideas played a role, but also the economic and social demands of the surviving dependants, primarily as regards the securing and renegotiation of their societal position. Animal bones from Avar cemeteries have many times eluded an unequivocal interpretation of their funerary role. A realistic assessment of the possibilities of such an endeavour can only lead to the conclusion that it will not be possible to find clear-cut evidence for specific motivations behind the grave goods, but at the most indications. Hence, this study largely does not commit itself to certain unequivocal interpretations. Instead, the multitude of interpretations and possible indications in the faunal material are discussed with the aid of ethnological and sociological findings. The interpretational approaches are that the finds may be 1. equipment for the afterlife, 2. elements of the funeral feast, 3. results of an ostentatious destruction of riches (potlatch), 4. insignia of rank or status, 5. gifts from the community for the deceased, 6. metaphors or symbols, 7. remains of measures to protect the living, or 8. measures to generate a lasting remembrance. With the exception of points 5 and 7, the bone material yields indications that these aspects may have played a role. A weighting of these, however, would overstretch the information potential of the faunal material.

A conclusive integration of the faunal material from the cemetery at Vienna Csokorgasse into the full picture of animal-related Avar funerary rites (as can be reconstructed from other published data) shows how regional some of the detected characteristics are. The quantitative occurrence of animal bones as such and the respective spectra of selected domestic mammals show no clear pattern in the Avar Carpathian Basin of the 7th and 8th centuries. The parameter of the prevailing skeletal element of the domestic mammals, however, as well as the degree of standardization of this parameter, show clearly that the respective burial rite has its roots in the preceding centuries of the Carpathian Basin. The spatial pattern corresponds to the historical division of the Hungarian plain into formerly-Roman, then Lombard Pannonia west of the Danube on the one hand, and on the other, the »Barbaricum« east of the Tisza which had been influenced by the Gepids. In the area mentioned first, primarily portions of the hind limb (most of all femur, but also tibia) were placed into the graves, and this practice was highly standardised. In the eastern area, however, the degree

⁷⁸⁴ Specific in the sense of »occurring exclusively in this group«.

⁷⁸⁵ Typical in the sense of »characteristic for a group, but not occurring exclusively in this group«.

of standardisation is very low and usually elements of the trunk prevail, i. e. ribs and vertebrae. Even a small stretch of land on the Middle Danube in southern Slovakia can be marked out, historically influenced by Suebi and Slavs, where primarily elements of the forelimbs and remains of skins were found in Avar graves. While east of the Tisza, especially between the rivers Körös and Maros, lies a region that is characterised by the comparatively well-studied funeral rite of partial and complete animal burials. This feature makes this area markedly different from the western Carpathian Basin.

Given the current state of research, it is not yet possible to transfer the characteristics of the Vienna Csokorgasse bone material as regards the sex- or status-typical occurrence of certain grave goods to other Avar cemeteries. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that the degree of the group-typical correlation is low; on the other, these correlations occur most clearly in rather obscure parameters (like the preparation of the chickens in different phases of the cemetery), which cannot be accommodated in the usual find lists and tables.

The cultural and social implications of the Avar burial rites that include animals are not yet adequately explored. To do justice to the cultural-historical informative value of these zooarchaeological finds, these ramifications must continue to be the subject of archaeological and historical studies.