

NEW HOME, NEW HERDS:

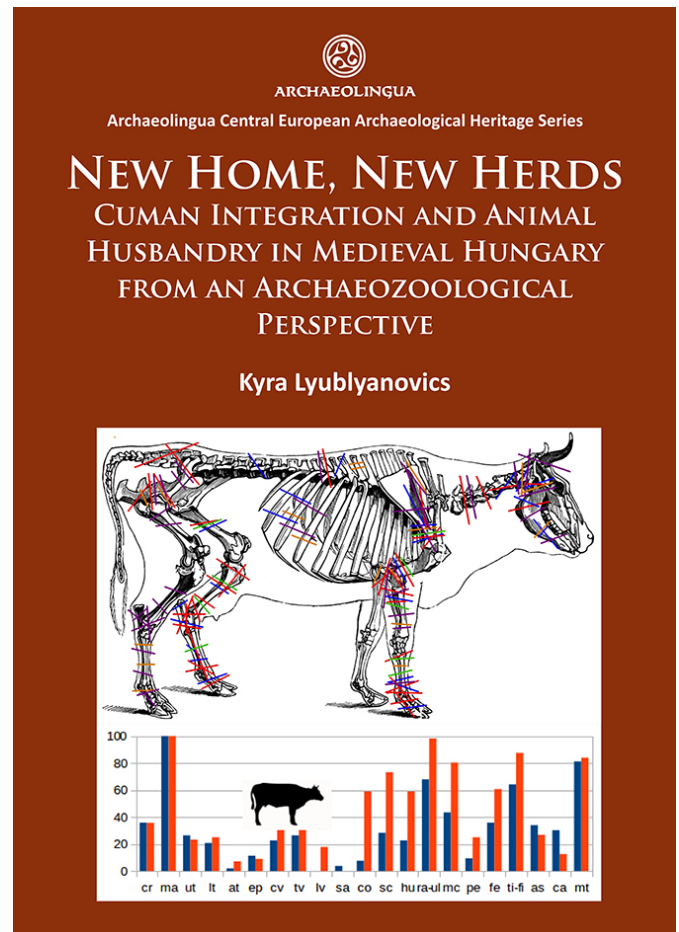
Cuman Integration and Animal Husbandry in Medieval Hungary from an Archaeozoological Perspective

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The Cuman people inhabited the East European steppe zone in the Middle Ages and were the last major group of mobile pastoralists to have settled for good in the Carpathian Basin during its entire history. They first arrived during the mid-thirteenth century fleeing the Mongol-Tartar expansion. As refugees they were settled down in the Eastern half of the country and converted to Christianity. However, it had taken centuries before they became properly integrated within the local population of the Hungarian Kingdom. Various chapters in this book discuss Cuman history, methodological concerns of interdisciplinary inquiry and Cuman economic orientation in Hungary in light of the natural environment. Foodways, that is meat consumption and related modes of butchery are integral elements of culture. Cuman tradition can thus be directly illustrated studying osteoarchaeological signs of processing the animal body. Moreover, evidence of caring for sick beasts i.e., animal welfare and veterinary treatment can also be detected on bone finds.

The book begins with putting Cuman history in perspective, a synthesis of major works in the area, typically published only in Hungarian. In addition to being an important summary of the state of research in English, it is a critical evaluation of the ways Cumans have been presented in the literature during their long research history. The ways Cumans reached Hungary and the efforts to integrate them into the Kingdom in politically critical centuries (beginning around the brief but violent 1241–1242 Mongol Invasion of Hungary) is a much-contested subject. It is an object lesson in ‘otherness’: lacking a written history of their own, the few contemporaneous sources describe Cumanians along topoi reflecting how ‘nomads’ have been perceived and documented by coeval sedentary communities. The subtle, contemporary definition of nomadism is thus a welcome introduction to the topic. Nomadism is a precarious way of life, vulnerable to fluctuations including extreme weather conditions, animal disease, and changing social relationships such as trade opportunities with sedentary rural and urban populations.

In the Carpathian Basin, space was limited and more-or-less settled-in in comparison with the Eurasian steppe. Beyond discussing this general feature, the author simultaneously deconstructs the simplistic



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concept of Cumans as a homogeneous group and the stereotype of nomads which – on the basis of archaeological evidence – does not seem to fit the diverse ways of life many steppe peoples eventually adopted in the Carpathian Basin. The author thus successfully addresses the question of ‘Cumans’ using a sophisticated mixture of historical and archaeozoological data, i. e. combining the written record (laden with generalizations even today) and the solid evidence of animal remains from archaeological sites. The latter are especially characteristic of a pastoral way of life. Both sources have their inaccuracies and both have been decimated by information loss through centuries. However, their different nature offers an invaluable opportunity for the complementary analysis of the scarce data.

The book is built upon the professional archaeozoological evaluation of data available from a variety of medieval settlements in Hungary. Against this background, bones from putative Cuman sites can be reliably studied as possible indicators of a well-established animal husbandry. During this work, the author makes an illuminating effort to reconcile medieval sources describing landscapes in the natural environment of settlements with osteological evidence recovered from sites. In the absence of using fine recovery techniques during excavations (such as water-sieving and flotation), relatively few fish finds can be compared to the written record. Fish remains from other archaeological cultures, however, confirm the importance of the main fish amply discussed in medieval and early modern age documents.

An entire chapter is devoted to illustrating that while all animal species, live or dead, are regarded and handled differently, all activities involving livestock are defined in the culturally determined framework outlined in this book. The author correctly emphasizes that the arbitrary present-day dichotomy between ‘ritual’ and ‘functional’ deposits threatens arguments with circular reasoning as it involves an inherent interpretation in itself. To the archaeologist, ritual is often any phenomenon that seems difficult to explain by rational, post-Enlightenment reasoning. However, such features should not be distanced from everyday life events in which they must have been deeply and organically embedded. It is especially interesting how a sacrificial animal was chosen. The practical or symbolic value of such individuals was an important aspect of Cuman mortuary practices as reflected by human burials.

The chapter discussing livestock health is laden with information, primarily natural-scientific or veterinary in nature. Bones react to major physiological changes during a lifetime, the skeleton thus carries a fascinating imprint of external effects that had influenced the animal. This can be translated into archaeological information in light of stratigraphic data as well as iconographic and written sources. It is this logic that helps understanding human-animal relationships specific for the examined culture. This chapter contains the meticulous description of diseased animal bones, the most typical cases also being illustrated in the colour photographs of the Appendix.

Throughout the work, the author consistently represents the view that dealing with animals has not only influenced culture through diverse attitudes toward animals. Understanding animal exploitation helps create a novel interpretive context within which the way human communities arranged their daily and seasonal activities can be elucidated. The way Cumans related to their livestock and the way these attitudes compare to those of the external, “non-Cuman” world of likewise heterogeneous medieval Hungarian communities open fascinating vistas in archaeological research: relationships with animals involve important issues of identity and self-representation, being meanwhile inseparable from the daily, material well-being of herders.

The book by Kyra Lyublyanovics on Cuman animal husbandry shows how archaeozoological analysis has the potential to reveal primary information on meat consumption, also characterizing animal keeping practices and lifeways of a predominantly pastoral community. It professionally combines zoological data with historical information and interprets them within the framework of settlement history in order to investigate the manifold integration process of medieval Cumans.