

Horse in Poland in the Times of the Early Piasts and Internal Fragmentation. An Interdisciplinary Study

The purpose of this project is to examine history of horse in the early history of Poland. Among domestic animals this species undoubtedly belongs to those which had an important influence on the history of man and his culture. Thanks to this species man could overcome long distances faster and easier, could develop transportation, revolutionize warfare and hunting. The significance of this species in the history of Poland, especially in its early period of the Piasts, is, however, quite poorly known due to very few historical records. From those we can gather that already before the acceptance of Christianity, the horses of particular appearance were believed to be associated with a god. Because of that, they were kept in sacred groves, and only priests had access to them and used them as prophetic palfreys which could tell the fortune of Slavs. The horses also served sovereigns, for example the founder of the State, Mieszko I, who was wealthy enough to equip his military units with military horses.

Despite such a special significance, the bone remains of horse discovered in settlements among kitchen waste, allow us to think that meat of this species was an edible produce. Perhaps it belonged to hunted ones, since herd of wild horses, according to the historical accounts of chronicles, lived in the forests of Pomerania. Next to the randomly scattered bones, more and more often archaeologists are discovering horse skeletons or skulls accompanied by agricultural implements and other animal skulls. Due to such discoveries we can suppose that after death a part of animals was buried in special tombs, like it was practiced until recently in some parts of Slavic lands. Some specimens were probably important in rituals related to the gratitude for successful yields.

Because there are definitely more archaeological finds of horse than there are historical records about it, this project aims at gathering all the archaeological bone discoveries of this animal, their examination in scientific laboratories and at analysing the results obtained. The research material will then include horse bone remains from castles, settlements, ritual sites and horse graves, that were discovered at about 130 sites, including the oldest seats of the Piasts – Gniezno, Poznań, and Ostrów Lednicki.

The subject of the research will then concern appearance of this animal, its size and shape. For this purpose, researchers will conduct thousands of measurements of bones, skulls and teeth, and will use innovative genetic and isotopic analyses. Thanks to the genetic analyses it will be possible to get to know the differentiation of horse coat, as well as to answer the question if mules and donkeys were used. The analyses of isotopes will serve to track the places of stay of palfreys and their owners. The analyses will be conducted to indicate which horses (of what size of body and sex) were used to what kind of purposes, and if Slavs were really hunting wild herds.

Rituals and customs in which horse was used as a magical animal will be described. In this regard, horse skeletons and skulls discovered on islands of lakes and in surrounding waters will have particular meaning. While analysing in detail the development of sets of teeth, we will check how long the animals were kept alive, and if mares and males were used to the same extent.

The participation of horses in battles, hunting and everyday usage exposed them into injuries and illnesses, which were causing infections visible on bones and in an abnormal development of set of teeth. In this regard, detailed causes will be known via paleopathological analyses conducted in veterinary laboratories. Besides the examination of bones, we will also gather information about treatment of horse, its utilitarian and magical meaning contained in Medieval records and chronicles, as well as preserved in the folk culture of Slavs.

Such designed aims of the project will be realized by a team consisting of archaeozoologists, archaeologists, geneticists, specialists of isotopic analyses and veterinarians and zootechnologists. The effect of their work will consist of scientific articles, conference papers presented at national and international conferences, and, first of all, a book presenting the history of this animal in the earliest stage of our statehood. The tasks realized in the project will be regularly reported at the internet website designed especially for this purpose.