

The role of dog among the societies of Central European Barbaricum (c. 200 BC-400 AD) – archaeozoology of the so-called “dog burials”

In the Antique world, dogs were valued for their usefulness in hunting, guarding, pastoralism, or spectacular dogfighting – but also as pets providing aesthetic pleasure. Dogs were also essential to cultural life, playing their role in mythology and religious rituals. The spiritual world was plenty of dogs, such as the famous Cerberus, the Canis Major and Canis Minor constellations of the night sky, or Lupercalia festival in Rome, during which dogs were sacrificed. Dogs were present in the rites of purification and protection, and sacrificed upon temples and buildings foundation. All these aspects of human-dog relationships are known through ancient texts and iconography, and manifest in the archaeological records as discoveries of dog deposits. The practice of burying dogs spread far beyond the borders of the Mediterranean Antique civilization and reached distant corners of the Barbaricum.

In Poland, there is rich archaeological evidence of dog deposits from the Roman Period. This phenomenon emerged here around the second century BC and persisted for several centuries. The peak of academic interest in this topic dates back to the 1970s-1990s, when archaeologists discovered many so-called dog burials across the country, with particular concentration in the Kuyavia region. Especially interesting are dog deposits in areas considered as sanctuaries and temples (offerings to deities?). Dog burials are also known from settlement areas, usually in or around houses and economic areas, where they may represent a sacrificial offering to provide prosperity or protection against evil.

With the growing number of archaeological records, scholars have formulated many theories and interpretations on the reasons behind practicing dog burial. The unequal treatment of dogs by past societies is evident. Some dog corpses were simply disposed of, but the others were ritually treated, including funerary practices, maybe preceded by sacrificial killing. Does this mean that dogs were differently perceived and differently maintained by people? Did the Roman time people in Central European Barbaricum categorize dogs into functional, farm animals and those with spiritual/ritual importance? Or maybe the sacrificial dogs were just randomly selected from the population? And beside these two categories of dogs, did these people also have pet dogs, as did the Romans? There are a few examples of very small dachshund-type dogs from the archaeological sites in Kuyavia region, that could have been kept as a manifestation of one's social/economical status. All of these important questions about the human-animal relationships in Barbaricum can help us to comprehensively understand the complex issue of the history of regarding animals as our property, but also as our companions, friends and guardian spirits.

A more in-depth insight into these dogs' life history is crucial to address these questions. This project will bring the new spectrum of zooarchaeological data to verify the indirect interpretation of the sacrificial killing of dogs for ritual or religious purposes – an interpretation that has existed in the archaeological literature for more than 40 years, but has never been systematically studied with advanced scientific methods. This requires advanced analytical techniques that infer information from dog skeletal remains. We will apply a combination of archaeological and zooarchaeological methods. In this project, a special focus is given to dogs' traits, such as physical appearance – size and body build, sex, age, size. Another important focus is the health of dogs, including skeletal deformations, which will allow to draw the conclusions about their living conditions and utilitarian function. Assessment of the season of their death will give clues about possible connections of sacrificial killing with some kind of periodic festivity, which for example took place in the Antique world. Taphonomical analysis of modifications made on bones by human and non-human agents, will allow to conclude if the animals were subjected to some kind of ritual violence. The set of radiocarbon datings will provide us the verification of the indirect archaeological data about the chronology of the finds.