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Animal remains from the Monastery of Chargubilya Mostich in Veliki Preslav (10-12th c. AD) – NE Bulgaria

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Abstract. A total 1653 animal remains of 18 taxa have been established in the medieval (10-12 c. AD.) Monastery of Chargubilya Mostich in Veliki Preslav (Shumen Region, CN Bulgaria). Some wild mammals as red deer, roe deer, wild boar and European edible dormouse were rarely hunted, while livestock breeding (cattle, pig, goat, sheep, horse, donkey and rabbit) was the basic source of meat for the settlement's inhabitants.

Key words: Subfossil vertebrates, Archaeozoology, Holocene animal remains.

Introduction

The monastery, where the ichirgu-boil Mostich (known also as Chargubilya Mostich) was reburied, was discovered and explored in 1952 by Prof. Stancho Vaklinov (Kostova 2010; Anonym. 2012). In 2012, Prof. Kazimir Popkonstantinov resumed the archaeological excavations. Mostich resided in the monastery as a distinguished monk, but in his previous secular life he was the third most important person (after the khan and the kavkhan) in the the First Bulgarian Empire.

The Monastery of Chargubilya Mostich in Veliki Preslav is located in the Selishte locality 43.14452 N, 26.81966 E in the southeastern end of the eastern low plain part of the Outer City of Veliki Preslav, which was inhabited by high-ranking secular figures (Kostova 2010). Mostich was the chief military commander of capital Preslav's garrison in the fortresses in the central (inner) region around the capital and the foreign minister, who was entrusted with the negotiations and the representation of the Bulgarian ruler abroad. Apparently, Mostich was among the closest people to Tsars Simeon and Peter (Kostova 2010).

The monastery, whose farm has existed for decades, is associated with the name of Mostich, due to the discovery of a tombstone with an inscription containing his name. The materials collected from the archaeological excavations conducted in 2023-2024 reveal for the first time information about the animal husbandry and hunting practiced by the inhabitants of this important place for Bulgarian medieval history.

Material and Methods

The studied material was collected in a total of 89 assemblages/samples in 2023-2024 and is dated to the 10th-12th centuries AD. It was provided for examination by Prof. K. Popkonstantinov (St. St. Cyril and Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo) for archaeozoological analysis. Material numbers 1653 bone/tooth fragments of mammals and birds and land snails' shells. It was identified through the osteological collections of the National Museum of Natural History at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (Vertebrate Animals Departments). All samples have been analyzed and the archaeozoological composition of the finds is described separately for each of them.

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Results and Discussion

There have been several archaeozoological studies of the capital of the First Bulgarian Empire, Veliki Preslav (Boev & Iliev 1989, 1991, Iliev & Boev 1990). The Mostich Monastery is a new site in the medieval Bulgarian capital.

The established species composition is relatively uniform. The studied remains belong to 18 taxa (wild animals and domestic forms, incl. human) – an average of over 93.5 remains/taxon (Table 1). No remains of fish, amphibians and reptiles have been established. The general distribution of the material includes: mollusks – 2 pcs., birds – 25 pcs., mammals – 1626 pcs.

Domestic cattle are the most common species/form of animals. Their remains account for 22.1% of the total material studied. The domestic pig is next, accounting for 12.2%.

Four bird species/forms have been identified - the domestic chicken, domestic goose, mallard and lesser white-fronted goose. All of them make up only 1.51% of the studied material. Most of the domestic chicken bones were from individuals of small breeds, like modern day bantam chickens. It was obviously not a meat breed.

The studied material proves the practice of two main livelihoods of the population – animal husbandry and hunting. The main source of meat for food was provided by livestock farming, mainly cattle breeding (Table 1). From preserved horn cores, we can conclude that the cattle raised were of the brachycerous type (i.e. short-horned breed; Fig. 1 a). Of interest is the finding, although with isolated finds, of a domestic rabbit (Fig. 1-c) and a European edible dormouse (Fig. 1-d). The latter, although a rodent, was used for food in ancient times. We do not exclude its presence among the collected bone remains being of a caught animal. Among wild animals, the wild boar has a significant predominance. In general, hunting had very little importance as a source of food supply.

It is well known that in Europe during the Middle Ages, hunting was usually the privilege of the rich and powerful in society. It was practiced not for the purpose of providing meat for food needs, but as an adventurous hobby for entertainment and satisfying hunting passions. This explains why game animals are relatively poorly represented in the Mostich monastery.

Of the wild mammals, 4 species have been identified – wild boar, roe deer, red deer and European edible dormouse. These species are mainly forest dwellers – an indirect indication of the prevalence of forest landscapes in the vicinity of the monastery.

A significant part of the collected bone remains, due to the nature of their deposition, is unsuitable for taxonomic determination. A total of 626 pcs. (37.8 %) represent unidentifiable fragments (so-called bone splinters), on which no species-diagnostic features for their osteological identification have been preserved. In addition, 235 pcs. bone fragments (14.2 %), presented in Table 1 as “small even-toed mammals *Ovis /Capra*” – sheep/goat, are also partly undetermined.

Traces of processing on the bones (knife/axe cuts) were identified on 19 bones (Fig. 1-b). All of them are cut marks obtained during the dismemberment of the animal's carcass. The detailed distribution of the archaeozoological remains is presented in Table 1.

Fig. 1. Some animal bone remains from the Monastery of Chargubilya Mostich in Veliki Preslav: *Bos taurus* – horncores (a); *Cervus elaphus* – antler, fragment (b); *Oryctolagus cuniculus* – os coxae (c); *Glis glis* – femur (d). Photographs: Z. Boev.

Table 1. Distribution of the collected archaeozoological material from the Monastery of Chargubilya Mostich near Veliki Preslav (10-12th c. AD) in 2023-2024.

No	Taxa	English name	Total number of finds	Number of samples	Number of processed finds
Mollusca					
Gastropoda					
1.	*Helix lucorum*	Turkish snail	2	1	
	Mollusks total		2	1	
AVES					
Anseriiformes					
2.	*Anas platyrhynchos*	Mallard	1	1	
3.	*Anser anser domestica*	Domestic duck	1	1	
4.	*Anser* cf. *erythropus*	Lesser White-fronted goose	1	1	
Galliformes					
5.	*Gallus gallus domestica*	Domestic chicken	22	17	
	Birds total		25	20	
MAMMALIA					
Artiodactyla					
6.	*Sus scrofa domestica*	Domestic pig	201	34	5
7.	*Sus scrofa scrofa*	Wild boar	47	19	
8.	*Capra hircus*	Domestic goat	80	21	2
9.	*Ovis aries*	Domestic sheep	43	12	
10.	*Ovis / Capra*	Small even-toed	235	32	1
11.	*Bos taurus*	Domestic cattle	366	69	10

12.	*Cervus elaphus*	Red deer	7	5	
13.	*Capreolus capreolus*	Roe deer	6	2	
	Artiodactyls total		985		
Perissodactyla					
14.	*Equus ferus caballus*	Domestic horse	7	3	
15.	*Equus africanus asinus*	Domestic donkey	5	2	
	Perissodactyls total		12	5	
Rodentia					
16.	*Glis glis*	European edible dormouse	1	1	
	Rodentia total		1	1	
Lagomorpha					
17.	*Oryctolagus cuniculus domestica*	Domestic rabbit	1	1	
	Lagomorpha total		1	1	
Primates					
18.	*Homo sapiens*	Human	1	1	
	Primates total		1	1	
	Mammals indet.	Bone splinters (of mammal bones)	626	64	1
	Mammals total		1626	89	19
	Vertebrates total		1651	89	19
	Animals total		1653	89	19

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