Almost a chest hit: An aurochs humerus with hunting lesion from Göbekli Tepe, south-eastern Turkey, and its implications

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Abstract

An aurochs right humerus with a fragment of an embedded projectile point was discovered during excavations at early Neolithic Göbekli Tepe in south-eastern Turkey. Evidence for hunting trauma in bones is extremely rare in the prehistoric record from the Near East and Africa, while the dataset from Europe is much larger. In this contribution a hunting lesion from Göbekli Tepe and its context will be described and discussed against the background of data on similar hunting lesions found in Europe, the Near East and Africa. Communal hunting is identified as one strategy to hunt down large game like aurochs, which, in the case of Göbekli Tepe, will be placed in the socio-cultural context of large scale gatherings.

1. Introduction

The presence of aurochs, Bos primigenius, in former times widely distributed across temperate Eurasia and Northern Africa is illustrated by rock art and Egyptian wall paintings as well as dental and osseous remains from Pleistocene and Holocene sites (e.g. Churcher, 1972; Boessneck, 1988; Gautier, 1988; Peters, 1990; Muzzolini, 1995; Lutz and Lutz, 1995; Chenal-Velardé, 1997; Linseele, 2004; Huyge and Ikram, 2009; Yeshurun, 2017). However, with the onset of human management and subsequent domestication of aurochs, wild sheep, wild goat and wild boar in the Near East during the 10th-9th millennia BCE (Helmer et al., 2005; Peters et al., 2014, 2017) and the dispersal of livestock husbandry practices across Holocene Europe, Asia and Africa, aurochs increasingly lost ground to become extinct in historical times.
Conversely, its domestic descendant developed into a most valuable provider of milk, traction power and manure, besides meat, fat and raw materials (e.g. hides, leather, sinews, horn), and is currently distributed across all continents.

Considering its physique, the aurochs must have been an impressive and – from a hunter’s viewpoint – most formidable adversary. Beyond the hunter-prey relationship, however, prehistoric iconography also illustrates the species’ prominent role in animal symbolism. In parts of its former distribution, the dual nature of the human-aurochs relationship is already illustrated in Upper Palaeolithic cave art, for instance in Europe (e.g., Guinant and Néron de Surgy, 2014) and Northeast Africa (e.g. Huynen et al., 2011), and continues well into the Neolithic (s. below). With weaponry evolving since the Upper Palaeolithic, aurochs hunting probably became more efficient. This can be deduced from the species’ contribution to the diet of hunter-gatherers in Eurasia and northern Africa. In absence of historical accounts, however, information about aurochs hunts is mainly restricted to imagery and only rarely supported by archaeological findings. Here we report on an exceptional find of an aurochs bone with a flint projectile embedded, recovered from the 10th-9th millennium BCE site of Gōbekli Tepe in Southeast Anatolia. First a short account of the site, its fauna and the context is presented. This is followed by an overview of hunting traumas reported in game species by means of faunal analysis in Africa, Europe and the Near East. Drawing essentially upon ethnographic evidence from sub-Saharan Africa, discussion then centres on the frequency and types of lesions and techniques and strategies for hunting large game. The paper closes with considerations about the socio-cultural implications and importance of large game hunting.

2. The site, its fauna and the aurochs specimen in its context

2.1. The site

Gōbekli Tepe is situated on one of the southernmost elevations of the Germuş Mountains overlooking the fertile Harran plain to the south, some 18 km northeast of the modern city of Şanlıurfa (Fig. 1). Excavations at Gōbekli Tepe have been underway for nearly twenty-three years, of which the first two decades are synonymous with the pioneering studies by Klaus Schmidt, who passed away in 2014 (Schmidt, 2012).

Currently, the remains of several multiphase monumental buildings have been excavated at Gōbekli Tepe, labelled A to H in the order of their discovery (e.g. Kurapkat, 2010; Piesker, 2014; Dietrich et al., 2016). The earliest phases of some of these buildings, which were generally found in the lower-lying hollows of the mound, were probably constructed in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA: ~9.600–8.700 calBC), while their later phases can be attributed to the Early Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (EPPNB: ~8.700–8.200 calBC). In addition to these large monumental structures, there are remains of numerous smaller stone-built rectangular buildings. These were erected in Early to Middle Pre-Pottery Neolithic B times (~8.700–8.000 calBC) and were found on the higher-lying knolls and slopes, sometimes partially superimposing the larger monumental round-oval structures.

Most of the monumental structures have a round-oval ground plan and feature monolithic T-shaped pillars (up to 4 m in height) which were incorporated into enclosing outer stone walls. Two taller pillars (up to 5.5 m) were installed in the centre of the buildings, in some cases inserted into pedestals which had been carefully carved from the natural limestone bedrock upon which

Fig. 1. Map of Turkey. (1) Şanlıurfa, (2) Gōbekli Tepe (Made with Natural Earth. Free vector and raster map data @ naturalearthdata.com).
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