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## ANIMALS AND RITUAL IN EARLY BRITAIN : THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE

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### Résumé

Dans cet article sont abordés certains indices permettant de détecter, à partir de données archéologiques, des pratiques rituelles ou religieuses impliquant des animaux. Cela implique que des dépôts d'ossements animaux résultant de ces pratiques peuvent être distingués de déchets culinaires ou artisanaux par leur contexte, la manière dont ils ont été mis en place ou leur association avec d'autres types de restes, inhabituels ou dont la nature religieuse peut être établie. Les exemples donnés concernent la Grande Bretagne, du Néolithique à la période romaine.

Cependant, on montre également que les traces archéologiques de pratiques religieuses ou rituelles peuvent être très peu évidentes, voire impossibles à détecter, notamment lorsqu'elles ont eu pour cadre l'espace domestique.

In this paper I want to look at some of the ways in which it may be possible to detect in the archaeological record ritual or religious practices involving animals, taking examples from Britain from the Neolithic to the Roman period. In particular I wish to draw attention to some phenomena which may be rather difficult to detect and may not be recognized during excavation, but which still seem to have resulted from such practices.

Our interpretation of archaeological deposits of animal bones as manifestations of religious practices rather than subsistence or economic activities tends to be based on the recognition of the unusual. These unusual deposits may be distinguished from the bones that are food or industrial debris by the context of their deposition, the manner of their deposition or their association with other archaeological remains of an unusual or recognizably religious nature.

The most obvious of the latter category are bones that are found associated with human burials in burial mounds, graves or with cremations. Such deposits have often been interpreted as dedicatory offerings, the remains of ritual or funerary meals, or of food buried with the dead to feed them on their journey to the afterlife. Examples of such practices are widely distributed temporally and geographically. One particular example are what are known as "heads and hooves" burials, first recognized in Neolithic long barrows in Wessex, but more recently also found in early Bronze Age round barrows. They consist of the lower limbs, usually carpals, tarsals, metapodials and phalanges, and the skull of a domestic ox, and are thought to be burials of ox hides which have the extremities still attached. A recently excavated example is from Hemp Knoll near Avebury in Wiltshire (fig.1). The hide burial was found in the grave pit, not in the coffin itself, and has been interpreted as an offering, placed beside the coffin at the time of burial, but perhaps belonging to a shaman or chief mourner rather than to the dead man himself (ROBERTSON-MACKAY, 1980).

Animal bones are also found with burials even as late as the Romano-British period. In the late first to second century AD cemetery at Skeleton Green in Hertfordshire (PARTRIDGE, 1981), 36 percent of the cremations included some animal bone, either sheep cattle or bird. These can perhaps best be interpreted as food offerings, but further indications of the nature or significance of the ritual are seen in the association of cattle with male and birds with female burials. Sheep bones were found with burials of both sexes.

In many instances, it is only their association with human remains that marks out collections of bones as having any particular significance. Many of those that are interpreted as the remains of ritual meals or food offerings would not, in other contexts, be distinguishable from ordinary food refuse. In other instances we seek for ritual or religious interpretations and explanations because the contexts in which the animal bones were found are unusual or difficult to explain.

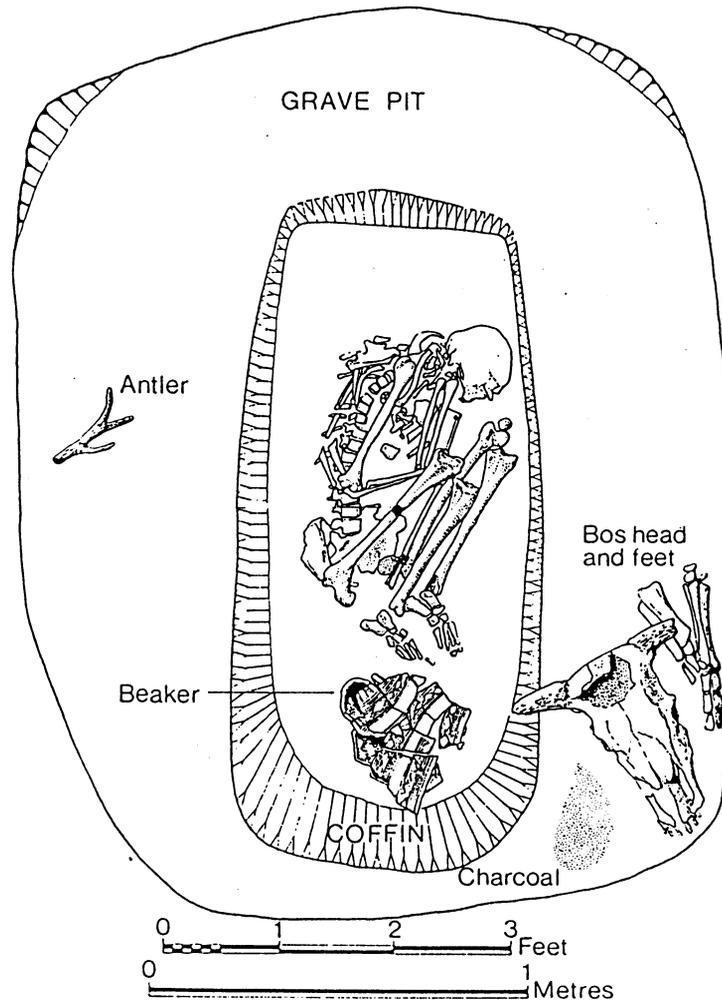


Figure 1

"Head and hooves" burial at Hemp Knoll, Wiltshire (after M.E. ROBERTSON-MACKAY, 1980).

One of the major problems that archaeologists have had to face in trying to understand the earliest agricultural societies of southern Britain is the almost complete absence of domestic structures. Our knowledge of these early societies comes almost entirely from mortuary structures, flint mines and what are known as causewayed camps. These latter are roughly oval areas enclosed by one to four concentric ditches, interrupted by causeways. They seem very unlikely to have served any defensive function, and in the majority there is very little evidence for structures or occupation. However, the ditches often contain large quantities of animal bones, mainly those of cattle, together with potsherds and broken tools. Interpretation of the use of these monuments has varied and indeed there is evidence that they cannot all be assumed to have had the same function. Some have suggested that they were central places for a normally dispersed population, and were used to round up cattle in the autumn for exchange and the slaughter of surplus stock (PIGGOTT, 1954). However, in some camps, there are not only the disarticulated bones of animals that had been butchered and presumably eaten, but also some complete animals that appear to have been laid in the ditches and then deliberately covered with a layer of chalk rubble (SMITH, 1965).

This has suggested that the causewayed camps may have served not only as centres for exchange of goods and animals but also as places where magic or religious ceremonies were performed. The whole animals have been interpreted as sacrificial offerings, and the butchered bones as the remains of ritual meals (MEGAW and SIMPSON, 1987, p. 84).

In attempting to identify evidence for ritual or religious behaviour in the past, there is a danger that we may be over-influenced by context. Thus where a particular building or structure has been judged to have some religious or at least non utilitarian function, we may be only too ready to interpret animal bones found in or near it as resulting from ritual behaviour. However, when bones are recovered from what seem to be normal domestic contexts, such interpretations are often not looked for. Much of the ritual associated with modern Western religion is conducted within special buildings, which are architecturally distinct and quite separate from domestic buildings. However, there may be some aspects of the religious practice that take place within a domestic context -the Friday evening meals of Orthodox Jewish communities are an obvious example. Anthropological studies also show that while the context of a religious act may be extremely important, it may be defined by something as ephemeral as a circle drawn in the ground, or may be a building that at other times has a domestic function.

However, where the context is not in itself unusual, evidence for religious practices may be much harder to detect, and is often only visible if it leaves behind unusual remains in the archaeological record.

For the Iron Age in southern Britain, the primary source of information is not the funerary monuments that characterize the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, but a range of settlement sites. In fact a clearly identifiable and distinct burial tradition seems to be absent in many regions. A small number of buildings within settlements have been thought to have had a religious function, and have been called temples and shrines (CUNLIFFE, 1978, p. 320). This interpretation of their function has been based either on the fact that they were rectangular (rather than circular, like most Iron Age houses), or because they were replaced by Romano-British temples. However, if they were indeed ritual centres, then the ritual carried out within them seems to have left almost no detectable traces.

We do though have evidence for ritual practices involving animals that suggest that the focus of at least part of the ritual was a domestic one, carried out in the same contexts as were the more ordinary activities of everyday life. The most easily identified of these are burials of complete animals, fully articulated and with no obvious traces of butchery, although in a small number of instances the heads of the animals have been removed and placed near the rest of the skeleton (GRANT, 1984, p. 534; CRA'ASTER, 1961). The animals found are cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, horses and dogs, and very occasionally cats, red deer, badgers and foxes and possibly birds. They have in most instances been placed in the pits that are a common feature of the settlements. These pits were dug initially for the storage of cereals, but when abandoned for this purpose (see REYNOLDS, 1979, p. 76) were used as rubbish pits. In almost every case the animal burials were found in pits that did not appear to differ in any way from the rest, and they also contained the usual mixture of pottery sherds, domestic bone refuse and broken artefacts. Some animals appear to have been placed in the pit when they were empty, but others were put in after they had been partly filled with rubbish.

Two other groups of animal deposits have also been found in the same sorts of contexts as the whole animals -articulated limbs and complete skulls (GRANT, 1984; WAIT, 1985). The articulated limbs are often those of horses (fig.2), but also of cattle, sheep and more rarely pigs. They appear to have been cut from the rest of the carcass and placed in pits with their flesh still attached. The skulls that have been found include those of horses, dogs, cattle, sheep and pigs, and deposits of complete horse mandibles can also be seen to be part of the same ritual practice.

Here we have examples of animal deposits that are in themselves unusual, while their place of deposition is not. What makes them unusual is that they are the remains of animals or parts of animals that are usually eaten, and it is because of the apparent sacrifice of a food resource that they are interpreted as ritual deposits. Thus the not infrequent occurrences of complete dog skeletons in medieval contexts are not interpreted in the same way because in this period dogs were not eaten. In the Iron Age dogs and also horses were clearly regarded as edible, even if they provided only a very small proportion of the meat consumed (GRANT, 1984, p. 524).

It can of course be argued that the complete skeletons are nothing more mysterious than the remains of animals that died from diseases that made them dangerous for human consumption. While it is impos-



Figure 2  
Articulated horse leg found in a pit at the Iron Age hillfort at Danebury, Hants.  
(See GRANT, 1984; photo : The Danebury Trust).

sible to prove that this was not the case, there are other factors that argue against such a "rational" explanation. Firstly, if they were all natural mortalities, then one would expect that the skeletons of animals that were kept in the smallest numbers would occur least frequently and vice versa; however, this is not the case. For example, at the hillfort at Danebury, horse and dog bones comprised about 5 percent of the bones from the settlement as a whole, but 15 percent of the burials were of these animals (GRANT, 1984, p. 127).

Secondly, there are many instances of more than one animal being buried at the same time, and particularly when they are different species, natural mortality does not seem to be a particularly plausible explanation for their presence. A horse and a dog, and cattle and pigs have been found together at Danebury, a horse, a dog and a man at Blewburton, and two pigs and a dog at Twywell (GRANT, 1984; COLLINS, 1953; HARCOURT, 1975).

There is also some evidence that the animals were not just haphazardly thrown into the pits, but were carefully placed there. Some were placed at the bottoms of pits (fig.3), while others seem to have been put in with flints or chalk blocks, although how frequently this occurs is not clear. Unfortunately, where ritual deposits have been found in ordinary domestic contexts they have not always been given appropriate attention during excavation, because they were not expected, or even at first noticed. Thus full details of the manner of their deposition have not always been recorded.

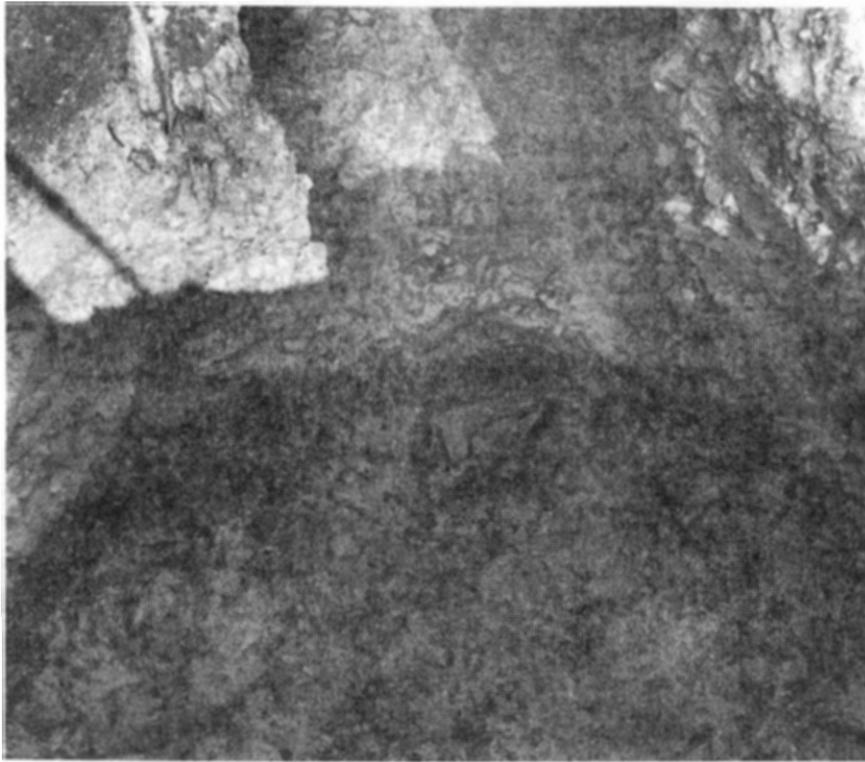


Figure 3  
Horse skull found on the base of a storage pit at the Iron Age hillfort at Danebury, Hants.  
(see GRANT, 1984; photo : The Danebury Trust).

Increasing awareness of the possibility of detecting ritual behaviour has more recently led to more careful excavation and recording, and thus a more detailed knowledge of the nature of the practices involved. The excavation of the contents of a pit at the Danebury hillfort has given further insights into Iron Age ritual practice. The articulated head, neck and chest of a horse had been placed in the pit after it was partly filled with rubbish. The pelvis and sacrum were positioned over the vertebrae but the rest of the animal was missing. Within the chest cavity were two large flint nodules, which must have been deliberately placed there, suggesting the cutting and evisceration of the horse prior to burial. A complete young pig was placed against the horse, one forelimb over and the other under the atlas and axis and the head resting against the back of the skull. A second young pig lay on the other side of the pit, and within the same layer were many burnt flints, chalk blocks, slingstones and large pieces of pot, and a broken whetstone placed against the horse's jaw. Clearly the ritual practices that resulted in this deposit were complex, and we can only guess at the symbolic meaning that the various elements in the ritual may have had.

Those ritual activities that we have been able to detect in the Iron Age appear to have involved killing animals and not eating them, or not eating all of them. However, sacrifice followed by the consumption of the victim may be almost impossible to detect archaeologically. In the Roman period we know from written evidence that animal sacrifice was a very important part of the religion, but the animals were often consumed after they had been slaughtered. The Roman soldiers that garrisoned the first military establishments in Britain will almost certainly have sacrificed a large number of cattle, and yet it has not been possible to distinguish sacrificed cattle from those that were killed merely to provide food, since all were ultimately eaten. However, there are a few cases where such animal sacrifices can be detected. The animal bones recovered during the excavation of a Roman building at Uley, Gloucestershire, were predominately those of goats and chickens, and in both species males predominated (LEVITAN, 1989). Typical domestic assemblages for this period are dominated by cattle bones. Sheep and pigs are also

fairly common, but chicken and especially goats are very rare (GRANT, in press). This bone assemblage is thus very unusual in the proportions of animal species and in the proportions of sexes represented. It is thus assumed to be largely the remains of sacrificed animals, an interpretation supported by finds of cult objects associated with Mercury, a god whose favoured animals were believed to be goats and cockerels.

Finally, we return to the Iron Age for an example of what appears to have been some sort of ritual behaviour that has led to a rather puzzling phenomenon in the archaeological record. The excavation of the Iron Age hillfort at Danebury was very extensive, and has produced almost 200,000 bones, mostly from the pits already discussed. During the long process of the identification of these bones, it gradually became apparent that while both horse and dog bones were rather rare at the site, if a bone of one of these animals was found within a particular context, then it was very likely that there would be a bone of the other animal. This impression was tested statistically, and confirmed a significant association between the occurrence of the bones, often only single bones, of horses, dogs and also of birds, particularly ravens, in several phases of occupation at the site.

This discovery, together with the frequent occurrence of horse and dog bones in the ritual deposits already discussed, suggests that these animals may have had an important symbolic role in the life of Iron Age communities.

Furthermore, it demonstrates that while we may be detecting some of the most obvious signs of ritual activity in the past, within many bone deposits that have been assumed to be merely the random accumulations of household debris, there may also be evidence of deliberate deposition of animal remains as part of a ritual practice. Further work that is still in its preliminary stages has suggested that there may be other significant associations of animal bones that demonstrate other aspects of Iron Age religion and ritual.

This paper has concentrated on the identification of ritual practices involving animals, and has said little about the nature or the significance of those practices. In fact it has until very recently been rather unfashionable to talk about ritual for fear of being labelled as part of the lunatic fringe of archaeology. In Hodder's introduction to anthropology for archaeology he apologises for the brevity of his chapter on ritual which he says is "partly because the process of compartmentalisation of archaeology has pushed off ritual.....as (a) peripheral aspect of human behaviour". However, he goes on to suggest that "an understanding of a society's ritual is of primary importance in revealing the models through which adaptive responses were made" (HODDER, 1982, p. 159). While we may recognize the existence of ritual, and be able to start to reconstruct some aspects of religious or ritual practices in the past, understanding and interpretation of those practices is a great deal more difficult. We have used the terms "ritual" and "religion" rather loosely, although they do have precise and rather different meanings. This is because we may have great difficulty in distinguishing between the archaeological manifestations of abstract religious beliefs and the performance of ritual acts. In any attempt at explanation, we are heavily dependent on ethnographic analogy which may point the way to understanding but which also cautions against the ready acceptance of simple interpretations. Ritual is frequently extremely complex, and often as ambiguous in its meaning to those that practice it as to those that attempt to understand it. Nonetheless, even if we may never be able to fully comprehend it, it is clearly important in defining the cultural identity of societies in the past, and as an indication of their responses to the natural, and the supernatural, world.

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## DISCUSSION

*J. LECLERC : Trouve-t-on des restes humains dans une position et dans un état comparable aux restes animaux ? Si cela est le cas, ne devrait-on pas chercher une explication unique ? (Cela suggérerait plutôt des morts naturelles, en tout cas pour les squelettes entiers).*

*A. GRANT : Sur les sites de l'Age du Fer en Grande Bretagne, des restes humains sont également trouvés dans les fosses à détritiques, quelquefois associés avec des os animaux. Les restes humains sont assez rarement des squelettes complets, ils peuvent être réduits à des parties de squelettes en connexion, à des crânes ou d'autres os isolés. Plutôt que de suggérer une mortalité naturelle pour les squelettes complets d'animaux, ils semblent ajouter une autre dimension à ce qui apparaît clairement comme un comportement religieux complexe à cette période.*

*P. MENIEL : Le cheval a été cité à plusieurs reprises dans les sites de l'Age du Fer que tu as mentionnés, et il a été fait mention de la découpe de cet animal : a-t-il été consommé régulièrement comme c'est le cas en Gaule belge ?*

A. GRANT : Des traces de découpe sur les os de chevaux, et aussi de chiens montrent que ces animaux ont été mangés à l'Age du Fer, mais de telles marques sont plus rares que sur les os de boeufs, de moutons ou de porcs, ce qui suggère qu'ils étaient consommés occasionnellement, plutôt que régulièrement.

A. FERDIERE : A propos de l'association chien-cheval : le chien aurait alors une importance comparable à celle du cheval. On peut alors penser à des chiens de chasse, ce qui justifierait peut-être leur importance.

A. GRANT : C'est une idée intéressante, et Strabon mentionne l'exportation de chiens de chasse anglais vers Rome. Cependant il y a très peu d'indices archéologiques d'une activité cynégétique en Angleterre à l'Age du Fer. Les restes de cerf et d'autres gibiers sont très rares sur les sites d'habitat.

H. SIDI MAAMAR : Existe-t-il une association entre les inhumations de chiens et de chevaux ? Existe-t-il des traces de découpe sur les os de chats ?

A. GRANT : Des associations de sépultures de cheval et de chien ont été trouvées, le meilleur exemple qui me vient à l'esprit a été trouvé à Danebury. Je n'ai pas rencontré de traces de découpe sur des os de chats, mais les chats sont très rares à l'Age du Fer en Grande Bretagne.

J.-H. YVINEC : En France on trouve assez régulièrement des os de corbeaux à la période gauloise, mais ce ne sont que des fragments isolés. Comment a-t-on pu mettre en évidence l'utilisation du corbeau dans les pratiques religieuses en Angleterre ?

A. GRANT : Pour l'instant il y a trop peu d'indices pour attester le rôle des corbeaux dans les pratiques religieuses. Nous avons besoin de plus de fouilles où le tamisage soit pratiqué de manière systématique.

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