

Animal Bones from the Early Iron Age Pit at Porumbenii Mari-Várfele (Harghita County)

Imola Kelemen

The faunal remains excavated from the Early Iron Age pit were in a fragmented and a slightly weathered state, most of them (not based on number of fragments, but on number of species and individuals) being kitchen waste. The total of 56 fragments can be categorized into only three groups of domestic species: 47 pieces of a young horse's skull, 5 cattle bones, 2 pig bones and 2 ribs belonging to an animal of small-medium size.

Domestic cattle (*Bos taurus*):

- two fragments of a left mandible (with a calf's teeth and a growing molar–juvenile individual);
- one distal epiphysial fragment of a thigh bone (the line of ossification is visible–subadult individual);
- one proximal epiphysial fragment of a left shinbone, probably broken for the marrow inside, with cut marks and teeth marks (ossified–adult individual);
- one fragment of a thoracic vertebra.

Domestic pig (*Sus scrofa domesticus*):

- one fragment of a skull (processus supraacusticus);
- one diaphysial fragment of a radius with teeth marks.

Horse (*Equus caballus*):

- 47 pieces of a juvenile individual's skull, apart from the splinters the identifiable parts were: one skullcap, one os petrosum, the partly burnt occipital bone with the occipital condyles on it, two temporal bone and two nasal bone fragments, one palatine bone, one upper left jaw (molars and premolars, M2 growing), isolated teeth (upper right molars: M1-M2, the latter in growth; upper incisor also in growth), one fragment of a lower jaw with 6 incisors (calf's teeth).

Unidentified, small-medium sized mammals: two rib fragments.

	<i>Bos taurus</i> (cattle)	<i>Sus scrofa domesticus</i> (domestic pig)	<i>Equus caballus</i> (horse)	Unidentified, small-medium sized mammals
Cranium	2	1	47	
Radius		1		
Femur	1			
Tibia	1			
Vertebra	1			
Costa				2

Table 1. Porumbenii Mari-Várfele. The animal bones found in the Early Iron Age pit.

Not all of the faunal remains found in the pit can be considered kitchen waste. Most of the cattle bones (apart from the jaw-fragments) come from relatively beefy regions of the body, one piece even showing usage (cut and teeth marks on the broken shin bone), and one of the pig bones (the radius) also bears gnaw marks. On the other side, the skull fragments of the young foal can hardly be considered food remains.

Domestic cattle (*Bos taurus*). The most interesting thing about the 5 pieces coming from this species was that we could easily identify that such a small number of fragments belonged to at least three different individuals: one juvenile, one subadult and an adult. All of the remains are probably kitchen remains, a fact attested also by the gnawing and cut marks on the left shin bone (Figure 1). The gnaw marks were probably made by a dog, and the bone, considering its state, was cracked for the marrow inside.

Domestic pig (*Sus scrofa domesticus*). One of the two bones belonging to this species is a skull fragment (*processus supraacusticus*), the other is the diaphysial fragment of a *radius*, with gnaw marks (Figure 2). According to these facts, the bones seem to be kitchen wastes, the gnaw marks being produced by a dog. None of the bones, however, allow us to

determine the age of the animal. At the same time, the *radius* comes from a region that bears meat of quality B, and the skull fragment from a region with meat of quality C¹.

Horse (*Equus caballus*). The 47 pieces of the foal's skull is moderately weathered, and the identifiable pieces tell us that they belong to a 1-1.5 year old animal, with calf's teeth incisors, and because of the fragmentation, one of the permanent, still in growth, but not yet erupted incisor is visible. The skull pieces show no cut or teeth marks, but on the occipital bone a small burning (Figure 2) can be noticed. Considering this information, the skull is not kitchen waste, but since the pit held only the head, about the other parts of the animal the same thing cannot be said.

One of the two ribs belonging to the small-medium sized mammals also shows cut marks. These bones probably belonged to the above mentioned pig.

During the analysis of the archaeological finds a question arose, whether the deposits in the pit in matter are sacrificial or common, profane. If we were to judge only by the animal bones, we would be in the same situation, since these hold no more specific information than the archaeological material.

About identifying the ritual aspect of animal bone deposits, J.D. Hill offers us a comprehensive study², analyzing the limits of the expression *ritual deposition*, and especially its definition, its necessity as a notion.

According to the researcher's writing, in England, mostly at Early Iron Age sites there frequently occur some finds that archaeologists call *special animal deposits*. These are complete or partly complete skeletons, joint limbs and whole skulls which turned up in places close to the household along with material labeled as rubbish, and no buildings with primarily ritual functions, such as temples or tombs are found nearby³.

After analyzing the quality and quantity of the bones and the archaeological material found near these animal remains, respectively the way, system, recurrence and periodicity of their deposition, the author concludes that neither the contents of the pit, nor its location at the site can provide conclusive arguments about the ritual aspect⁴. The word *ritual*, however popular it may be among archaeologists, does not cover a well circumscribed action, and to universally define the notion, is virtually impossible.

Conclusions:

The faunal remains found in the Early Iron Age pit, apart from the fragments belonging to the foal's skull, are most likely all kitchen waste. Most of these cattle and pig bones come from the moderately meaty (quality B) parts of the body.

The five pieces of cattle bones belong to at least three individuals, with three different ages: juvenile, subadult and adult, while some of them—along with the pig bones—bear cut and teeth marks. On one hand, the presence of the juvenile individual suggests a meat-centered community, on the other hand, though, the slaughtering of subadult and adult animals reveals a growth where secondary products (e.g. milk and field work) are more important. At the same time, the bones of the older individuals also belong to the meaty regions (quality A and B) of the body, which means that the animals kept for milk and used for work—in the most natural way—end up as food.

The presence of the foal skull breaks the pattern of animal remains resulting from food, since it has no gnawing or cut marks. Even the partially burnt occipital bone is no proof for long lasting burning, but more likely a brief contact with fire.

Bibliography:

Hill 1996: J.D. Hill, *The identification of ritual deposits of animals. A general perspective from a specific study of "special animal deposits" from the Southern English Iron Age*. In S.

¹ Uerpmann 1973, 316.

² Hill 1996, 17-32.

³ Hill 1996, 18.

⁴ Hill 1996, 28.

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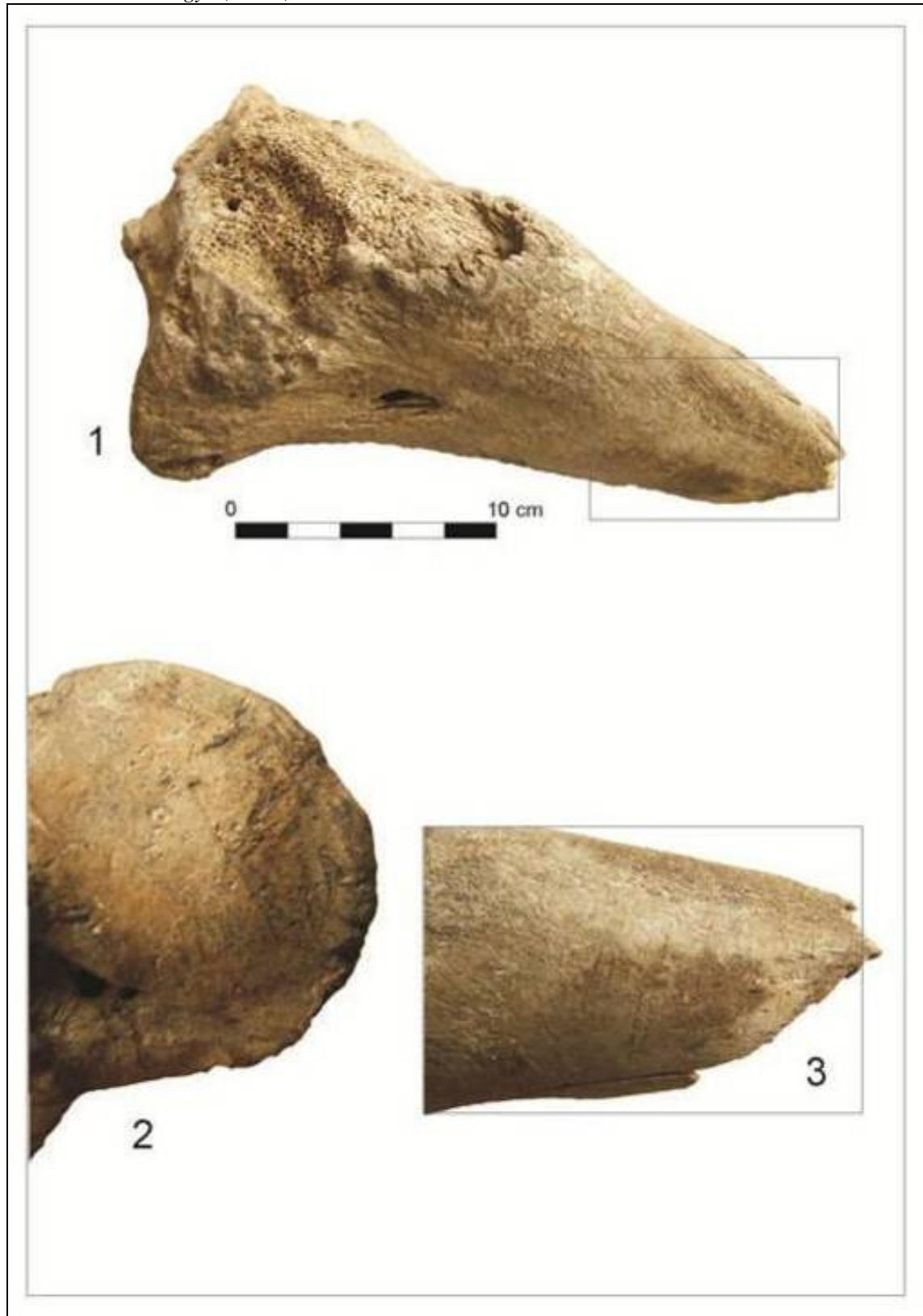


Figure 1. Porumbenii Mari-Várfele. 1. Cattle shin-bone. 2. Cut marks on the proximal epiphysis of the cattle shin bone. 3. Gnaw marks on the diaphysis of the shin bone.

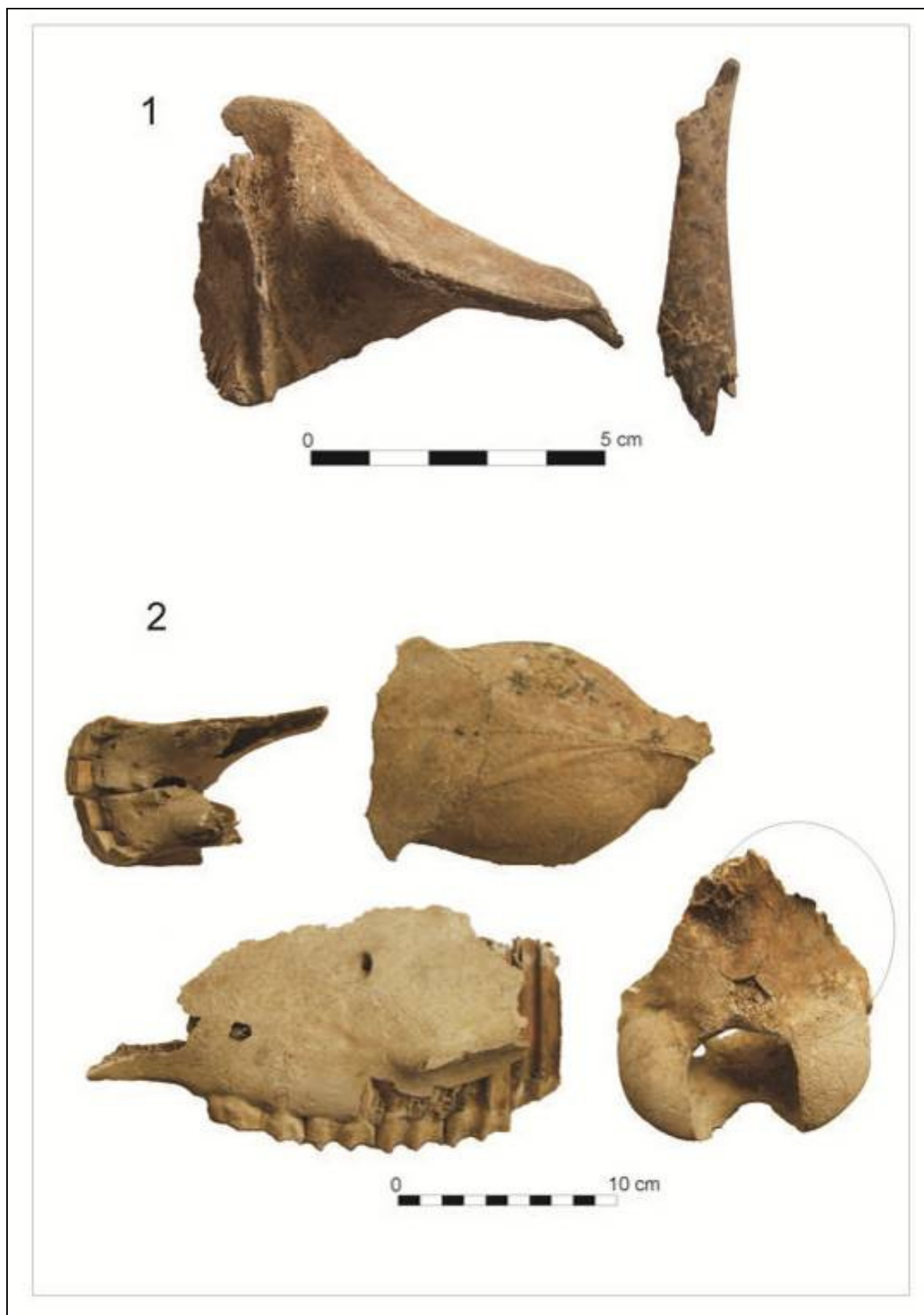


Figure 2. Porumbenii Mari-Várfele. 1. Fragments of a pig's skull and radius (gnaw marks visible on the latter). 2. Remains of a horse's skull, burnt mark on the occipital bone.