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THE METAL AGES AND MEDIEVAL PERIOD

T.V. Lobanova[1] and O.V. Kardash[2]

[1]Institute of Plant and Animal Ecology, Ural Branch, Russian Academy of Sciences,
8 Marta 202, Yekaterinburg, 320144, Russia
E-mail: lota_64@mail.ru
[2]Institute of Archaeology of the North,
PO Box 398, Nefteyugansk, 628310, Russia
E-mail: kov_ugansk@mail.ru

SUBSISTENCE AND RITUAL PRACTICES AT THE POLUI FORTIFIED SETTLEMENT, WESTERN SIBERIA (Based on fauna remains)

Results are presented of an analysis of animal bones from the late 16th–early 18th century Polui fortified settlement (excavations of 2004 and 2005). Twenty species of domestic and wild mammals, 22 species of birds, and 11 species of fish have been identified. The portion of various skeletal parts and fragmentation are assessed with regard to butchering techniques. Conclusions are drawn based on the bones of wild mammals and birds in connection with hunting practices and the functioning of the settlement as a seasonal hunting camp. Ritual practices relating to the use of animals are addressed.

Keywords: *Northwestern Siberia, Polui fortified settlement, Taishin princes, archaeozoology, historical ecology.*

Introduction

In recent years, several northern sites with a frozen cultural layer (Nadym, Bukhta Nakhodka, Ust-Voikar, Mangazeya, and others) containing numerous animal bones have been studied (Lobanova, 2003; Kosintsev, Lobanova, 2005; Kardash, Lobanova, 2008). Analyzing this type of abundant material is an important archaeological task, firstly, because the northern diet is largely based on meat, which secures survival under harsh climatic conditions and secondly, because skeletal remains are no less informative than artifacts.

The study of the Polui fortified settlement is part of a large project aimed at reconstructing the economy, livelihood, and religion of the ancient population of northwestern Siberia. Results obtained at the initial stages of the study were published in the book entitled *Historical Ecology of the Population of Northwestern Siberia* (Istoricheskaya ekologiya…, 2013). Research of this kind is also being conducted at other sites. However, in order to achieve the objective described above, the archaeological data available must be compared with other sources.

The aim of this article is to present the biological data obtained through the analysis of the archaeozoological assemblage from the Polui fortified settlement in an historical and archaeological context. On this basis, certain aspects of subsistence strategy and ritual have been addressed which cannot be reconstructed on the basis of the material culture alone.

Object of research

The Polui fortified settlement is located on the right bank of the Polui River (66°32′ N; 66°34′ E) in the city

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of Salekhard (Fig. 1). In 2004 and 2005, archaeological research was carried out by joint efforts of the "Northern Archaeology" Scientific and Production Association under the direction of O.V. Kardash and experts from the Institute of Plant and Animal Ecology, Ural Branch RAS. Excavations revealed archaeological horizons of several settlement complexes attributable to the 3rd–mid-1st millennium BC. Early Iron Age deposits were overlain by horizons representing the Polui fortified settlement of the late 16th–early 18th century and the Obdorsk village of the 18th–19th century. These horizons are not separated by any sterile layers and at some places have become mixed.

In the course of excavations, samples were taken for laboratory analyses. Identification and description of fauna remains was based on comparison with the reference collection of the Zoological Museum of the Institute of Plant and Animal Ecology. Bird bones were identified by E.A. Nekrasov, fish bones, by D.O. Plakhuta.

The Polui fortified settlement was constructed on the platform of a promontory-like projection of the terrace on the right bedrock bank of the Polui (Fig. 2). The fortified residential complex including four dwelling houses (dwellings 1–3) was located on the northwestern edge of the promontory. Southeast of this area, where the chief, his family, and relatives would have lived, randomly placed constructions were also situated. These comprised the unfortified part of the settlement. In total, the remains of 11 houses (Fig. 3) were recorded in all excavated areas. In addition, a platform composed of a layer of wood chips was found at the settlement's southern periphery. For certain reasons, this has been defined as a ritual ground.

Fig. 1. Map showing the location of the Polui fortified settlement.

Archaeozoological assemblage

The assemblage is comprised of 14,002 specimens (Table 1). In addition to the bone remains presented in Table 1, four rodent bones, four fragments of human bone, and four fragments of mammoth tusk with traces of working were found. All the tusks became fossilized during the Pleistocene and were probably brought to the settlement by its inhabitants as material for manufacturing various artifacts.

Mammal bones are most numerous and make up 80 % of the assemblage. Identifiable bones belong both to wild and domestic animals of 20 different species. Some mammal bones (1343 specimens) cannot be identified to the species level. Only 3 % represent small animals (hare, polar, and possibly fox) and about 95 % belong to large mammals, presumably to reindeer.

Cattle (*Bos taurus*). Bones of these animals are numerous in the upper layers identified as the deposits of Obdorsk village. Only three cow bones can be directly associated with the Polui settlement. These include two fragments of pelvis (from dwelling 7) and one fragment of scapula with a trace of arrowhead (from dwelling 3).

Sheep and goat (*Ovis aries* and *Capra hircus*). Only one fragment of a juvenile mandible was discovered at the periphery of the settlement during the 2004–2005 excavations.

Pig (*Sus scrofa domestica*). Pig bones are not numerous. Examples were found both in the fortified and unfortified parts of the settlement, mostly in the later layers of the early 18th century. All components of skeleton are represented in the assemblage (Table 2). Six bones belong to young animals and one, to a newborn.

Dog (*Canis familiaris*). Canine bones representing at least 18 individuals were found on the territory of the settlement. Most (76 %) were discovered in the unfortified part of the settlement (Table 1). In excavations 1 and 2, two nearly complete adult skeletons in anatomical order with hair remains and one skeleton of a young animal were unearthed (Fig. 4, *8*, *9*). Evidently, the dogs were buried intentionally and presumably, for ritual purposes. Skeletal remains of several other dogs were recovered mostly from the unfortified part of the settlement, however, it is difficult to interpret the finds specifically. Isolated bones represent all skeletal elements (Table 2); complete or almost complete skulls and mandibles are relatively numerous. Excavation 11Б contained three complete crania of large dogs including one skull with a mandible (Fig. 4, *10*, *11*). In excavation 11A, in addition to bones of the axial skeleton and limbs, six mandibles of smaller animals were found (Fig. 4, *2–7*). Dwelling 7 comprised a cranium fragment, two mandibles of different animals, bones of the neck, tail and forelegs of a juvenile