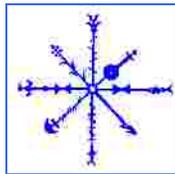


A Small Archaeofauna from Context 714
Pingvellir Iceland

Thomas H. McGovern
**CUNY Northern Science
and Education Center**



NORSEC
CUNY Doctoral Program in Anthropology
Hunter College Bioarchaeology Laboratory

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Contact: nabo@voicenet.com

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Abstract

In 2006 a small collection of animal bones (archaeofauna) was recovered from a pit fill from the farm and church site near the famous assembly site of Thingvellir in southern Iceland. The bone collection was from a pit (context 714) and was associated with pieces of hack-silver and three silver coins of 11th century date. The analysis of the bone remains indicates that these were animal (not human) remains, and that sheep, pig, and a larger animal (probably cattle) were represented. The sheep and pig bones came exclusively from meat rich portions of the skeleton (shoulder and haunch) while the probable cattle bones appear to represent a segment of ribs and attached thoracic vertebrae. While the collection is small (88 bone fragments total) this pattern is suggestive of some sort of specialized deposit, especially seen in conjunction with the hack silver and coins.

Species Present

The bones in context [714] were in fair condition, although compressed tightly into a lump that needed to be carefully disaggregated. The lump proved to contain bone elements that could be identified securely as pig and as sheep (at least two individuals). As usual, some bone fragments were assigned to the “caprine” category, which could be from either sheep or goat. Other bone fragments (very small pieces and rib and vertebral fragments) were assigned to the “Large Terrestrial Mammal” (Horse or Cattle sized) or “Medium Terrestrial Mammal” (pig, sheep, goat, large dog sized). In this case, the ribs and vertebrae are almost certainly cattle rather than horse.

Table 1	Context [714]	Count
<i>Sus scrofa</i>	Pig	6
<i>Ovis aries</i>	Sheep	5
<i>Caprine sp.</i>	Sheep or goat	11
	total NISP	22
Large Terrestrial Mammal		11
Medium Terrestrial Mammal		17
Unidentified bone fragment		38
	total TNF	88

Skeletal Elements Present

Table 2 presents the distribution of skeletal elements present in the context of [714] archaeofauna. Note the absence of cranial or foot bones, and the presence of meat bearing bones and the small dense “riders” in the lower limb which tend to travel with the meatier elements (Binford 1978). This element distribution profile provides a contrast to normal midden material, which contain remnants of all stages of butchery, cooking, meat consumption and discard and which contain more low-meat value bone elements.

Table 2
Skeletal Element Distribution

Species	Bone	Count
Pig	astragalus	1
Pig	naviculocuboid	1
Pig	Femoral shaft	1
Pig	Patella	1
Pig	Scapula	2
Sheep	astragalus	2
Sheep	calcaneus	1
Sheep	humerus	1
caprine	naviculocuboid	2
caprine	femora	2
caprine	humerus	1
caprine	metatarsus	1
caprine	radius	1
caprine	tibia	5
Large Terr. Mam.	long bone frag	6
Large Terr. Mam.	rib	4
Large Terr. Mam.	thoracic vertebra	1
Medium Terr. Mam.	long bone frag	15
Medium Terr. Mam.	rib	2

Figure 1 presents a generalized pig skeleton with the bones present in the [714] archaeofauna indicated by shading.

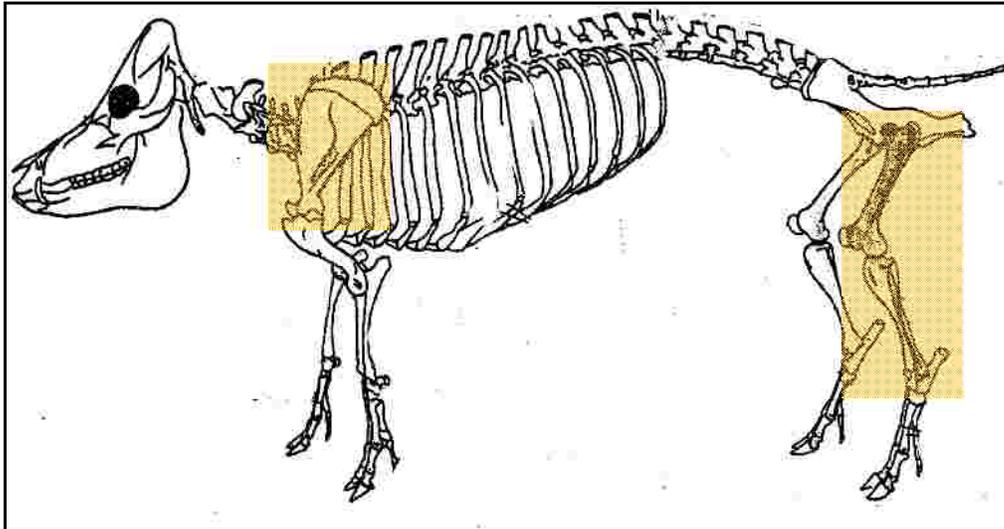
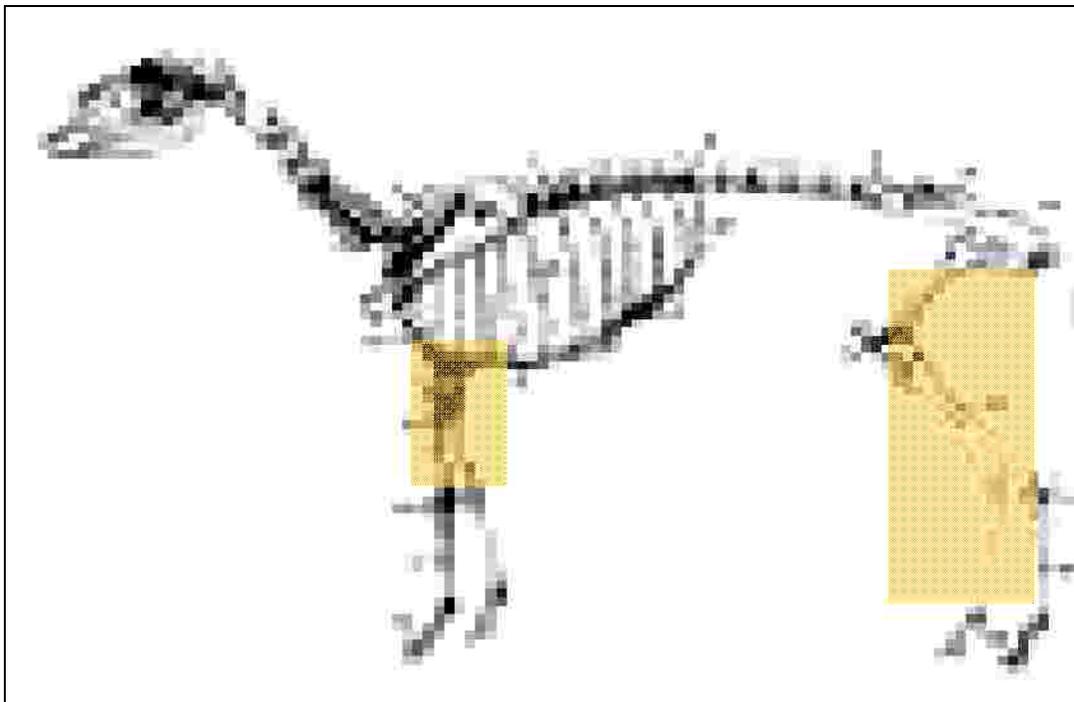


Figure 2 presents a generalized sheep skeleton with the bones present in the [174] archaeofauna indicated by shading.



Discussion and Speculation

While the archaeofauna from context 714 is small, it appears to represent a deposit mainly made up of meat-bearing elements of the fore and hind limb and some rib segments. Given the small sample size, no conclusions should be drawn about relative species abundance, but it is worth noting that the presence of pig bone is very suggestive of a pre-1100 AD date of deposition, as pigs become increasingly rare in Icelandic archaeofauna after the 12th century (McGovern, Perdikaris et al 2001, Vésteinsson et al 2002). If these bones recovered in isolation, a hypothesis of specialized provisioning might be proposed. In their current association with Thingvellir and the silver objects we may wonder if these bones were originally part of a dedicatory offering or similar specialized ritual deposit?

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