

The Middle Bronze Age "lithic cist" of Bressanone-Albanbühel/Brixen-Albanbühel, South Tyrol

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ABSTRACT - During the vast excavations of Albanbühel, a high ground settlement of the Middle Bronze Age, a "lithic cist" made of slabs of stone was found in a hut. Part of the original contents relates to sacrificial rituals: charcoal, calcined animal bones, bronze wire springs. Among the osteological fragments of sheep, goat, and oxen, phalanges, carpal and tarsal bones, metapodius, and skulls were the best preserved parts. This might imply that only symbolic anatomical parts of animals, some of which were young, were sacrificed. The interpretation of this ritual practice was problematic and could have something to do with domestic-propitious or foundation rites or even with yet unknown customs.

KEY WORDS: Domestic-propitious or foundation rites, Lithic cist, Middle Bronze Age, Archaeozoology, Alto-Adige

PAROLE CHIAVE: Culto domestico propiziatorio o di fondazione, Cista litica, Media Età del Bronzo, Archeozoologia, Alto-Adige

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Albanbühel, situated in the middle of the Isarco valley is a highland settlement, at 850m a.s.l., that presents the so-called alpine "castelliere" features. Archaeological excavations undertaken by the Soprintendenza ai Beni Culturali di Bolzano (1986-89) revealed the remains of a series of light wooden huts and a conspicuous amount of cultural material including a great quantity of animal bones. Inside a hut, a "lithic cist" without a cover made of slabs of phyllite, was recovered. Part of the original contents relates to sacrificial rituals: charcoal, calcined animal bones, burnt grains, a small ring and a bronze wire spring. It was difficult to carry out an osteological analysis because of the alterations produced by the heat, which reduced the original volume of the bones of about 10%. Amongst the fragments, which were all inferior to 40mm (925gr), the phalanges, carpal and tarsal bones, parts of the metapodius and the skull were best preserved. These bones were more compact and resistant at temperatures between 300° and

800°C. This might imply that only symbolic parts of the animal were sacrificed, while the valuable parts were excluded from the ritual (KOKABI & WAHL; SIGVALLIUS, 1997:43) (Fig. 1-2). In the studies it was ascertained that there were no human bones and the prevailing presence of bones belonged to domestic animals, such as the oxen (Fig. 1) and the sheep (Fig. 2). It was not established whether there were any goat bones. The cist mainly contained ovine-caprine bones, followed, in terms of quantity by oxen and a few traces of pigs represented only by fragments of teeth. The numerical proportion is similar to that recorded in other faunistic complexes of Albanbühel. The osteological analysis indicated that the main part of the individuals sacrificed were young and they were not older than 12-13 months (SILVER, 1963:252-253). In any case, two second phalanges of oxen with welded proximal edges, also point out the presence of sub-adult individuals (older than a year and a half). The interpretation of this ritual prac-

tice was problematic and could have something to do with domestic-propitious or foundation rites or even with yet unknown customs. For instance, similar examples are not rare in the province and in different eras, for example in Bressanone-Stufles (Middle Iron Age), S.Andrea-cemetery (Early Iron Age), Castel Badia (Bronze Age), Villandro (Iron Age), Velturmo (Copper Age) (unpublished excavations Sop. BB.CC. of Bolzano).

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SUMMARY - Archeological excavations undertaken by the Bolzano Cultural Assets Service during 1986-89 revealed a settlement from the Middle Bronze Age on the hill of Albanbühel (province of Bolzano/Bozen). Inside a hut, a "lithic cist" made of slabs of phyllite and placed as to form a quadrangular box was found completely inserted in the floor. Parts of the cist's content (charcoal, calcined animal bones, burnt grains, a small ring, and a bronze wire spring) stem from sacrificial rituals. Among the bones, the phalanges, carpal, and tarsal bones, and parts of the metapodium and the skull were preserved (Fig. 1-2). This might imply that only symbolic parts of the animal were sacrificed, while the edible or valuable parts were excluded from the ritual. The cist mainly contained sheep and goat bones (the latter not being securely identified), followed, in terms of quantity, by oxen bones and few pig bones. The osteological analysis indicated that mostly younger animals were sacrificed. Similar sacrificial finds were observed e.g. at Bressanone-Stufles/Brixen-Stufels, cemetery of S.Andrea/St.Andrä, Castel Badia/Sonnenburg, Villandro/Villanders, and Velturmo/Felthurns. However, problems arose in the interpretation of this ritual practice: perhaps it has to do with domestic-propitious or foundation rites intending to bless the house and the household, or it may be related to yet unknown customs.

RIASSUNTO - Nei vasti scavi di Albanbühel un insediamento su un'altura della media età del Bronzo venne rinvenuto entro una capanna una "cista litica" composta da lastre in pietra. Parte del contenuto originario è riconducibile a rituali sacrificali: terra carboniosa, ossa animali calcinate, cerali e elementi in bronzo. Tra i frammenti osteologici di ovicaprin e di bue, risultano meglio conservati parti di falangi, carpali, tarsali e metapodi e cranio. In questo quadro appare possibile la presenza sul rogo sacrificale di sole parti anatomiche simboliche dell'animale appartenenti anche ad individui giovani. Problematica è l'interpretazione di questa pratica rituale che può forse essere collegata a riti di culto domestico-propiziatore o di fondazione, o altro non ancora ricostruibile.

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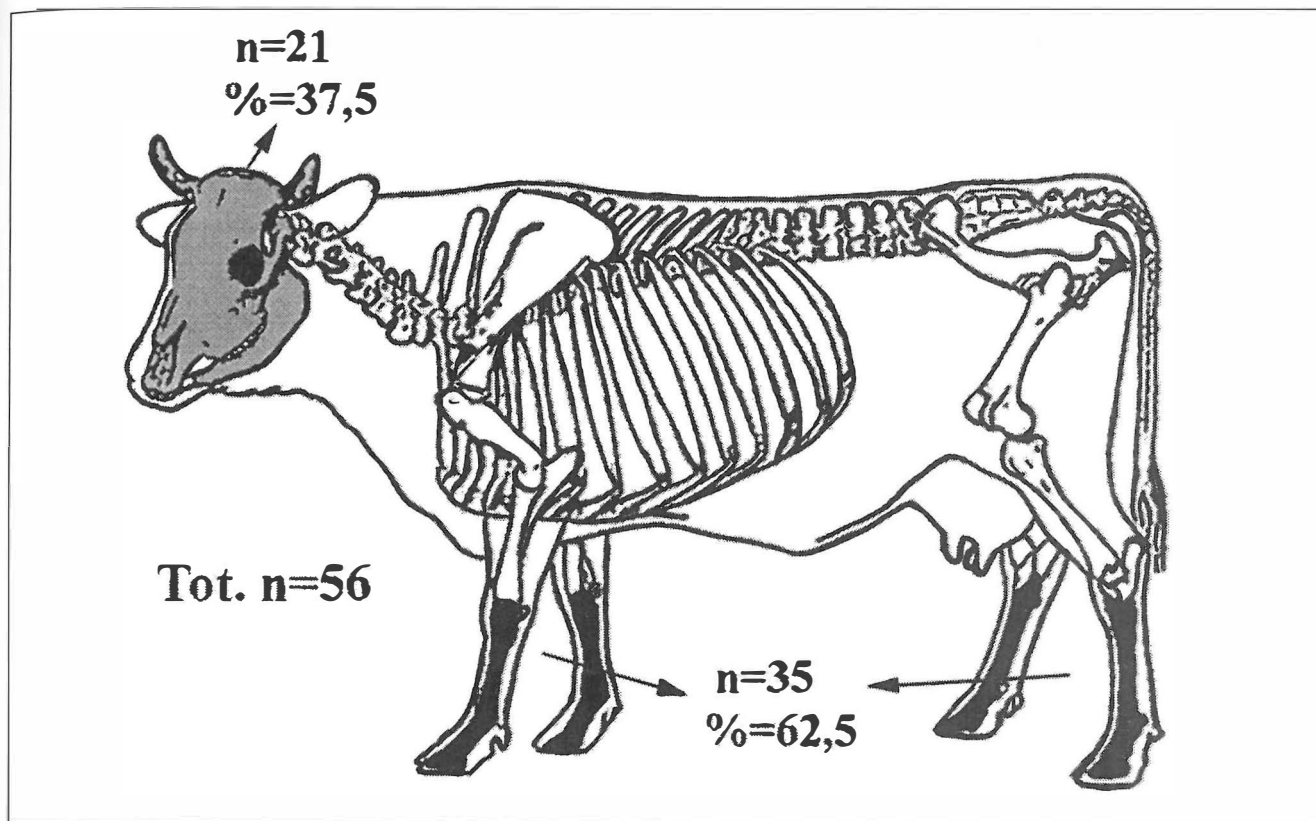


Fig. 1 - The figure indicates which sacrificed/calcined animal parts were found in the grave pits

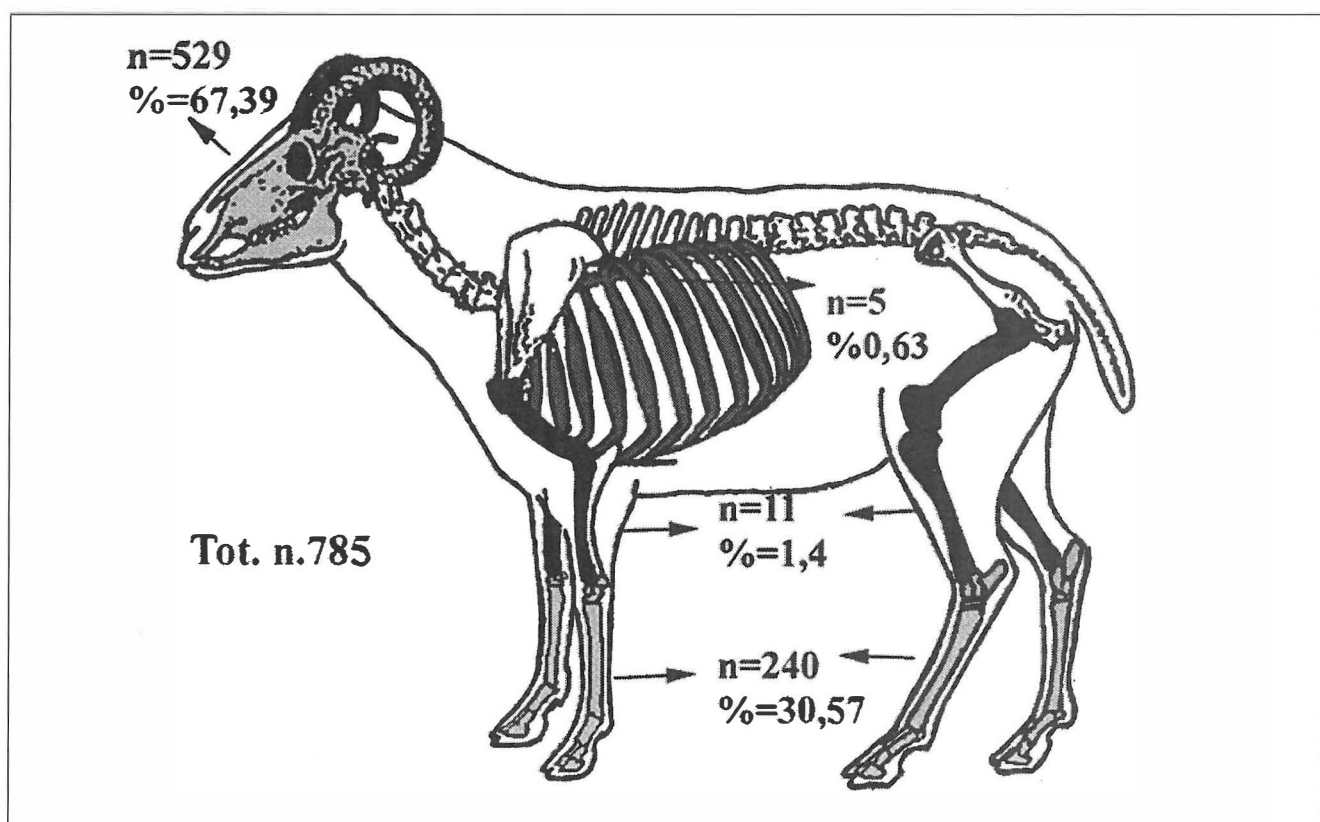


Fig. 2 - The figure indicates which sacrificed/calcined animal parts were found in the grave pits