

YOU EAT WHAT YOU HAVE - SOCIAL DIFFERENCE AND FOOD CONSUMPTION IN AN EARLY MEDIEVAL COMMUNITY

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In the Carpathian Basin during the early Medieval period, i.e. between the 5th and the 9th centuries CE, many graves contained various remains generally described as food offerings, such as animal bones or different types of vessels including pottery, glass or even wooden containers. While they are clearly part of the grave inventory, their purpose is often largely unexplained or they are vaguely interpreted as sacrifices, leftovers from funerary feasts or offerings necessary in the afterlife. Nevertheless, access to good quality food, especially animal protein could be a similar indicator of social status, as certain artifact types, such as weapons or jewellery. But how did the people decide which member of a community should be buried with food offerings? Did it only depend on the social and/or economic standing of the individual or their family, or did personal preference also come into play? Did individuals buried with animal remains consume more meat than those buried without?

We address these questions with the help of the fine-scale analysis of the 6th-century cemetery at Szeleste, Hungary. We combine archaeological and osteological data and results of carbon and nitrogen stable isotope analysis to see whether there is a difference in nutrition among different socially identifiable groups (age, gender, economic or social status, etc.) in a community, where different types of food offerings are much more common - circa half of the graves contained animal remains or vessels - than in case of other contemporaneous sites.

Keywords

early Medieval period, funerary customs, stable isotopes, nutrition, social structure

Note/comment