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The Gabii “zoo”: exotic and unusual animals from the Roman layers

Lo “zoo” di Gabii: animali esotici e inusuali dai livelli romani

The archaeological investigations carried out since 2007 at the roman site of Gabii on the Via Prenestina, under the direction of Prof. Terrenato (University of Michigan), yielded a very large faunal assemblage. Most of the remains belong to common domestic animals, mainly caprines, pigs, and cattle as well as dogs, presenting variable proportions according to the time period and the area within the settlement. However, unexpectedly few specimens did not fit in the ordinary species range of a roman town: in particular some remains of large felids (lion, leopard) and bear have been identified. In addition a beaver humerus was also recovered; the specimen showed cut marks that suggest the occasional exploitation of this species as food. A further unusual finding is represented by a vulture ulna.

Le indagini archeologiche intraprese sin dal 2007 nel sito romano di Gabii sulla Via Prenestina, sotto la direzione del Prof. Terrenato (Università del Michigan), hanno fornito un grandissimo campione faunistico. La maggior parte dei reperti appartiene a comuni mammiferi domestici, soprattutto ovicaprini, maiali e bovini, come pure cani, in proporzioni variabili a seconda del periodo e dell'area del sito. Tuttavia, inaspettatamente alcuni reperti non rientrano nel solito panorama delle specie presenti in una città romana: in particolare sono stati identificati alcuni resti di grandi felini (leone, leopardo) e orso. Inoltre è stato rinvenuto un omero di castoro con tracce di taglio che suggeriscono l'occasionale sfruttamento di questa specie come cibo. Un ulteriore ritrovamento inusuale è rappresentato da un'ulna di avvoltoio.

Parole chiave: Animali esotici, Periodo romano, Castoro, Avvoltoio, Gabii.

Keywords: Exotic animals, Roman period, Beaver, Vulture, Gabii.

INTRODUCTION

The ancient town of Gabii is located at about 18 km E of Rome along the *via Prenestina*, once called *via Gabina*, on the slopes of a former volcanic lake, *Lacus Gabinus*, later known as *Lago di Castiglione*. The site was occupied since at least the 10th cent BCE until its decline in the 2nd and 3rd cent. CE.

The archaeological investigations, carried out since 2007 under the direction of Prof. Terrenato (University of Michigan) (Becker *et al.* 2009; Mogetta, Becker 2014 with references), yielded a very large faunal assemblage. Most of the remains belong to common domestic animals, mainly caprines, pigs, and cattle as well as dogs, presenting variable proportions according to the time period and the area within the settlement (for data on Area B see Alhaique 2016). However, unexpectedly few specimens did not fit in the ordinary species range of a roman town: some of them belong to exotic species, others to unusual ones. All the remains from the Area F (SUs 5000s) of the excavation come from fills and dump layers dated to the 1st–3rd cent. CE; the one from

Area C (SU 2130) is still from a fill, but is dated to the late 2nd cent. BCE.

MATERIALS AND DISCUSSION

A lion (*Panthera leo*) second phalanx (Fig. 1) was found in SU 5068, the specimen is quite large and may belong to a male individual. The ventral surface of the bone presents a polish that is not present on the other faces of the specimen.

Two first phalanges attributed to a leopard (*Panthera pardus*) were recovered in SU 5301 and SU 5314 (Fig. 2A, B). The smaller one presents on the lateral surface of the diaphysis several cut marks (Fig. 2C) probably related to disarticulation and skinning. The two different SUs about on the same *opus reticulatum* wall therefore it is likely that both specimens belong to the same individual.

The bear (*Ursus arctos*) is represented by a first phalanx and two third ones respectively from SUs 5052, 5091, 5685 (Fig. 3A, B, C). The first two SUs may be stratigraphically related therefore the two specimens



Fig. 1. Lion (*Panthera leo*) phalanx from SU 5068.



Fig. 2. Leopard (*Panthera pardus*) phalanges: A) from SU 5314; B) from SU 5301; C) detail of B with cut marks on the lateral surface.

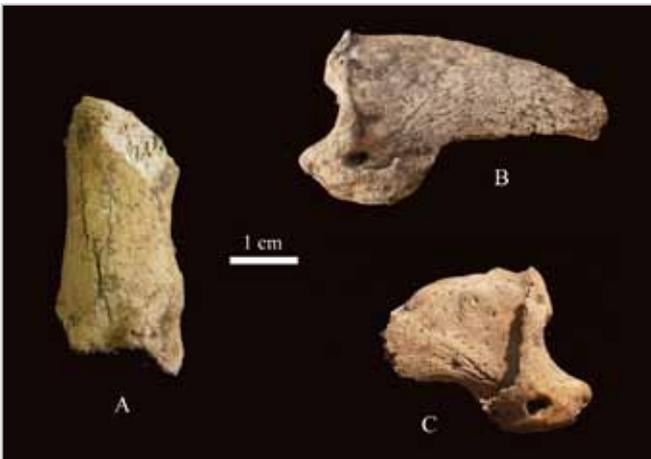


Fig. 3. Bear (*Ursus arctos*) phalanges: A) from SU 5091; B) from SU 5052; C) from SU 5685.



Fig. 4. Beaver (*Castor fiber*) humerus with cut marks from SU 5110.

possibly belong to the same individual, while the latter one may represent a second animal although, given the fact that these layers are dumps accumulated within the same time interval, the possibility that all the bones may be referred to the same bear cannot be completely ruled out.

The occurrence of these carnivore species is anomalous in a Roman town, but the anatomical pattern, with only phalanges and lacking, so far, all other skeletal elements may suggest that they belong to pelts. The reason for the presence of such pelts is more difficult to explain; they may represent part of the equipment of a *signifer* or other military paraphernalia, may be the skin of animals used and killed in the games at a circus (but not in Gabii), or may be just souvenirs from a military campaign or a foreign trip.

As far as the provenience of these animals is concerned, the felids may have been acquired in both Africa and Asia, while the bear could have been more “local” although this species too may represent a foreign import. However, the occurrence of a large amount of African cookware and African red slip in SU 5314, may suggest, at least for the leopard an African origin.

Other remains of exotic species in Italy have been found at the Colosseum and its surroundings and in Pisa (De Grossi Mazzorin 1995; De Grossi Mazzorin *et al.* 2005; MacKinnon 2006; Sorrentino 2000). Those of the Colosseum may be easily explained as animals used for the games in the amphitheatre, while the lion maxilla from Pisa that was found in a shipwreck, could be an animal being transported, but also part of a pelt since often, besides the paws, also the skull was left attached to the skin.

A beaver (*Castor fiber*) humerus (Fig. 4) was collected in SU 5110; the bone displays an oblique cut mark on the lateral surface of the shaft suggesting meat removal and indicating that at least occasionally this animal was used as food. Such species has been rarely, if ever, recovered in Roman settlements of this period in central Italy. Other reported findings of this animal are earlier (e.g. S. Rocchino, Lucca - 7th-3rd cent. BCE, Wilkens 2003) or later (e.g. Terme di Traiano, Rome 7th cent. CE, De Grossi Mazzorin 2016).

In SU 2130, the construction fill of the “Vespaio” connected with the first phase of a *Fullonica*, a very large bird ulna was recovered (Fig. 5). The specimen belongs



Fig. 5. The vulture (*Gyps fulvus* or *Aegypius monachus*) ulna from SU 2130.

to a vulture, possibly *Gyps fulvus* or *Aegypius monachus*. These species, now extinct in Italy or confined in Sardinia (with the exception of some tentative reintroductions in other regions), were once more widespread and in Roman times lived also in the peninsula as indicated by the legend on the foundation of Rome.

The vulture in Roman times was considered as sacred to Mars and this species was preferred for taking omens. Other vulture remains in the Rome area were found at the *Lapis Niger* (Blanc, Blanc 1958; De Grossi Mazzorin 1990) in a ritual context related to Romulus.

The strong symbolic connotation of the vulture in the Roman culture, together with the fact that one of the bones from the Roman Forum was an ulna as our element, and that the town of Gabii was connected with Romulus and Remus, may be suggestive of a ritual value also for our specimen. However, lacking a primary context for the finding it may just represent the remains of an urban scavenger that was accidentally included in the fill.

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