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Editorial: They fought on horseback, didn't they?

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It is widely acknowledged that the incorporation of domestic horses into the human past triggered a number of significant impacts that cascaded through societies, one of which was the enhanced potential for how humans could fight each other. Conflict and combat are expressed at different scales, durations and intensities through time, but since at least the first millennium BC it is notable that horses often play a major role in these events especially when it comes to battles (Clutton-Brock 1992; Drews 2004). Despite such visibility in historic records, it has proven challenging to definitively identify the remains of horses used for warfare in the archaeological record (e.g. Ameen et al. 2021; Pluskowski et al. 2010).

In this issue, Kveiborg and Nørgaard (2022) present detailed palaeopathological evaluation of six Iron Age horses from Denmark found in association with ritually deposited warrior paraphernalia, including large amounts of weaponry and horse harnesses. Based on their context and treatment, these horses are believed to have belonged to defeated armies – all were directly associated with weaponry depositions and had been subject to similar ritual destruction as seen in the weaponry. Kveiborg and Nørgaard evaluate the distribution of pathologies in these skeletons for evidence of their lifetime use, but importantly also conduct experimental studies in the recreation and testing of the associated bits. These specialized bits have a ported mouthpiece and a heavy rein chain and are interpreted as being closely associated with use in Iron Age warfare (Pauli Jensen and Kveiborg 2021). Bit wear in one horse in particular matches closely with the reconstructed ported mouthpiece (rather than a snaffle bit), providing another strong line of evidence for their connection to warfare.

Part of the challenge in identifying specific uses of horses in the past, such as for 'war', is having the appropriate control datasets to use to be able to draw robust conclusions. Osteoarchaeological analyses often draw on museum-curated modern equid skeletons with known life histories, that tend to divide into categories of riding, draught, or unworked animals (e.g. Bendrey 2007; Taylor et al. 2015). If their life histories are not comparable with how past warhorses were used, these collections may not work as appropriate proxies for their archaeological identification. In the long-view, it is also clear that shifting cultural practices, evolving phenotypes, specifics of use and associated technology means that 'warhorses' are also not a static entity through time, and thus the pathological changes registered in their skeleton may not be similar either. It is in this context that the study of Kveiborg and Nørgaard (2022) also has great value. The pathological studies they present can be tied closely to a tight archaeological context and artefactual record in terms of harness equipment, to provide a useful control dataset for comparison to other archaeological records. It adds to an increasing array of methods and situated case studies (e.g. Binde et al. 2019; Taylor et al. 2021) to provide zooarchaeologists with the toolkit and comparanda to be able to effectively reconstruct the past.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

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