



Dimitrijević, V., Blagojević, T., Sofija Stefanović. 2016. *Aurochs in the background: distribution and evidence of hunting of ancestor of domestic cattle in the pre-Neolithic (Late Pleistocene and Early Holocene) and Neolithic in the Central Balkans*. 22nd European Association of Archaeologists Conference, Vilnius, Lithuania.

Abstract: Cattle played an outweighing role from the beginning of neolithization in the Central Balkans, unlike in the southernmost Europe, where sheep and goat, mostly for environmental reasons, preceded and subsequently kept their key position in animal husbandry. As genetic evidence suggests, cattle was introduced to Europe from the initial centers of its domestication in the Near East. However, incidences of local domestication cannot be completely ruled out, and, even more so, that hybridization of domestic stock with wild progenitors occurred. In order to understand whether these processes ever happened, the data on the distribution of the wild ancestor of cattle in the region are important, as well as its features observed from skeletal remains and archaeological context of discovery. Although scarce, aurochs was present in the Central Balkans in the Late Pleistocene, as can be judged from the faunal remains from Palaeolithic sites and from alluvial deposits. The steppe bison, another large bovid of comparable size and ethology, was more frequent. Its prevalence is documented both by the number of sites where its presence has been confirmed, and regarding the ratio of bison and aurochs remains at sites where both species were found. Steppe bison became globally extinct towards the end of the Pleistocene, although the more precise timing of its disappearance in the region is not known. It can be hypothesized that aurochs consequently became more numerous and substituted bison in an empty niche, but there is also a lack of data on the presence of aurochs at the end of the Last Glacial and the beginning of Holocene. The remains of aurochs from Pleistocene alluvial deposits mainly consist of cranial parts, whereas those from Palaeolithic sites include scattered bone fragments and teeth, which makes it largely impossible to determine whether they accumulated as prey of human hunters or large animal predators.

The earliest occurrence of contextualized aurochs remains is a partial skeleton discovered in a Mesolithic layer at the site of Velesnica in the Danube Gorges. The processing of the animal carcass is evident from butchering marks on the articulated neck vertebra. During the Mesolithic, aurochs remains are scarce at other sites in the Danube Gorges and other parts of the Central Balkans. In the Neolithic, the remains of aurochs became a regular component of the settlement animal bones refuses, but mostly in modest proportions, showing that the intensity of hunting was not high. Nevertheless, owing to its cognation to domestic cattle, potential local domestication trials and hybridization, or solely to its impressive appearance, the significant symbolic role of this large bovid, one that is going to endure throughout prehistory, was probably established already at the onset of the Neolithic. In this respect, the sudden and synchronous appearance of spoons made from aurochs metatarsal bones in the Central Balkans is intriguing, as well as within the large area stretching from Anatolia to Pannonian plane and Carpathian Mountains.