

Report

# The process of butchering, cooking, and consuming livestock in modern Kyrgyz Republic

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## Abstract

We had the opportunity to observe the process of livestock butchery, cooking, and consuming in the modern Kyrgyz Republic. In this paper, we reported on that information. This information can be said to be important and valuable as ethnographic for examination and interpretation of archaeological materials.

Through this report, several points have emerged that are considered beneficial for interpreting archaeological trends. For example, the method of slaughtering livestock based on religious background is cited. This was common to both cattle and sheep, reflecting the strong influence of Islamic thought. Furthermore, regarding consumption in particular, a distinctive ritual was observed where the distribution of parts was conducted according to social status. In terms of the meaning attributed to these parts, both commonalities and differences across animal species were recognized.

The findings reported in this paper are expected to contribute to the restoration of butchering techniques for animals in the past and the formation process of faunal remains in archaeological sites.

**Keyword :** modern, Kyrgyz Republic, livestock, animal butchery, ethnography

## I. Introduction and background of this study

This paper presents the results of observations on the process of butchering cattle and sheep, providing ethnographic insights into the preparation and consumption of livestock in the modern Kyrgyz Republic. The research was conducted to obtain practical information for interpreting the results of analyzing faunal remains from archaeological materials.

The production and utilization of livestock are among the primary livelihoods in this region, and archaeological investigations have revealed that this practice has been ongoing since prehistoric times. Much remains unknown about the introduction and development of livestock culture in the Kyrgyz Republic. However, analysis of animal remains from the Chap I highland agricultural site (Motuzayt Mat) in the Central Tien Shan region of Kyrgyzstan has revealed that horse, cattle, sheep, and goats were domesticated in the region during the late Bronze Age and Iron Age (Ananyevskaya et al. 2020). However, the quantity of cattle remains is particularly

low, with sheep and goats being the primary species, as noted in the findings. According to research conducted at the Obishir V archaeological site in southern Kyrgyzstan, which dates back to the early Holocene period, the domestication of sheep in Kyrgyzstan is believed to have begun around 8,000 years ago (Taylor et al. 2021).

While such research explores the introduction of domesticated animals in prehistoric times and the early stages of domestication, there are also zooarchaeological studies focusing on faunal remains from an archaeological site in historical periods. An example of this is the study of animal remains excavated from the Ak-Beshim site in Tokmak (Arai 2016; Uetsuki & Arai 2020). There, it was discussed that the three main taxa of livestock were horse, cattle, and sheep, and that, based on an analysis of the sex ratio and age composition, the pattern of livestock consumption had shifted from those typical of urban sites to the rural sites.

The authors, similarly, have conducted analyses of animal remains excavated from the Ak-Beshim site during historical periods (the 7th to 13th centuries) in

the Kyrgyz Republic. In there, the main species of faunal remains found are horse, cattle, and sheep. When the authors analyzed animal bones from the Ak-Beshim site, linear marks known as “cut marks” were identified on the bones. These marks are presumed to have been caused by contact with a sharp tool during animal butchering. Furthermore, differences were observed in the proportions of each body part. This suggests that each part was treated differently in the past. Similar points were mentioned in previous studies (Arai, 2016; Uetsuki & Arai, 2020), and it has been clarified that the composition of animal parts varies at various locations within the site. These archaeological trends reflect the overall results of human animal consumption in past societies. In addition, considering that eating is essential for humans, it is possible to think that these trends directly reflect the lives (cultural aspects) of people in the past.

By examining and interpreting the results of analyzing these archaeological materials, we can infer the past, though this is no easy task. In this context, information about contemporary society and daily life proves valuable. With this in point, this paper focuses on cattle, as large-sized domesticated animals, and sheep, as medium-sized domesticated animals, and describes the modern animal butchering process. Additionally, from an ethnological perspective, we will describe the methods of cooking and consuming animals after they have been butchered. The purpose of this report is to obtain information useful for the interpretation of archaeological materials (faunal remains).

## II. Observation of the cattle butchering process

### II-1. Prepare for butchering

This case was conducted in May 2025. The subject was a female cattle individual estimated to be 5–6 years old (Fig. 1). The body height was 118 cm. Six men performed the butchery.

First, the person performing the slaughter prayed to God and said “Allahu Akbar” and “Bismillah”. Next, the legs were tied with thick rope, and the limbs were bound together. When attempting to tie the animal, it struggled,



Fig.1 Observed cattle

so six adults held it down. Due to the danger posed by the horns, one person grasped the horns and held the head down. The rope was 1–2 cm wide and approximately 3 m long. The binding points were the shafts of the metacarpal and metatarsal bones.

### II-2. Butchering process of cattle

#### II-2-1. Slaughtering and drawing blood

After restraining the animal, butchering began. A hole was dug near the binding site. This was to prevent blood from staining the area when an incision is made in the neck. After binding the animal, it was restrained in a prone position with its body on the ground, and an incision was made in the neck. At this point, the animal was still in a prone position. In the case observed in this study, the neck was not completely severed at this stage; instead, the incision was made only to sever the esophagus. According to Muslim “halal” rituals, the person must quickly and precisely cut the sheep’s throat with a very sharp knife, severing the carotid artery and trachea, allowing the blood to drain completely. The above method suggests the influence of Islam.

Also, modern Kyrgyz use a method of animal butchering in which each bone is cut along with a portion of meat. This method is like that of many other Central Asian peoples; these cuts are called “zhilik” in Kyrgyz. Only one knife is used for slaughtering sheep. In the case of larger livestock, both a knife and an axe are used. However, only knife was used in the dissection of this cow.

## II-2-2. Skinning and processing of internal organs

After the cattle had died, it was turned on its back. At this point, two tasks were performed simultaneously. The first was to separate the upper and lower limbs from the metacarpal and metatarsal bones at the carpal and tarsal joints. The second was to insert a metal knife into the abdomen and cut the skin along the midline (Fig. 2). First, we will describe the first task. The blade was inserted into the carpal and tarsal bones to separate the lower limbs from the upper limbs. During this process, after making an initial cut with the knife, the limbs were separated by twisting them by hand. It is important to note that while the joints are separated, the skin remains connected in some areas. Therefore, each limb was still connected to the others by the skin. Next, the upper ends of the limbs were tied with a string. The string was approximately 3 mm in thickness, thinner than the string used to tie the feet earlier. The reason for tying the limbs again will be explained later.

The second step was to insert the blade of a metal knife into the abdomen along the midline and slit the skin. As the slit was made, the skin was peeled outward. The direction of the blade was perpendicular to the long axis of the limbs. The action involves inserting the blade and pulling it back toward oneself once. During skinning, frequent sharpening of the blade was examined. This was done at a frequency of approximately once every five minutes, significantly more than the number of times the blade was sharpened during subsequent joint separation or meat removal. This is likely due to fat adhering to the blade during the skinning process. This process took



Fig.2 Skinning

approximately 30 minutes.

After skinning, the skin was spread out, and the blade was inserted into the sternum, cutting along the midline in one direction to separate the ribs on one side (Fig. 3). The internal organs, which were connected by a single thin membrane, were then pulled out. During the separation of the sternum and ribs, care was taken not to damage the thin membrane.



Fig.3 Separation of the sternum and ribs

The internal organs were handed over to the woman at this point (Fig. 4). Women carried out the processing of the internal organs. A hose was inserted into the internal organs, and water was continuously flowed through to clean them while separating them into parts. The separated internal organs were placed in a basin in units of a certain size.

## II-2-3. Rough dismembering

### II-2-3-1. Separation of limbs

The limbs were separated while still attached to the meat. The separation of the upper and lower limbs began. Blades were inserted between the humerus and radius, and the femur and tibia, and the bones were separated.



Fig.4 Internal organs processing by woman

The scapula was then removed.

The skin remained intact and was laid on the ground. Blood accumulated on the skin during the process, but it did not spread across the ground.

#### II-2-3-2. Separation of the trunk

The ribs were detached from the vertebrae. The blade was inserted on the abdominal side of the ribs and progressed toward the dorsal side. The blade was inserted on the inner side of the proximal end.

Additionally, when removing meat from the spine, the blade was inserted along the longitudinal axis of the vertebral column, and cutting was performed at the spinous processes. This was not a separation of parts, but rather an effort to maintain the integrity of the meat mass. The spine remained connected.

This may result in cut marks along the longitudinal axis of the spine at the spinous processes.

#### II-2-3-3. Separation of the ilium

After removing the meat from the limbs along with the bones, the ilium and lumbar vertebrae remained. Here, the separation of the ilium and thoracic vertebrae was

performed. To separate the ilium, the blade was inserted at the center, and one hand was placed on the handle of the knife, and struck. After the blade was inserted, it was kept pierced and gradually moved back and forth to cut through. After separating the ilium on both sides, the ilium was separated from the sacral vertebrae, sacrum, and coccyx.

#### II-2-3-4. Separation of the remaining spinal column and head

Finally, the remaining lumbar vertebrae were re-separated. Also, the head was then severed, and the skin was finally cut away in a state where the esophagus had been severed. The neck was separated between the occipital protuberance and the atlas vertebra at the back of the head.

These tasks took approximately 40 minutes to complete.

#### II-2-4. Detailed dismembering

The parts that the initial dissection had roughly separated were gathered in one area. At this point, multiple parts were still connected to the joints. Therefore, the work of separating them into individual parts began. Additionally, the meat was removed from the bones and cut off. Furthermore, the spinal column and other parts had the meat scraped off (Fig. 5).

This process took approximately 30 minutes. The entire dismantling process was completed in approximately 100 minutes.



Fig.5 Detailed dismembering

### III. Observation of the sheep butchering process

#### III-1. Preparation for butchering

This observation was carried out in July 2025. The age of the observed sheep was 7 months (Fig. 6).

While one person is sufficient to slaughter a sheep, in most cases, two or more people participate in the process. The second person usually acts as an assistant, holding the sheep's body to make it easier for the person to perform the slaughter. Often, this assistant is a teenager, as it is believed that young boys should learn how to butcher sheep. However, whereas 30 to 50 years ago it was considered shameful for a Kyrgyz man not to know how to slaughter a sheep, today it is no longer viewed as embarrassing.

Nowadays, most Kyrgyz invite skilled people (butchers) to their homes specifically to carry out the slaughter. These individuals are referred to as "kassapchy" in Kyrgyz. As with cattle, sheep were butchered using the "zhilik" method, which involves cutting the bones while the meat is still attached.



Fig.6 Observed sheep

#### III-2. Butchering process of sheep

##### III-2-1. Slaughtering and drawing blood

First, the person performing the slaughter prayed to God and said "Allahu Akbar" and "Bismillah" before starting to slaughter the sheep. A small pit was dug to allow the blood to drain from the sheep's neck. This point is similar to what was observed in the dissection of cattle. After the above preparations were complete, the butchering began. The animal is laid on its left side on the ground, with its legs bound. Its head oriented toward the qibla, facing Mecca (Fig. 7). According to Muslim "halal" rituals, the person must quickly and precisely cut the sheep's throat with a very sharp knife, severing the carotid artery and trachea, allowing the blood to drain completely. The head was not entirely cut, only partially severed. These points are like those for the slaughter of cattle. It takes some time for all the blood to drain thoroughly.



Fig.7 Position of sheep during butchery

##### III-2-2. Hanging and skinning

After that, the sheep's carcass is usually hung for convenience. In some regions of Kyrgyzstan, if there is no place to hang the carcass, it is sometimes butchered

on the ground. However, as observed above, large livestock, such as cattle, are always butchered on the ground. Recently, a method has gained popularity where the carcass is processed without removing the skin; people simply singe the hair with fire. It is said that meat prepared this way tastes better, although this method is still not very common.

Once the sheep has finished bleeding, it is time to skin it. To make this process easier, the sheep is usually kept without food for 10–12 hours before slaughter. After the sheep is hung, its legs below the knees are cut off with a knife. This helps to remove the skin more quickly. The skin is removed using both the knife and tightly clenched hands. The skinning is done very carefully to avoid damaging the belly, after which the skin is laid on the ground, and the meat is placed on top of it.

### III-2-3. Removal and processing of internal organs

The abdominal cavity was then carefully opened to remove the lungs, heart, liver, and spleen. Afterward, the stomach was taken out (Fig. 8) and given to the women to clean. Usually, women clean the internal organs, but if it is horse meat, men do this task. The next



Fig.8 Removal and processing of internal organs

step is to remove the gallbladder very carefully—if it is accidentally punctured with the knife, all the meat will be ruined. It is also necessary to remove hidden tendons located deep within the muscles.

### III-2-4. Detailed butchering

The next stage was the detailed butchering of each part. It started from the butchering of the forelegs, which were divided into three parts: the forearm (radius bone), the shoulder blade (scapula), and the upper arm (humerus) (Fig. 9-1).

Next was the dismembering of the trunk. The brisket was separated (Fig. 9-2), followed by the ribs (Fig. 9-3). The neck (Fig. 9-4) and the spine (Fig. 9-5) were then removed, after which the back portion was divided (Fig.9-6).

After that, the hind leg was removed and immediately divided into three parts: the shin bone (tibia) (Fig. 10-1), thigh bone (Fig. 10-2), and pelvic bone (ilium) (Fig. 10-3). Finally, only the tailbone (coccyx) remained (Fig. 10-4).

In general, through this butchering process, excluding the stomach and internal organs, the sheep carcass is divided into 19 parts (Fig. 11).

## IV. Cooking and consumption of livestock

### IV-1. The method of cooking

In general, cattle are slaughtered for large gatherings such as weddings, funerals, and memorial feasts. It is usually slaughtered for events attended by 100–200 people. Today, Kyrgyz weddings often host a much larger number of guests, ranging from 50 to 600. In that time, the meat of cattle can be cooked in a cauldron (kazán) for more than two hours.

In response to this, sheep are typically slaughtered either to honor a small group of guests or to satisfy the household's daily need for meat. Young lambs are most often slaughtered in honor of guests.

This section provides a detailed description of the methods for cooking sheep meat. Dishes made from it can generally be divided into two categories: those prepared from internal organs and those made from the meat itself. Meat is prepared either by boiling or roasting,

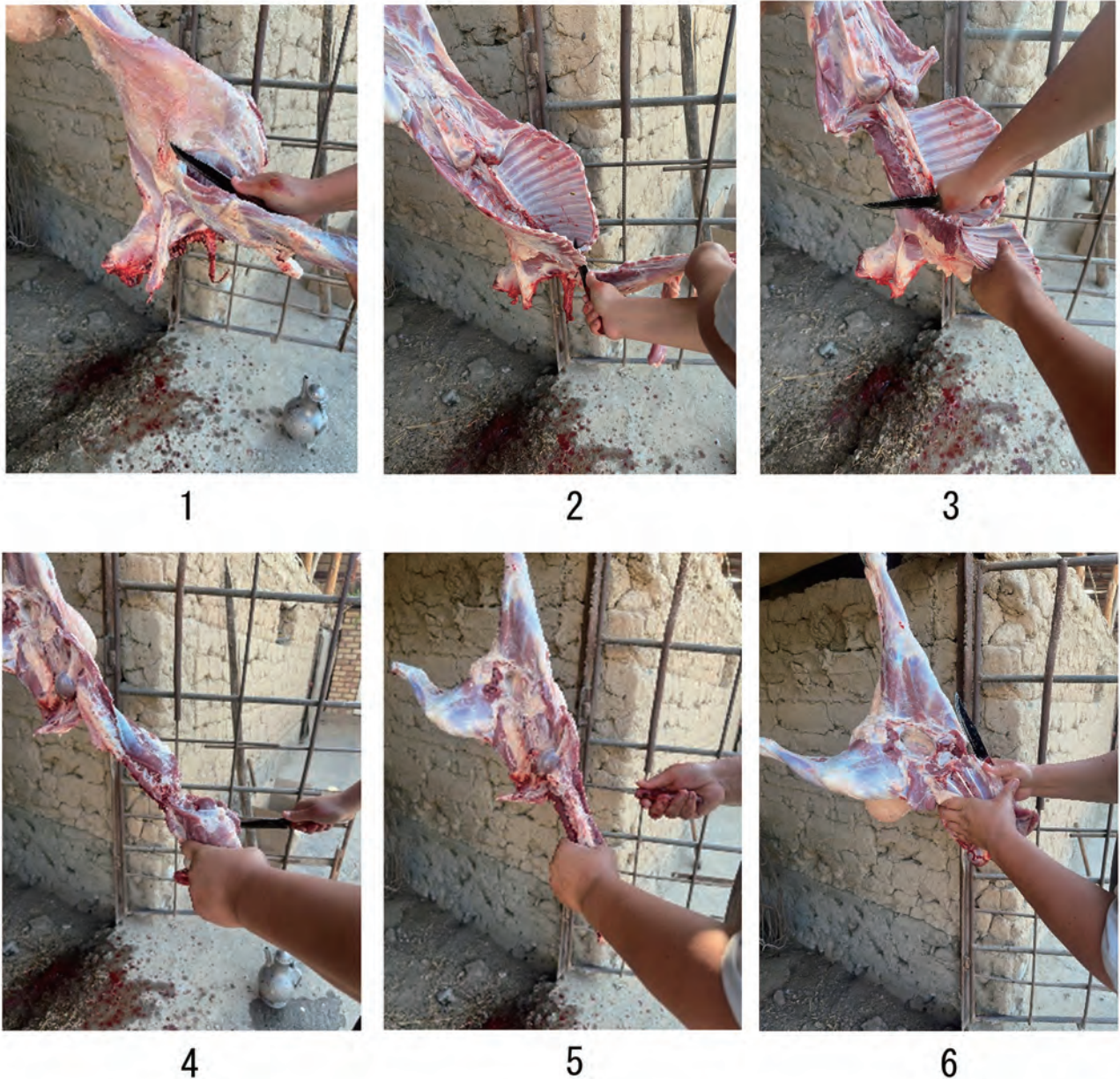


Fig.9 Dismemberment of the forelimbs and body

with boiling being the most common method of cooking meat dishes. The meat is usually cooked in a cast-iron cauldron. Sheep meat is placed in a special pot designed for boiling meat. In most cases, an entire sheep is cooked in a large pot that can hold about 100 liters of water.

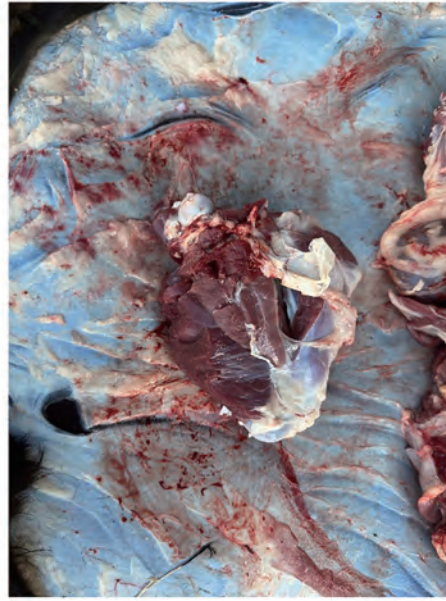
It is essential to use a dedicated pot for boiling meat, as cooking the meat in a pot where other dishes have been fried can transfer the remaining fat and odor from previous meals, potentially affecting the taste of the mutton broth. Additionally, cold water must be used in the pot. If the water is already hot when the meat is

added, the meat can develop an unpleasant dark reddish color. The cooking time depends on the size and weight of the animal. For example, beef usually requires three to five hours, or even six hours, to cook, while lamb is typically ready in about one and a half hours. During boiling, the foam that forms on the surface of the broth is carefully removed. Regularly skimming off the foam ensures that the broth stays clear and clean.

Over the past 30 years, significant changes have occurred in the way meat is prepared. In the past, the sheep's head and lower legs were not skinned—instead,



1



2



3



4

Fig.10 Dismemberment of the hindlimbs

they were singed over an open flame, cleaned, and then boiled together with the meat in the pot. Today, however, the head is usually wrapped in a bag before being placed in the pot to prevent the broth from acquiring an unpleasant smell. As for the lower legs, in most cases, they are no longer added to the pot at all. Previously,

intestines were washed, cleaned, and cooked together with meat; however, they are now rarely included in cooking. After boiling, the meat is eaten. It should be noted that in some areas, such as the Alai region, it is common practice to soak the meat in salted water before serving (Мыкамбаев Ж. 1982).



Fig.11 Condition of each part finished dismemberment

## IV-2. Consuming pattern

After cooking, the meat is divided into portions according to the number of guests. In most cases, due to the large number of people, it is possible to divide it into two or more parts.

The method of distribution for each part is essentially the same for both cattle and sheep. Additionally, these are cut into portion-sized meat pieces with bones, which are served to guests. This is called and known in Kyrgyz as “ustukan”, which is the ceremonial serving of boiled meat portions to guests. Undoubtedly, the highlight of Kyrgyz culinary culture is this “ustukan.”

In “ustukan”, each portion is distributed according to social status. Interestingly, ustukan pieces are categorized as either “respected” or “less respected” cuts. The parts belonging to these two categories are listed below. Parts considered “respected” are presented as A (1-3), while parts considered “less respected” are presented as B (4-14). In modern Kyrgyz society, it is considered highly disrespectful and shameful to offer a guest the wrong cut of meat. Such an insult can even become widely known among neighboring villages.

### A. Thigh meat (two of each)

1. Ilium (pelvic bone).
2. Tibia (shin bone).
3. Femur (thigh bone).

### B. Front leg meat (two of each), head, and body

4. Radius (forearm bone).
5. Shoulder blade (scapula).
6. Humerus (upper arm bone).
7. Coccyx (tail bone)
8. Head.
9. From the ribs to the hips.
10. Spine (vertebrate).
11. Brisket.
12. Neck.
13. Lower legs (shanks).
14. rib

In particular, “less respected” parts—except for the humerus—are offered individually to respect guests. In addition, Parts 9 to 13 are usually served to children or

less honored guests. In addition, the coccyx (tailbone), together with the meat and fat tail (kurdyuk), is served to high-status individuals. However, not to just one person—usually it is shared among several. Also, there is a strict order when distributing cooked meat among guests, as every part of the sheep has its own significance and is intended for specific individuals. A designated person is appointed to handle the distribution at the table. This person plays a crucial role in ensuring that portions of meat are distributed correctly among the guests, taking into account their age and social status. Among the Kyrgyz, the most highly respected part of the meat was the rear portion—the sacrum (called “ucha” in Kyrgyz), if it was horse meat, and the thigh meat if it was mutton. For female guests, the most honored piece was considered to be the sheep’s rump (in Kyrgyz, kuimulchak). Male guests were usually served the pelvic bone first, followed by the shin and thigh bones. Next came the forearm (radius bone), shoulder blade, ribs, and so on. In some regions of Kyrgyzstan, the sheep’s head is offered to the most respected guest, while in others, it is presented to the youngest person at the table. Presenting the sheep’s head is considered a sign that a freshly slaughtered sheep has been served. The brisket is traditionally given to young people or teenagers. Examining ethnographic records from the 19th and 20th centuries reveals that the customs of meat distribution among guests varied significantly from region to region across Kyrgyzstan (Абрамзон С.М. 1990). Even today, these regional differences in serving meat to guests persist in many parts of Kyrgyzstan. It should also be noted that among the Kyrgyz, the sheep’s humerus (upper arm bone) is referred to as “kün zhilik,” which literally means “slave’s meat.” Serving this bone to a guest is considered a grave insult, and according to oral tradition, such actions even sparked intertribal conflicts in the past. However, in some regions of Kyrgyzstan, such as Jalal-Abad province, “kün zhilik” (the humerus) is still served to guests.

The tradition of distributing ustukan (honorary meat portions) among the Kyrgyz people reflects their nomadic concept of social fairness. In Kyrgyz society, everyone is aware of their status and responsibilities. Younger individuals usually receive more minor cuts

of meat, but as they grow older, they are offered more prestigious portions. This custom resembles a kind of “pension system,” where every Kyrgyz knows that once they become an elder (aksakal), they will be guaranteed a respected share of meat at the table—a symbol of honor and recognition.

In this way, we can understand that each part of an animal has a distinct meaning and is treated (or consumed) differently. This point is considered to provide valuable insights for interpreting the results of archaeological investigations. That is, modern Kyrgyz traditions surrounding the slaughter of sheep and the distribution of meat among guests are reflected in archaeological findings. Excavations of early Iron Age burial mounds frequently reveal the sacrum—the fat-tailed part of the sheep carcass. Such remains are typically found in female graves. Meanwhile, the sacrum from horse carcasses has occasionally been discovered in male burials (Табалдиев К., 2013). Also, in burial mounds dated to the first half of the first millennium CE, archaeologists have uncovered sacrum bones and femurs. Studies of burial sites from the era of the Great Migration of Peoples in the Tien Shan and Alai regions have also revealed remains of sheep, including the sacrum, shoulder blades, vertebrae, femurs, tibias, and ribs (Табалдиев К., 2013).

In this way, livestock’s parts respected in the modern culture of the Kyrgyz Republic, are unearthed alongside the remains of powerful figures. This point suggests that distributing parts based on social status—a form of consumption in modern society—provides valuable information for exploring the formation process of archaeological materials.

## **V. Comparing the process from butchering to the consumption of cattle and sheep**

Through the above considerations, when comparing the processes of slaughtering, cooking, and consumption of cattle, which are large livestock, and sheep, which are medium-sized livestock, both similarities and differences can be identified.

### **V-1. Similarities between cattle and sheep**

The common point is that in both the slaughter of cattle and sheep, before slaughtering the animal, the slaughterer first recites “Allah Akbar” and “Bismillah,” and then begins the slaughter of the livestock. Currently, the majority of the population in the region is Muslim, and this background is reflected in the practice.

Also, according to Muslim “halal” rituals, the person must quickly and precisely cut the livestock’s throat with a very sharp knife, severing the carotid artery and trachea, allowing the blood to drain completely. The head is not entirely cut, only partially severed. One common point is that they are careful not to spread blood on the ground.

Kyrgyz people still practice a near-zero-waste butchering technique, making use of nearly every part of the animal. As is evident from the fact that prayers are offered before the slaughter of animals, the thorough utilization of animal resources can be said to represent the utmost respect for the lives of the livestock that are slaughtered. These points reflect the influence of Islam on animal slaughter.

Furthermore, regarding the treatment of body parts in consumption, allocation according to social status was confirmed. In this regard, regardless of the type of livestock, the thigh bones and the meat from the hind legs have traditionally been regarded as valuable.

### **V-2. Differences between cattle and sheep**

The main difference is that cattle are butchered on the ground, while sheep are hung up. This is thought to be due to the difference in size between large and medium-sized animals.

Also, the following points can be cited as differences regarding the allocation of parts. Namely, when presenting the bones of a sheep to respected guests, it is not permissible to break them. However, the bones of a cow may be offered to esteemed guests after being divided into several parts.

In some regions of Kyrgyzstan, the sheep’s head is presented to honored guests, while in others it is not. The head of a cow, however, is never offered to guests.

## VI. Conclusion

This paper presented an ethnographic perspective on the slaughter, preparation, and consumption of livestock in modern Kyrgyzstan, using cattle and sheep as examples, and compared the two species across each process. Through the analysis in this report, several points have emerged that are considered beneficial for interpreting archaeological trends. Going forward, we intend to attempt to interpret archaeological materials by comparing archaeological trends with the contents of this report.

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報 告

## 現代のキルギス共和国における家畜の解体・調理・消費の過程

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### 要旨

本稿では、現代のキルギス共和国における家畜の解体、調理、消費の過程についてまとめ、若干の検討をおこなった。

家畜の屠殺方法に関しては牛と羊で共通しており、イスラム教の影響がうかがわれた。また、消費に関しては部位の分配が社会的地位に応じて行われる点が観察された。なお、各部位に付与される意味については、動物種間において共通する点と異なる点の双方が認められた。本稿で報告した知見は、過去における動物解体技術の復元や、考古遺跡における動物遺体の形成過程の解明に寄与することが期待される。

キーワード：現代、キルギス共和国、家畜、動物解体、民族誌

