

# STONE AGE COMPANIONS

Humans and animals in hunter-gatherer  
burials in north-eastern Europe

Aija Macāne

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Department of historical studies

**Abstract**

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**Author:** Aija Macāne

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**Faculty opponent:** Professor Peter Jordan, Lund University

**Supervisors:** Karl-Göran Sjögren, University of Gothenburg, Liv Nilsson Stutz, Linnaeus University, and Ola Magnell, Arkeologerna, Statens historiska museer.

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**Department:** Department of historical studies, University of Gothenburg, Box 200, SE-405 30 Gothenburg.

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This thesis examines the relationships between humans and animals in their mutual environment and how these relationships were expressed in the burial practices of northern foragers. The empirical research material consists of animal remains, particularly animal tooth pendants, deposited in graves at Zvejnieki (Latvia), Skateholm I and II (Sweden) and Sakhtysh II and IIa (Russia) cemeteries. The Zvejnieki cemetery (8<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> millennium cal BC) represents the largest assemblage and has a central place in this study, while Skateholm (ca. 5600–4800 cal BC) and Sakhtysh (5<sup>th</sup> – early 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium cal BC) provide additional material from more narrowly delimited periods and different geographical areas. The interdisciplinary toolkit includes a re-evaluation of previous zoo-osteological analyses and their supplementation with new ones, an extensive archival and literature survey, as well as a spatial and contextual analysis of the cemeteries and each excavated burial. The interpretative framework builds on the relational approach and hunter-gatherer ontologies, and the relationship between humans and animals is approached through the perspective of companionship. In this thesis, animals are considered not only as a source of food and raw materials, but as companion species that inhabited a shared landscape with humans.

Ungulates, notably elk, wild boar and red deer, were the most widespread animals in burials, especially during the 8<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> millennium cal BC. An increase in the diversity of species in burials, particularly of carnivores, can be seen starting from the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium cal BC. This is partially paralleled by a shift from animal tooth pendants to more strongly modified artefact forms made from other animal remains (bone and antler). The relationships with animal species at each site were shaped by multiple factors, including environmental and ecological conditions (availability of particular species) and the socio-cultural context (preferences and restrictions arising from traditions and cosmological concepts). Ungulate incisors and carnivore canines are most commonly used for making pendants, but local preferences for the use of other bones, such as beaver astragali, bird wing bones, and red deer antlers, can also be observed. The study shows that fragmentation and selection of specific body parts was important, and that animal individuality and personality were essential to establishing relationships between them and humans.

Animal-derived materials had a central role in mediating social communication and cosmological beliefs. They were not just ornaments of the body or wrappings, but their materiality and embedded qualities suggest multiple potential uses, including social identification, protection and transformation. Reading all of this from a companionship perspective shows that human–animal relationships were ontologically fundamental for the Stone Age hunter-gatherers, while at the same time being rather fluid and situational. Companionship in Stone Age north-eastern Europe was forged at an individual level, and both humans and animals participated in the creation of interspecies relationships and environments. Despite the spatial, temporal and cultural variation, animal companions were never far away from the Stone Age hunter-gatherers.

**Keywords:** human–animal relationships, relational ontologies, companionship perspective, burial archaeology, mortuary practices, zooarchaeology, hunter-gatherers, Stone Age, Mesolithic, Neolithic, north-eastern Europe, southern Sweden, Latvia, central European Russia