

11,500-year-old animal bones in Jordan suggest early dogs helped humans hunt

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Selection of gazelle bones from Space 3 at Shubayqa 6 displaying evidence for having been in the digestive tract of a carnivore. Credit: University of Copenhagen

Around 11,500 years ago, in what is now northeast Jordan, people began to live with dogs and may also have used them for hunting, according to a new study by archaeologists from the University of Copenhagen and University College London. They suggest that the introduction of dogs as hunting aids may explain the dramatic increase of hares and other small prey in the archaeological remains at the site.

Dogs were domesticated by humans as early as 14,000 years ago in the Near East, but whether this was accidental or deliberate remains unclear.

The new research may suggest that humans valued the tracking and [hunting](#) abilities of early [dogs](#) more than previously known.

A study of animal bones from the 11,500-year-old settlement Shubayqa 6 in northeast Jordan not only suggests that dogs were present in this region at the start of the Neolithic period, but that humans and dogs likely hunted animals together. "The study of the large assemblage of animal bones from Shubayqa 6 revealed a large proportion of bones with unmistakable signs of having passed through the digestive tract of another animal; these bones are so large that they cannot have been swallowed by humans, but must have been digested by dogs," explained zooarchaeologist and the study's lead author, Lisa Yeomans.

Yeomans and her colleagues have been able to show that Shubayqa 6 was occupied year-round, which suggests that the dogs were living together with the humans rather than visiting the site when there were no inhabitants:



One of the excavated structures at the Shubayqa 6 site. Credit: University of Copenhagen

"The dogs were not kept at the fringes of the settlement, but must have been closely integrated into all aspects of day-to-day life and allowed to freely roam around the settlement, feeding on discarded bones and defecating in and around the site."

Can new hunting techniques account for the increase in small prey?

When Yeomans and her co-authors sifted through the data, they also noted a curious increase in the number of hares simultaneous with the

appearance of dogs at Shubayqa 6. Hares were hunted for their meat, but Shubayqa 6's inhabitants also used the [hare](#) bones to make beads. The team think that it is likely that the appearance of dogs and the increase in hares are related.

"The use of dogs for hunting small, fast [prey](#) such as hares and foxes, perhaps driving them into enclosures, could provide an explanation that is in line with the evidence we have gathered. The long history of dog use to hunt both small as well as larger prey in the region is well known, and it would be strange not to consider hunting aided by dogs as a likely explanation for the sudden abundance of smaller prey in the archaeological record," said Lisa Yeomans.

"The shift may also be associated with a change in hunting technique from a method such as netting, which saw an unselective portion of the hare population captured, to a selective method of hunting in which individual [animals](#) were targeted. This could have been achieved by dogs."

More information: Lisa Yeomans et al, Close companions: Early evidence for dogs in northeast Jordan and the potential impact of new hunting methods, *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jaa.2018.12.005](#)

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