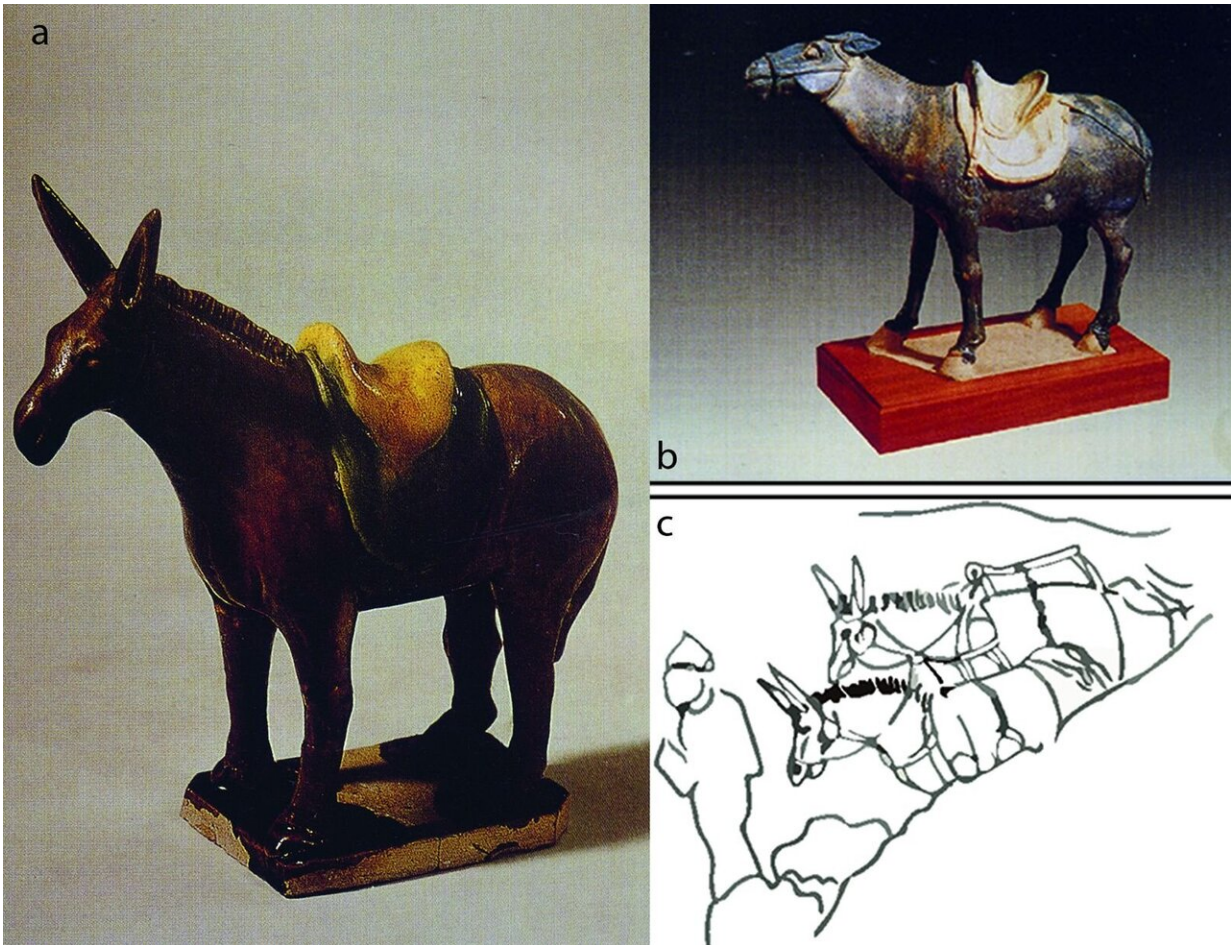


Tang Dynasty noblewoman buried with her donkeys, for the love of polo

March 16 2020



Credit: Washington University in St. Louis

A noblewoman from Imperial China enjoyed playing polo on donkeys so

much she had her steeds buried with her so she could keep doing it in the afterlife, archaeologists found. This discovery by a team that includes Fiona Marshall, the James W. and Jean L. Davis Professor in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis, is published March 17 in the journal *Antiquity*.

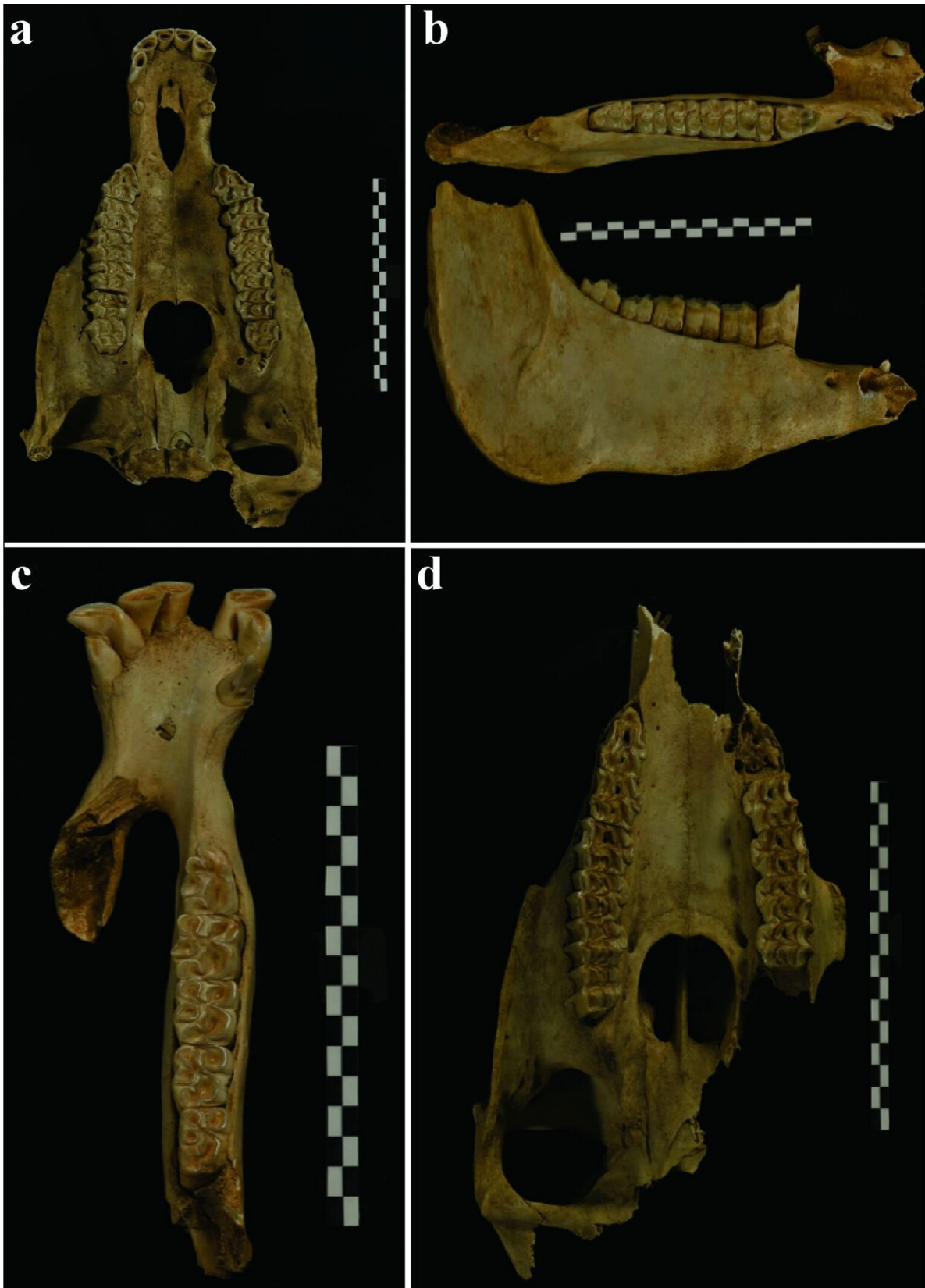
The research provides the first physical evidence of donkey polo in Imperial China, which previously was only known from historical texts. It also sheds light on the role for donkeys in the lives of high status women in that period.

Researchers found donkey bones in the tomb of Cui Shi, a noblewoman who died in 878 AD in Xi'an, China. The presence of work animals in a wealthy woman's tomb was unexpected, the researchers said.

"Donkeys were the first pack animal, the steam engines of their day in Africa and western Eurasia, but we know almost nothing about their use in eastern Asia," said Marshall, an archaeologist in the Department of Anthropology. She helped study the animal bones found in Cui Shi's tomb.

"Donkey skeletons just have not been found—this is probably because they died along trade routes and were not preserved," she said. "The donkeys buried in the Tang Dynasty noble tomb in Xian provided a first opportunity—and a very rare one—to understand donkeys' roles in east Asian societies."

"There was no reason for a lady such as Cui Shi to use a donkey, let alone sacrifice it for her afterlife," said lead author Songmei Hu, from the Shaanxi Academy of Archaeology. "This is the first time such a burial has been found."



Credit: Washington University in St. Louis

Polo is thought to have its origins in Iran; however, the sport flourished during the Tang Dynasty, which ruled China from AD 618 to 907.

During this time, polo became a favorite sport of the royal and noble families, to the point where an emperor used a polo competition to pick generals. This included Cui Shi's husband, Bao Gao, who was promoted to general by Emperor Xizong for winning a match.

However, the sport was dangerous when played on large horses, with one emperor killed during a game. As such, some nobles preferred to play Lvju, or donkey polo. Although both forms of polo are mentioned in the historical literature, horse polo is the only form depicted in art and artifacts.

The researchers conducted radiocarbon dating and analyzed the size and patterns of stresses and strains on the donkey bones from Cui Shi's tomb. Their findings suggest that these small and active donkeys were being used for Lvju. Given that animals were typically included in burials for use in the afterlife, the donkeys' presence with Cui Shi allowed the researchers to conclude that she wanted to keep playing her favorite sport after death.

Taken together, this research provides the first physical evidence of donkeys being used by elite women and of donkey polo in Imperial China, the researchers said. As the first [donkey](#) skeletons from eastern Asia to be thoroughly studied, they also broaden the understanding of the role of donkeys in the past.

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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