

6,600-year-old gravesites in Poland suggest wealth gap existed earlier than thought

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A team of researchers from Sweden, the U.S., Poland and the U.K. has

found evidence that suggests the wealth gap in human communities goes back at least 6,600 years. In their paper published in the journal *Antiquity*, the group describes their study of skeletons in an ancient Polish graveyard and what they found.

The [wealth gap](#) is a term for describing disparities in income for people living in a shared community. Most countries in the world today have a wealth gap. In this new effort, the researchers have found evidence that suggests the wealth gap goes back even further than most historians have believed.

The work involved digging up skeletons in an ancient cemetery in Oślonki, Poland, along with associated artifacts. The researchers then studied the bones, looking for nitrogen and [carbon isotopes](#). In all, the team studied the remains of 30 people, all adults between the ages of 18 and 45. As a final step, the researchers also studied the bones of cattle found in the same area from the same time period.

They found that some of the people had been buried with pendants, headbands and copper beads, a hint that they may have been from more privileged families. But that was not enough to provide evidence of a wealth gap. The team then noted that those same people who had been buried with nice trinkets also had a distinctive ratio of [carbon isotopes](#) in their bones, which was also observed in the cattle, suggesting that those people were eating the local cattle. Those people buried without such trinkets did not have the distinctive carbon isotopes ratios, suggesting that they did not eat the local cattle.

The researchers also note that the carbon isotope ratio in the cattle suggests they grazed on open field grasses because it is the type of ratio typically seen with modern [cattle](#) with access to wide-open, sunlit fields, as opposed to cows who eat plants growing in partially tree-shaded areas.

Taken together, the findings suggest that those people buried with trinkets who ate local beef likely belonged to land-owning families—families that had access to more of the good things in life than those people buried without trinkets, providing evidence of a wealth gap.

More information: Chelsea Budd et al. All things bright: copper grave goods and diet at the Neolithic site of Osłonki, Poland, *Antiquity* (2020). DOI: [10.15184/aqy.2020.102](https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2020.102)

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