# This Tang Dynasty noblewoman loved playing polo so much, she was buried with her donkeys

(CNN)Sometime before an Imperial Chinese noblewoman named Cui Shi died in 878 AD, she requested that her beloved donkeys be buried with her.

Cui Shi played donkey polo during the Tang Dynasty, and her hope was that she could continue her favorite sport in the afterlife.

But of course, no one alive today knew that at first. When researchers came across her heavily looted tomb in Xi'an, a city in central China, in 2012 they had no idea why lowly donkey bones were amongst the goods found inside.

The archaeologists had never seen anything like it before: Why would a beast of burden be buried with a noblewoman?

They set out to find an answer -- and what they discovered, published this week in the journal Antiquity, gives scientific confirmation to ancient stories about the lives of the Tang Dynasty elite.

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

Historical texts have suggested that people, especially noblewomen, played donkey polo called Lvju. But this discovery provides the first direct evidence of this game and the women of higher status who played it during this time period.

Cui Shi was married to Bao Gao, a skilled polo player at the time who was promoted to the rank of general by Emperor Xizong for winning a polo match. Emperors used the game as a way to determine generals through competition.

But polo on large horses was dangerous. Bao Gao lost an eye during one game. Separately, Emperor Muzong was killed in a match.

Lvju, or polo played using donkeys, was preferred for this reason. Donkeys were considered safer and steadier.

"Historical documents also showed that ladies of the late Tang court loved to play donkey polo," said Fiona Marshall, study co-author and archaeologist at Washington University in St. Louis.

Marshall analyzed the donkey bones found in the tomb. The researchers wanted to determine if the donkeys truly belonged in the grave, or if they had been deposited there by looters.

Radiocarbon dating confirmed the bones belonged to the grave based on their age. Analysis also revealed stress on the bones that occurred when the donkeys were alive -- but not the kind of stress typically found in pack animals used for carrying heavy loads.

Instead, the patterns of strain in the bones were consistent with animals that ran and turned frequently. The donkeys were also smaller than is expected of pack animals. This suggests they were bred to play polo. And the donkeys found in the noblewoman's tomb were about six years old -- the prime age for polo, according to the researchers.

"This context provides evidence the donkeys in her tomb were for polo, not transport," Hu said. "This confirms the claims of donkey polo from historic literature."

Polo was popular in China during the Tang Dynasty, which lasted from 618 to 907 AD, but the game has roots in Iran and was thought to have spread across the continent between 247 BC and 224 AD.

Xi'an, once known as Chang'an, was the capital of the Tang Dynasty. When archaeologists excavated Cui Shi's brick tomb, they found the items looters left behind: a stone epitaph bearing her name, a lead stirrup and scattered donkey bones.

Chang'an was also considered the beginning of the Silk Road, where trade began and people used the route to travel and move goods across Central Asia.

Donkeys were inevitably part of this trade route, but actual evidence of their presence is rare.

"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," Marshall said. "Donkey skeletons just have not been found -- this is probably because they died along trade routes and were not preserved."

But the skeletons in the tomb provided a unique opportunity to study donkeys and their role in Tang era China.

Donkeys were first domesticated between 3,000 to 4,000 BC. They were used as pack animals for trash pickup in Eurasia, but thought to be largely overlooked for use in warfare, ceremonies or entertainment, according to the study.

Marshall, a well-known donkey zooarchaeologist, says this discovery places donkeys in an elite setting compared to how history has treated them otherwise.

"Donkeys are hardy and strong animals as well as gentle, and fill really important roles in everyday life for small farmers and traders carrying loads in many parts of the world," Marshall said. "This finding shows that donkeys have also had a place as high status rather than humble animals."

## Vocabulary

### Gives

##### Verb (used with object),

* To present voluntarily and without expecting compensation; bestow
* To hand to someone
* To place in someone's care

##### Verb (used without object),

* To make a gift or gifts; contribute
* To yield somewhat, as to influence or force; compromise

##### Noun

* The quality or state of being resilient; springiness.

##### Verb phrases

* give away, to give as a present; bestow. to present (the bride) to the bridegroom in a marriage ceremony. to expose or betray (a person). to reveal (a confidence or secret, hidden motives, true feelings, etc.)
* give back, to return (something), as to its owner; restore

### Ladies

##### Noun,

* A woman who is refined, polite, and well-spoken
* A woman of high social position or economic class
* Any woman; female (sometimes used in combination)
* (used in direct address: usually offensive in the singular):

##### Adjective

* Sometimes Offensive. being a female
* Of a lady; ladylike; feminine.

### Humble

##### Adjective,

* Not proud or arrogant; modest
* Having a feeling of insignificance, inferiority, subservience, etc.
* Low in rank, importance, status, quality, etc.; lowly
* Courteously respectful

##### Verb (used with object),

* To lower in condition, importance, or dignity; abase.
* To destroy the independence, power, or will of.

### Dynasty

##### Noun,

* A sequence of rulers from the same family, stock, or group
* The rule of such a sequence.
* A series of members of a family who are distinguished for their success, wealth, etc.

### Favorite

##### Noun

* A person or thing regarded with special favor or preference
* Sports. a competitor considered likely to win.
* A person or thing popular with the public.
* A person treated with special or undue favor by a king, official, etc.
* Digital Technology. bookmark(def 3a).

##### Adjective

* Regarded with particular favor or preference

### Turned

##### Verb (used with object)

* To cause to move around on an axis or about a center; rotate
* To cause to move around or partly around, as for the purpose of opening, closing, or tightening

##### Verb (used without object)

* To move around on an axis or about a center; rotate.
* To move partly around through the arc of a circle, as a door on a hinge.

##### Noun

* A movement of partial or total rotation
* An act of changing or reversing position or posture, as by a rotary movement

##### Verb phrases

* turn back, to retrace one's footsteps; turn around to return. to cause to go no further or to return, as by not welcoming; send away. to fold (a blanket, sheet of paper, etc.) on itself
* turn down, to turn over; fold down. to lower in intensity; lessen. to refuse or reject (a person, request, etc.)

### Cloze Questions

##### Fill in the blanks

1: Polo was \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ in China \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_ Tang Dynasty, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ lasted from \_\_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_\_ AD, but \_\_\_\_\_\_ game has roots in Iran and was thought \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ spread across the continent between 247 \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_ AD.

2: Polo was popular in China during \_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Dynasty, which lasted \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 618 to 907 AD, \_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_ game has roots \_\_\_\_ Iran and was \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ have \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ the continent \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_ BC and 224 AD.

3: "There \_\_\_\_\_\_ no reason for a lady \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ as Cui Shi \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_ a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_ alone sacrifice it for \_\_\_\_\_\_ afterlife," said Songmei \_\_\_\_\_\_ lead \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and anthropologist from the Shaanxi Academy \_\_\_\_ Archaeology. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ the first time \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ a burial has \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ found."

### Discussion Questions

1: Summarise the article in your own words

2: Do you agree with the article's point? Why/why not?

3: Can you come up with an argument against this article's point?