

# SACRIFICE AND FEASTING AMONG THE CLASSIC MAYA ELITE, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE WHITE-TAILED DEER: IS THERE A REGIONAL PATTERN?

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*The exploitation and procurement of animal resources by any culture in the world is very important. Because of the lack of beasts of burden in the Pre-Columbian Americas, wild animals such as the white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) and some domesticates such as the domestic dog (*Canis familiaris*), were highly regarded among the Mayas. Recent analyses have shown that there is a change in the exploitation patterns of both animals from the Pre-classic to the Classic Period, a change that has been associated with the emergence of a more powerful group of rulers. My objective will be to discuss the symbolic and the importance of the white-tailed deer among the Maya and interpreting its presence in the archaeological record. In order to do so, firstly I will discuss the symbolic role of the deer and dog in the Classic Mayan iconography, and how this information relate to the presence of both species in the archaeological record through time. Then I will discuss how the Classic Mayan elite had access and used these animals resources to create a social difference from the rest of the population, through the celebration of sacrifice and ritual feasts. I will proceed to compare and contrast the information available on feasting from different sites in the region to stress the fact that the use of animal resources by the Maya is not only limited to the environment, and chronological period, but it is also a consequence of a cultural selection of certain species for specific purposes, such as the validation of a new ruling system, during the Classic period. Finally, I will conclude that it is necessary to consider the symbolic, socio-temporal aspects, and the nature of specific contexts when studying the archaeofaunal remains.*

## **White-tailed deer and domestic dog representations and symbolism in the Classic Maya iconography**

Deer is one of the most represented animals in the Maya iconography, and is present on ceramics, murals and codices<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1). Representations include ceremonial hunting parties<sup>2</sup>, or deer being trapped with a rope attached to a tree<sup>3</sup>. Another common representation of deer is as food. Deer haunches and deer tamales ready to be consumed are also a common topic in Maya iconography in scenes related to the elite<sup>4</sup>. It has been proposed<sup>5</sup> that the white-tailed deer had an important role in the Maya religion during the Classic (200-900 AD) period, an importance that may have well expanded from here to the rest of Mesoamerica. One of the questions that arise from this analysis is what was the role of the deer in the Classic Maya religion? Furthermore, what is the connection of the deer and other sacrificial animals with the elite?

Contemporary ethnographic studies in the Maya region have identified a direct relationship between the solar god and deer sacrifice, which would in turn assure fertility and good crops<sup>6</sup>. Deer is therefore seen as an intermediary between mankind and the gods<sup>7</sup>. Among the Classic Maya, deer are closely associated with water and rain, but also with fire, sun, and drought. The communal hunting parties could therefore represent a good harvesting<sup>8</sup>.

Deer sacrifice is also attested in the iconography by the **DEER.HOOF** logogram<sup>9</sup> which reads as **MAY**/may, an homophony of the word 'deer hoof' and 'sacrifice'<sup>10</sup>. However, the hoof is not the only body part with symbolic connotations. Headdresses made of a stag head supposedly worn by ball game players and hunters are commonly represented in the iconography<sup>11</sup>, pointing to the existence of a strong association between ball game players and hunters with the 'Old Deer God'<sup>12</sup> (Figure 2). Archaeologically, what appears to be a headdress made of a male deer head has been discovered in El Cerén, El Salvador<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, the 'Old Deer God' could have played an important role in the creation of a common identity for—the Late Classic Period elite<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is a repeated association between deer and elite. But, could the overrepresentation of deer in the archaeological record be a consequence of its predominance in the past environments, or is it being culturally selected by the Maya and especially the royal class? In order to answer this question, we must start by understanding how did the Mayas procure themselves with faunal resources.

### Dog and Deer Temporal and Spatial Exploitation

Animal exploitation patterns in the Maya area can be linked directly to Olmec groups from the Gulf of Mexico, where dog and deer were preferred over other species<sup>15</sup>. Other terrestrial mammals that appear to have been exploited include rodents, such as the paca (*Agouti paca*), and the pecari (*Pecari tajacu*), among others<sup>16</sup>. Coastal sites were involved in the procurement of marine and riverine food resources, including several kinds of turtles and fish<sup>17</sup>. During the Early Pre-classic in the Maya region, meat procurement was carried out at a household level, and finally, dictated by the resources available at site level, hence, a great inter and intra-site variability is expected<sup>18</sup>. The various degrees of landscape modification that came along with corn agriculture, may have made wild game more accessible<sup>19</sup>; a practice known as 'garden hunting'<sup>20</sup>. Contemporary data reveal that Maya women take care of and breast feed orphaned young wild animals, including deer, peccary, and tapir<sup>21</sup>, therefore some scholars have proposed that these animals were tamed and kept in controlled areas to assure their availability for rituals<sup>22</sup>. One example comes from Seibal, where remains of round structures have been identified as pens<sup>23</sup>. In this sense, recent isotopic analyses have shown that a few animals were fed almost exclusively on corn since they were young<sup>24</sup>. However, isotopic data from deer remains at sites such as Lagartero, Copán, and Tikal, suggest that most of the deer obtained by the Mayas was hunted in the wild, and possessed very little index of corn consumption<sup>25</sup> (Figure 3).

The importance of the deer during the Classic period is comparable to the use of the other species during the Late Preclassic (400 BC to 200 AD), and the Post-Classic and Colonial (900-1500 AD) periods<sup>26</sup>. During the Preclassic, the dominant species in ritual contexts was the domestic dog (*Canis familiaris*)<sup>27</sup>, which presence dramatically declines during the Classic, only to scarcely reappear during the Classic and the Postclassic. During the Postclassic the dog and the introduced turkey (*Meleagris ocellata*) were present almost exclusively restricted to ritual contexts<sup>28</sup>. It is interesting to stress that the contexts where the dog appears during the Pre-classic, are very similar to those of deer during the Classic period<sup>29</sup>. Information about dog consumption is available from both inland and coastal sites, such as Dzibilchaltún, Seibal, Altar de Sacrificios, Cuello, Cerros, and Cozumel<sup>30</sup>. It is worth noting that the presence of dog during the Classic appears to diminish, perhaps as the emergence of a more powerful ruling class<sup>31</sup>, an event that was accompanied by the predominance of white-tailed deer during that period<sup>32</sup>. In this sense, it is possible that the domestic dog and the deer could have taken the place of humans in sacrificial ceremonies during the Classic Period<sup>33</sup>, when sacrifice was used as a fundamental tool of the ritualism associated to the ruler class. Consequently, it has been suggested the dog is substituted as the favoured sacrificial animal from the Preclassic to the deer during the Classic. An overwhelming majority of deer remains has been found in Seibal<sup>34</sup>, Altar de Sacrificios<sup>35</sup>, Toniná<sup>36</sup>, Tikal<sup>37</sup>, Piedras Negras<sup>38</sup>, and Copán<sup>39</sup>, among others<sup>40</sup> (Figure 4). This shift to larger mammals could be a consequence of a fast growing population, especially the high class<sup>41</sup>, that required more resources, a growth that started all over the region during the Late Pre-Classic and continued all through the Classic<sup>42</sup>. Accordingly, social changes might have occurred at

the same time as the faunal exploitation changed during the Pre-classic; these social changes include the institutionalization of a ruling class accompanied by a larger access to labour and resources with a bigger symbolism of authority<sup>43</sup>, and the implementation of new methods by this class to control key resources<sup>44</sup>. This population growth would directly put pressure on the deer populations, as exemplified at the site of Seibal<sup>45</sup>. This would include the sacrifice and the celebration of feasts by the royal class, a topic that will be discussed further more below.

The wide presence of deer therefore in natural conditions makes it very available<sup>46</sup>, hence to some authors, meat was accessible to all the social strata thanks to regional exchange systems<sup>47</sup>. This argument contrasts with the main hypothesis of meat being only accessible to the elite, setting this social class apart from the rest of the population<sup>48</sup>. However the presence of deer remains in practically all social strata and in sites where deer is not native, such as the island of Cozumel<sup>49</sup>, may represent a culturally-defined preference for this taxon in the Maya region<sup>50</sup>. The contexts where deer remains appear include a wide variety, including construction fills, middens associated with permanent structures, ceremonial caches, and a wide range of offerings.

This poses another set of questions, such as how much meat did the Mayan royalty really eat? Was it a continuous consumption all throughout their lives or just in special occasions? Isotopic analysis on the chemical signature of specific resources has been used to help us understand this point and the results have been contradictive. On one hand, the differential consumption is confirmed by the isotopic analyses practised on human burials, especially of members of the higher strata, who would be expected to have a better nutrition and better health due to an access to a higher diversity of resources<sup>51</sup>, including meat products<sup>52</sup>. Not only would the consumption of meat be restricted by age and sex, but also it was more common among full grown up adults, especially males<sup>53</sup>. The results from the isotopic analysis from Copán also show that the younger based their diet on corn, squash and beans, similar to the rest of the population, who would base their diet on a wide array of wild plants, complemented occasionally with meat<sup>54</sup>. However, the consumption of meat by the gross of the population could have been on an occasional basis<sup>55</sup>, and even some authors affirm that the general access to animal resources was very scarce no matter the social class, age or gender of the individuals<sup>56</sup>.

It is interesting to note that although some authors stress the fact that there is a bigger diversity of resources present in the core of some sites<sup>57</sup>—presumably where the elite lived—other authors have found that there was a higher variability in the periphery of the sites<sup>58</sup>, and that the elite were focused on less resources, but higher in yield return. The predominant presence of deer remains associated to palaces in different sites, such as Aguateca and Chinikihá,<sup>59</sup> would likely support this fact.

Another way of exploring how this consumption of deer and animals was restricted to the elite, is through the study of the archaeofaunal remains in specific contexts. These include votive offerings and contexts of disposal from feasts, and the distribution of body parts from animals, such as in the case of the deer.

### **Celebration of Sacrifice and Feasts**

Although it has been pointed out that it is not possible to pin down the real importance of faunal resources for the Maya<sup>60</sup>, there is enough archaeological data to confirm that the presence of deer remains is generally related to contexts associated to higher classes and rituality. But this relationship could be due to the fact that most archaeological excavations are focused on these contexts thus, it is possible that this relationship is biased<sup>61</sup>. Therefore, comparisons between sites based on just the overall identification of the taxons present per site without taking into account the provenience of context, can be often misleading<sup>62</sup>.

The ritual contexts in the core of the archaeological sites include votive offerings and disposal of faunal remains as the result of feasting activities; both activities could have included the ritual sacrifice of animals.

In the Mayan iconography, depictions of deer sacrifice as well as other animals are found all throughout the codices; this practice is also well described by Landa<sup>63</sup>. However, sacrifice is very difficult to assess archaeologically<sup>64</sup>, as the archaeofaunal remains often are not well preserved or lack the diagnostic cutmarks to confirm the practice of sacrifice. However, sacrifice as any other ritual activity would possibly be identifiable, through the analysis of cultural patterns that are reflected in the archaeological record. The presence of other markers, such as the age of the animals and the body parts represented<sup>65</sup>, can help us to understand these topics.

On the other hand, there has been a larger interest in feasts as a ceremonial activity related to political purposes in hierarchical societies<sup>66</sup>. Usually, ritual activities in the form of feasts were promoted by the elite<sup>67</sup>, and had two components: a private, restricted consumption of consecrated items and a more public festive consumption open to the rest of the population<sup>68</sup>. Feasts are conventionally identified by the presence of a high frequency of animal bones, ritual items and serving vessels<sup>69</sup>. The presence of large serving vessels in the “Pompeii-esque” site of El Cerén has been interpreted as a place where feasts would be prepared<sup>70</sup>. Feasts can be classified in a diversity of manners, but at its basic level feasting carries social strategies to achieve specific goals<sup>71</sup>, that usually have a ritualized component<sup>72</sup>; therefore, the food used during feasts may reflect a non-domestic pattern<sup>73</sup>, that is different from everyday’s food<sup>74</sup>, commonly reflecting the hierarchy of the group that promoted the feasts<sup>75</sup>. These ritual banquets would probably involve the use of exotic species and/or the fauna with restricted access, and often controlled by the elite. The large quantities of exotic fauna, such as turtles, jaguars and birds in different sites stress the differential use of resources for ritual purposes<sup>76</sup>. Nonetheless, there are many examples where the use of a more local animal would have been used in large quantities during the feasts<sup>77</sup>. During the Classic Period, enormous amounts of deer remains have been found in what appear to have been massive feasts<sup>78</sup>. In these cases, the meatier parts of the animal are expected<sup>79</sup>; for instance, in the case of the deer, the haunch would be the most prized body part<sup>80</sup>. However, this pattern is not always present in the archaeological record. Some sites, like Laguna de On in Belize, present a very low amount of deer bones for the Late Classic period which has been interpreted as a consequence of higher human predation<sup>81</sup>. The results from Laguna de On contrast with those from the Petén region and other sites in the Lowlands, where there is an increase in animal bones during the Late Classic<sup>82</sup>. This topic will be further discussed in the next section.

### Deer Body Parts Distribution

Ritual use of fauna include the presence of whole animals in special deposits, or the overwhelming presence of a single body part of one or a few taxa, and a marked preference for young individuals. For example, votive contexts in the Petén region, often possess teeth or mandibles of young deer<sup>83</sup>. The discovery of truly votive offerings is low and in many cases, the preservation of faunal remains is very poor, a fact affects the study of cultural patterns. However, animal sacrifice among the Maya is a topic that is very interesting and will require more research in the future.

In feasting remains, the meatier body parts—represented by the long bones of the extremities—would be expected to dominate the collections. The osteological analysis from Yaxchilán shows that all body parts are equally well-represented, although most of this material does not come from a domestic context<sup>84</sup>.

In Piedras Negras, the body parts representing the best meat cuts—haunches and back strip—are not in association with palaces, but in peripheral, lower class contexts<sup>85</sup>. Another example comes from the site of Chinikihá, Chiapas, where there is an overwhelming predominance of white-tailed deer; although there is a higher percentage of bones that correspond to the meatier sections of the animal, the presence of less meatier parts is also important<sup>86</sup>. The partial results from this site have been interpreted as a result of the utilization of some body parts for other reasons other than meat procurement, and based probably on its utility index and not so much in the yield return<sup>87</sup>. The use of animals as raw materials by craftsmen groups, and the use of faunal resources for different activities, especially in high-class contexts<sup>88</sup>, is evident,

thus resulting in a far more complex picture than previously suggested<sup>89</sup>. Thus, it is clear that the contexts with faunal remain reflect a wide array of activities that can be difficult to pin-point. Certainly, one way to corroborate the use of faunal resources for feasting would be a high percentage of bones with distinctive cutmarks<sup>90</sup>, and other modifications (Figure 5). Modern Maya from the Itza region tend to differentiate among animal species, discarding their remains in rather a diverse pattern<sup>91</sup>. This patterning can be useful to understand the differential formation processes of the archaeological record among Classic sites, where sometimes food remains are not discarded in the immediate area surrounding a domestic structure, or more so, the remains associated with a structure do not reflect the diet preferences of its inhabitants<sup>92</sup>.

Clearly, we can not draw general conclusions on the use of the deer in the Maya area. The local availability as well as the cultural and symbolic concepts that lay underneath the exploitation of certain faunal taxa, need to be considered. Thus, some questions arise as to whether it is possible the distribution of faunal remains responds to an exploitation pattern of certain species that is controlled by the elite. Are animals being used as a sign of group or class identity? How does the inclusion in a wider exchange system affect the distribution of meat and other faunal resources? How is the use of Pre-Hispanic dog and deer connected and then transformed with the introduction of domestic animals by the Spanish? In order to answer all these questions, it is evident that we need to consider not only the biological aspect of the data, but also the symbolic, social, and temporal framework in which the use of animals is bounded.

## Conclusion

Among the scholars approaching the study of complex societies, there has been the generalized assumption of an elite that controlled certain resources, thus creating an unequal access<sup>93</sup>, as part of a set of different strategies to consolidate their power. Thus, this so-called inequality has been identified 'in household items, refuse, constructions, and funerary activities, as well as in evidence for better health and diet'<sup>94</sup>. This seems to be especially true when studying the Classic Maya from the Lowlands, as the zooarchaeological analyses conducted in several sites from this region have provided enough evidence to propose that there was an unequal access to meaty resources and that probably the elite had direct control on them. However, in this paper I have provided enough archaeological data that evidence the complexity that surround this topic, and the use of faunal resources for different purposes; these even change of symbolic values through time. A new approach would need to include the study of the archaeofaunal remains in a bigger system, that includes the symbolic role of animals, as well as a thoroughly analysis of the contexts in which they appear<sup>95</sup>. Comparisons among sites cannot be purely based on the total presence/absence of a certain taxon, but where does it appear and what is it associated with. The distinction between sacred and secular that has been embedded in the faunal analyses, does not seem to be reflected in the archaeological record as

*'for the Maya themselves, who drew no sharp distinction between the animate and the inanimate, and for whom virtually every detail of daily life had its religious aspects, my distinction between the secular and the religious would be meaningless'<sup>96</sup>.*

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## FIGURES

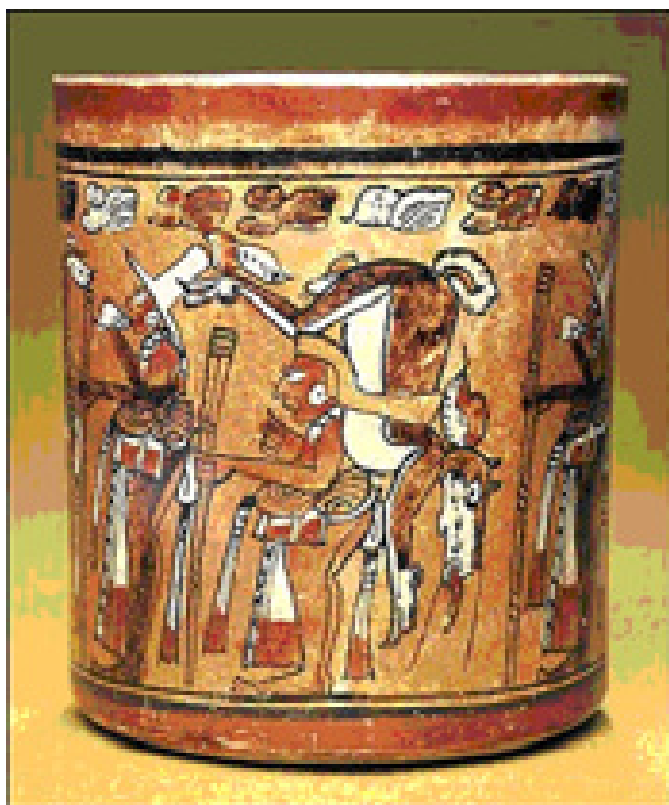


Figure 1. "Deer Hunting Processing", stuccoed, polychrome ceramic vessel from the Highlands, Guatemala, ca. 700-900 d. C. (from <http://www.famsi.org>, vase K808 from Kerr Archives ).

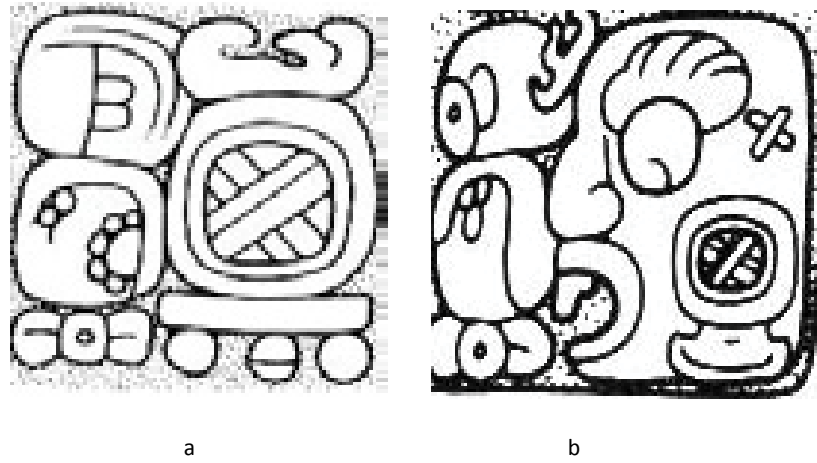


Figure 2. between 'Deer Antler' and 'Old Deer God': a, Yaxchilan Lintel 21 (drawing by Ian Graham); b, Yaxchilan Lintel 1 (drawing by Ian Graham).



Figure 3. White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*); left background, male specimen, right foreground, female (from [www.pgc.state.pa.us](http://www.pgc.state.pa.us)).



Figure 4. Archaeological sites mentioned in the text (modified from Emery 2004b:2)

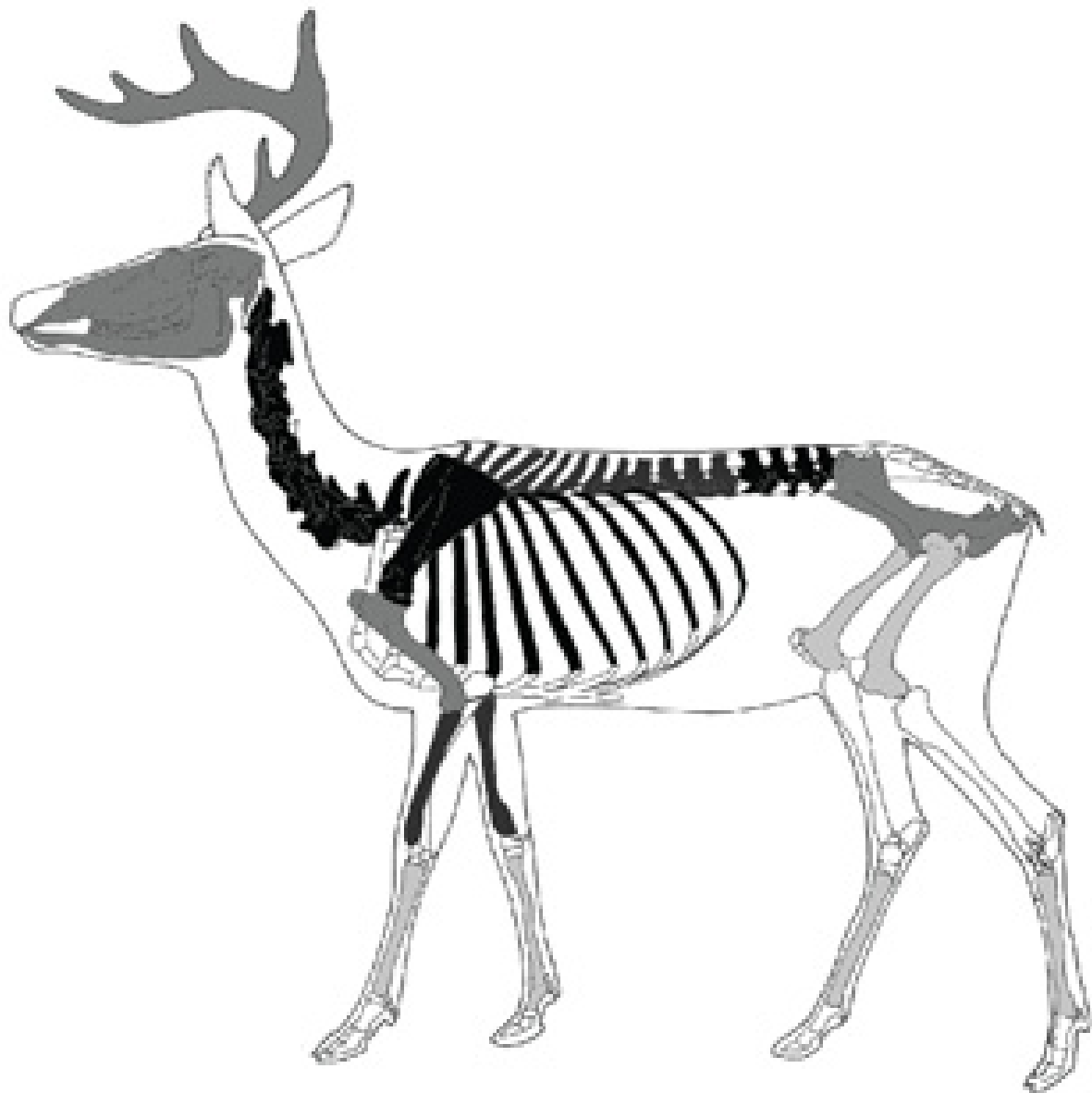


Figure. 5. Overall representation of bones from white-tailed deer in Chinikihá (Montero 2008).

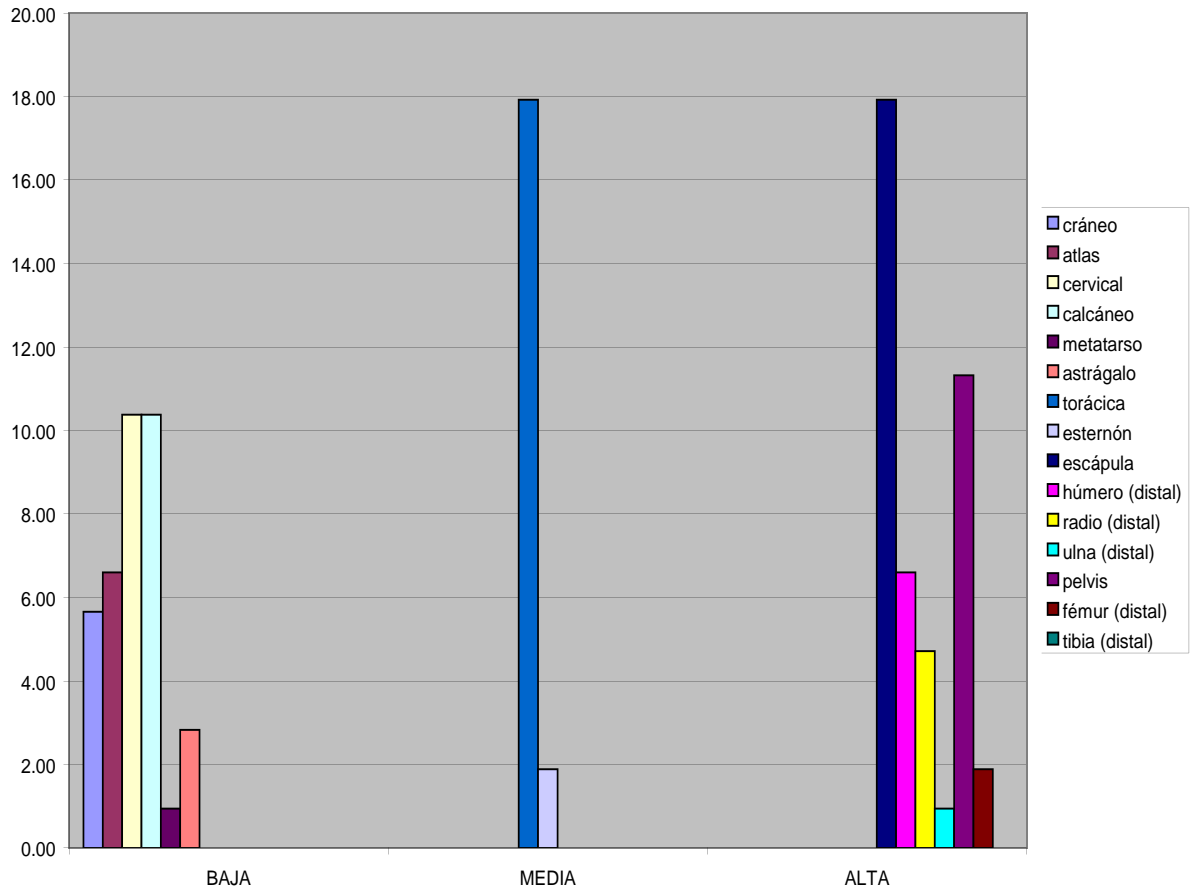


Figure 6. Distribution of bones by its utility index at Chinikihá (Montero 2008).