

Review

Animals and humans in complex societies

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NAOMI SYKES. *Beastly questions: animal answers to archaeological issues*. 2014. xvi+221 pages, 34 b&w illustrations, 3 tables. London: Bloomsbury; 978-1-4725-0675-7 hardback £70.

BENJAMIN S. ARBUCKLE & SUE ANN MCCARTY (ed.). *Animals and inequality in the ancient world*. 2014. xviii+388 pages, 87 b&w illustrations, 19 tables. Boulder: University Press of Colorado; 978-1-60732-285-6 hardback \$70.

GORDON LINDSAY CAMPBELL (ed.). *The Oxford handbook of animals in Classical thought and life*. 2014. xix+633 pages, 35 b&w illustrations. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 978-0-19-958942-5 hardback £95.



Zooarchaeology, once largely confined to questions of subsistence and production strategies, has recently devoted much more attention to the social roles of animals in the past. Responding

(belatedly) to trends in archaeological theory, on the one hand, and the growth of interdisciplinary animal studies, on the other, zooarchaeologists are now using animal remains to address a broader range of questions that are of interest to archaeologists and others (e.g. Gifford-Gonzalez 2007; Oma 2010; Hill 2013). The three books here exemplify this development, all using zooarchaeological data to explore the varied roles of animals in (mainly) complex societies. Each ranges widely and demonstrates the centrality of animals in the human world, and, therefore, their great potential to illuminate the workings of ancient societies. Each also integrates zooarchaeological data with many other sources of information to create a whole much greater than any of the parts. There is a little overlap in authorship, with a chapter by Sykes in *Animals*

and *inequality in the ancient world* and contributions by Michael MacKinnon in both edited volumes. These common threads aside, they are quite different books, with different goals and audiences.

Unsurprisingly, Sykes's single-authored volume makes the most coherent and sustained argument, and specifically addresses the interpretive potential of zooarchaeology and how to tap it. Her book pleads for the broader application of zooarchaeological data to big questions and for its integration with information from other materials and disciplines. She illustrates the value of such an approach with case studies drawn largely from her own extensive work on the later periods of British archaeology, with some excursions into early prehistory. Chapter 1 opens with the statement: "Zooarchaeology has begun to bore me" (p. 1); the last chapter commences with "Zooarchaeology is beginning to excite me" (p. 169); I think most readers will agree with her sentiment. Sykes notes that archaeology has been slow to embrace animal studies, and she suggests that this may be because we developed our standard zooarchaeological methods to address questions of production rather than of society and culture. But, as she argues and very ably demonstrates, those same methods are easily applied to other questions with simply "a small shift in mindset" (p. 6). I think the problem is less with methods than with theory. Much as Wylie (1991) argues for gender, zooarchaeology came of age in the context of processual archaeology, which set its agenda for some time to come. In any case, *Beastly questions* is a sterling example of zooarchaeology in whatever we call the present post-postprocessual era: drawing on new scientific techniques (stable isotopes, ancient DNA and so on), as well as classic zooarchaeological methods to address sophisticated social and ecological questions.

One valuable contribution of the book is that it synthesises much of Sykes's extensive work, along with that of others. One can follow an account of British (pre)history with animals at the centre through

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the book, summarised with a look at large-scale temporal trends leading to predictions for the future. (Zoo)archaeological data are rarely used at this scale, and while—as Sykes is the first to acknowledge—the information remains sketchy and patterns are merely suggestive at this point, the results are rewarding and should stimulate much work to fill in the gaps, develop other proxies and extend the analysis to other areas. Sykes traces stable isotopes in human bones ($\delta^{13}\text{C}$ as a marker of marine food in the diet; $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ to measure animal protein consumption), the proportion of wild animals in assemblages, cattle size, the numbers of vertebrate extinctions/extirpations and introductions, and the length of human and cattle lifespans. This creative assemblage of summary data takes human-animal relations seriously by trying to put both on the same scale. So, for instance, human and animal lifespans lengthen and shorten together until the post-medieval period, marking a turning point in human-animal relations that is arguably more dramatic than that of animal domestication.

Zooarchaeologists working in all places and periods will find here much inspiration and new ways to apply our methods. The chapters treat a series of topics (including domestication and herding practices, relations with wild animals, introductions, landscape, ritual, treatment of animals, and food) that are examined through time. These reframe zooarchaeological data in terms of social issues and yield many fresh insights into the workings of past societies. Sykes pulls off the tricky feat of writing engagingly, without jargon, and yet with sufficient detail and precision for specialists. For example, although Sykes has not entirely convinced me that humans and animals slipped gradually from hunting to herding, I greatly appreciate how she spells out what she means by ‘management’—too often used as a vague term to avoid thinking about actual human-animal relationships.

The second volume under review, *Animals and inequality in the ancient world*, focuses on a single topic but ranges widely in time and space. Originating from a session at the 2010 Society for American Archaeology, the 17 case studies are almost equally divided between Old and New Worlds and spread across the continents, with the Australia/Pacific area the only glaring absence. Most are primarily based on zooarchaeological evidence, but a few draw instead on various forms of text; imagery often plays a supporting role. These case studies provide much valuable information and food for thought, but I felt

the lack of a concluding chapter to synthesise what the individual contributions have collectively told us about animals and inequality. A brief introductory chapter frames the case studies but does not really pull them together. One reason a summation would have been desirable is that relatively few of the authors discuss inequality very explicitly, although some do this very well. In a few cases, I am not convinced that a link has been made between animals and inequality, and the methods used do not always seem adequate for the task. On the other hand, one intriguing chapter tries to break that link, arguing that horse sacrifice at Mongolian monuments is incorrectly understood by most to demonstrate hierarchy, when in fact it was a levelling device among fairly egalitarian pastoralists.

Throughout the various studies, animals are implicated in human inequality in the following ways: sacrifice, ritual offerings and divination; feasting; wealth; wool and textile production; access to high-status animals and their meat, wild or domestic; and as animal deities legitimating royalty. Juxtaposing the case studies, it becomes clear that we cannot use a formulaic approach to identify inequality in animal-bone assemblages but must analyse them in context. For instance, as Sunseri points out, an assemblage with high taxonomic diversity might result from the ‘luxury of variety’ (Jackson & Scott 2003) or from a broad-spectrum strategy responding to the lack of high-ranked prey. Hunting in a society with livestock can mark elite privilege or the desperation of commoners (Sykes’s chapter shows a move from one to the other in medieval Britain), or the use of buffer resources to preserve wealth in livestock (Hesse 1986). Horses are often a sign of wealth and power, and may indeed form wealth themselves, but Wright argues that for some pastoralists they were primarily the means of production of wealth in other livestock. Reiterating one of the main points in *Beastly questions*, sorting out these possibilities requires careful use of multiple lines of evidence, both faunal and otherwise. The chapters I found most useful focused tightly on the exploration of a single phenomenon and how it builds inequality, rather than offering overviews of the various uses of animals in a particular complex society.

Of course, a comprehensive overview of the role of animals in the Classical world is precisely the goal of *The Oxford handbook of animals in Classical thought and life*, although it has the scope of a long book in which to accomplish this aim. Unlike the other two books, zooarchaeology is not the

main focus; indeed, it would have benefited from greater participation from zooarchaeologists, but it is gratifying to see zooarchaeological data used in several chapters written by non-archaeologists, often with some sophistication. Thirty-three chapters discuss the role of animals in art, literature, philosophy, science and various aspects of real life. The volume defines its audience as scholars and graduate students, but clearly aims for those with little familiarity with the subject matter; the authors do assume a general knowledge of Classical chronology and terminology. Each chapter is designed to provide an overview and entry point into a particular topic. Most have a section of selected readings as well as the references, and many start by outlining and assessing the relevant sources of information, which may include particular ancient and modern texts, art, animal and other material remains, and sometimes other data sources such as animal behaviour studies. The chapters vary in the degree to which they make any kind of argument; several break off seemingly in mid-flow with no conclusion.

The authors choose individually—and usually implicitly—how they define ‘Classical’ in time and space. Some run all the way back to the Neolithic or forward to the Middle Ages, and some include the entire Roman Empire and its fringes, while most opt for more restricted coverage. Perhaps inevitably, there is a certain amount of overlap among the chapters, which becomes a bit grating when reading the book cover to cover. Most readers, however, will probably peruse only the chapters relevant to their interests, so understandably they need to be self-contained. There is at least one case of contradiction between chapters—the issue of whether the Romans practised caponisation, i.e. the castration of roosters. Oddly, the editor has not enforced uniform spelling, which will surely be confusing for the non-Classicalist. For example, the mythical centaur appears as Cheiron in one chapter and Chiron in others; these two forms are indexed separately and not cross-referenced.

With a middling but now rusty Classical education and an interest in animals, I am probably a good example of the target audience. I found most of the chapters useful and well written, assessing ancient knowledge of and beliefs about animals, as well as

the wide range of roles played by actual and imagined animals in Greek and Roman societies. Given length limitations, the authors generally manage to convey a nuanced sense of the variability in beliefs and practices within, as well as between, different times and places. The book would probably be better off without a couple of the contributions. The chapter on zoological knowledge is very narrowly focused on an arcane aspect of taxonomy and very hard to follow; I cannot imagine it will have much of an audience. Further, the chapter on domestication and livestock breeding seems an odd fit: the livestock-breeding part duplicates the following chapter on animal husbandry, and the animals considered were all domesticated well before the Classical period. The domestication portion is also riddled with inaccuracies and out-of-date information; I certainly would not recommend it as an entry to the topic.

Summing up, these three books serve different purposes and generally do so quite well. In aggregate, they show that zooarchaeology has definitively moved out of the appendices of site reports and into a central role in the discussion of large social questions.

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