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*Animals and Inequality  
in the Ancient World*

*An Introduction*

BENJAMIN S. ARBUCKLE AND  
SUE ANN McCARTY

The interaction of humans and animals has fascinated scholars for generations and continues to be a productive focus of research across a range of disciplines (Calder 2011; Campana et al. 2010; Clutton-Brock and Grigson 1983; Flannery, Marcus, and Reynolds 1989; Frizell 2004; Guerrini 2003; Ingold 1988; Nitecki and Nitecki 1986; Shipman 2011; van Buren 1939). Part of the reason for this continued interest is the degree to which animals are integrated into the fabric of human cultures and thus provide material and symbolic reference points around which cosmologies, cultural practices, aesthetics, and identities are built.

Archaeological approaches to the human-animal relationship, especially those focused on prehistoric periods, have long emphasized the value of using animals to address issues relating to environment and subsistence, particularly regarding the origins of domestic animals (Clark 1971; Davis 1987; Ducos 1968; Perkins 1973; Vigne, Helmer, and Peters 2005; Vigne et al. 2011; Zeder et al. 2006; Zeuner 1963). Despite this emphasis on technoenvironmental perspectives, recent trends have seen increasing interest in exploring the supranutritional roles of animals within integrated economic, social, political, and religious spheres of life, examining the many ways in which humans and animals have become intimately connected through a myriad of resilient but flexible “entanglements” (Hodder 2012). This new perspective, building on long traditions of anthropological thought, emphasizes animals as mechanisms for structuring human social relations. It is now an important component of the growing movement of “social zooarchaeology” and has found expression in related disciplines as well (Cantrell 2011;

Collins 2002; MacKinnon 1999; Marciniak 2005; Newmyer 2010; Russell 2011; Way 2011).

The chapters of this volume explore some of these current trends in the social archaeology of human-animal relationships, focusing on the ways in which animals are used to structure, create, support, and even deconstruct social inequalities—another major topic of archaeological inquiry. Although representing a diverse range of geographic and spatial contexts, from Neolithic Europe to the complex hunter-gatherers of coastal California, and from the Classic Maya to Colonial West Africa, each of the seventeen chapters in this volume builds on a set of shared themes that target the social rather than the strictly economic roles of animals, and focuses on animals as prominent media for expressing and manipulating social difference. These diverse chapters—each covering important specific topics in its own right, and collectively representing both the Old and the New Worlds—show that although the specific uses of animals may vary through time and space, animals become entangled within human social networks in predictable and consistent ways. These entanglements are so pervasive, so accepted, and so effective that animals often become core symbolic elements that materialize and naturalize social inequalities at a variety of scales extending from households to empires. It is this widespread and intimate association between animals and the creation and reproduction of social relations of inequality that is the shared thematic focus of the wide-ranging chapters of this volume.

The themes explored in this volume derive largely from the works of prominent anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Arjun Appadurai, Jack Goody, and Tim Ingold. This body of work has recognized that people in every cultural context, whether mobile hunter-gatherers or sedentary urbanites, incorporate animals into their cosmological and social systems. Lévi-Strauss (1963:89) famously expressed the idea that animals are “good to think,” emphasizing that the materiality of animals can effectively be used as repositories for, and to express, a wide range of social information. This theme is especially prominent in the New World chapters of this volume, where contributions by Nawa Sugimaya et al., Leonardo López Luján et al., H. Edwin Jackson, and Abigail Holeman, for example, focus on the prominent symbolic messages encoded within the structured deposition of specific, often wild, taxa. These messages are saturated with political, ritual, social, and cosmological hierarchies and are often carefully designed to reify and naturalize the prominent inequalities present in complex societies.

In chapter 1, by Sugiyama et al., the authors explore a combination of general and specific meanings behind the incorporation of big cats and birds of

prey into foundation deposits within the Pyramid of the Moon at Teotihuacan, central Mexico, emphasizing both the overt power symbolism of human control over the natural world as well as exploring the cosmological significance of these dangerous and richly symbolic taxa. In their contribution, López Luján et al. (chapter 2) describe a spectacular and symbolically rich deposit (Offering 125) consisting of more than 1,000 animals representing fifty-six different species, including a “royal dog” from the Great Temple at the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan. Here, the presence of taxa from every corner of the empire, often brought alive and at great expense to the capital, reflect both the economic power of the empire as well as its control over important cosmic processes while the majestically decorated canid is a physical representation of the journey made by dead sovereigns through the underworld. The animals included in this offering, therefore, are condensation points for multiple social messages that speak to a variety of audiences by reifying state power through the theatricality of public performance and the controlling of rare, powerful, and exotic animals; by speaking to the dominance of the royal family; and by supporting the religious underpinnings of Mexica identity and polity.

In his chapter (5), Jackson describes the manipulation of cosmologically related animal symbolism as one of the primary strategies of Mississippian elites for maintaining power in the American Southeast. Although less stratified than their Mesoamerican counterparts, Mississippian elites negotiated status differences through leadership in the ritual arena and in warfare, often involving control over access to specific, symbolically rich taxa, notably birds, and especially swans (whose remains are largely limited to the site of Cahokia), birds of prey, woodpeckers, and owls. In addition, birds such as cardinals, blue jays, and crows were also used by elites for their color symbolism, which was strongly linked to the cardinal directions and Mississippian cosmology.

The intersection of birds, color symbolism, and inequality is also explored by Holeman in her chapter (6) examining evidence for ritual authority and the use of macaws at the site of Paquimé, northern Mexico. Here, Holeman argues that hierarchy at Paquimé was based on the control of ritual knowledge. Dramatic evidence for raising parrots suggests that the red and green feathers of the scarlet and military macaws found in large numbers at the site played a central role in the ritual politics of this complex community in the Chihuahuan desert.

The theme of animals as symbolic elements involved in supporting political and ritual hierarchies is also explored in the Old World chapters by Roderick Campbell and Naomi Sykes. In an innovative analysis of life in Shang China (chapter 12), Campbell describes linkages between humans and animals that

support and reinforce a highly stratified social system, and he examines the symbolic, political, and economic consequences of deer hunting by elites. In a chapter (17) that likewise explores the social context of deer hunting, Sykes convincingly argues that the acquisition and consumption of venison played an important role in defining social difference throughout the Medieval period in England. Providing a deeply contextualized analysis that combines archaeological and historical data sets, Sykes shows that although the specific symbolism and practices of deer hunting changed over time in Anglo-Saxon and Norman England, it remained involved in the contested process of negotiating identity and was used by elites and commoners alike to define social difference both between and within social groups.

In a fascinating study from colonial West Africa, Neil Norman (chapter 14) examines the central place of snakes in the Hueda kingdom. Providing one of the most dramatic examples of animal symbolism structuring the political, ritual, and architectural organization of a complex society, Norman provides both historical and archaeological evidence for the physical and symbolic infiltration of pythons into every aspect of Huedan life from polity-level ritual performance conducted by the royal family to the everyday practices of commoners, and eventually culminating in the collapse of the Huedan kingdom itself.

Appadurai's (1986) concept of the "social life of things," which emphasizes the role of objects in mediating and structuring social relations, represents another prominent theme applied to the human-animal relationship. By identifying animals as "things" that readily become "entangled" (Hodder 2012) within human social relations, we can reimagine the role of animals within an infinite variety of social contexts outside of traditional techno-environmental approaches. For example, Arkadiusz Marciniak's chapter (9) on animal use in Neolithic central Europe explores how continuity and change in specific butchery and consumption practices, as well as taxonomic preferences, reflect processes of history building and localization during shifts in exchange networks and in the scale and intensity of regional interaction within early and middle Neolithic communities. These changes took place within a distinctive social context characterized by increasingly strong assertions of individual household independence, resulting in the continuation of some practices but also the development of new patterns of ritual consumption of animal products.

In addition, as active participants in structuring social relations, animals often become integrated into the competitive and often theatrical processes by which social status is contested and negotiated. These theatrical processes may involve the ritual use and hunting of wild animals, as seen in Norman's chapter on the use of snakes in the Hueda kingdom, and in Sykes's and Campbell's

chapters describing elite hunting in England and China, respectively. Within the foundation deposits of the Temple of the Moon at Teotihuacan (Sugiyama et al.), it was big cats and birds of prey that were used to symbolize elite authority, whereas in deposits from the Great Temple at Tenochtitlan (López Luján et al.), wild animals representing every corner of the empire were used to symbolize the combined cosmology, political power, and legitimacy of the Mexica. Within Classic and Late Bonito phases at Chaco Canyon, in the American Southwest, Adam Watson (chapter 7) identifies unique practices of communal hunting and feasting focused on the procurement of large game, often acquired at some distance from Chaco itself. Watson argues that these communal activities, organized around a Great Kiva, or ceremonial structure, provided important social contexts for the negotiation of power relations in the uniquely complex political system that developed in this region.

Domestic animals were also widely used by elites to reify their place in the social hierarchy. “Gastro-politics” (Appadurai 1981), or the use of food, including animals and their products, to actively pursue and reinforce competitive social advantages, became a central strategy in the quest for status, as did transforming animals into commodities and using them to create wealth and prestige in early complex societies. Pushing this concept back to the beginning of the human species, Speth (2010) has recently argued that the characteristic practice of big-game hunting was driven largely by hunters’ political motivations rather than a concern for maximizing nutrient returns. Moreover, Goody (1982) has emphasized the importance of symbolism and social messages attached to animals, specifically within contexts of consumption and inequality. Goody’s work has provided the foundation and stimulation for the development of approaches focusing on consumption practices in the archaeological record, especially as they relate to the expression and creation of persistent social inequalities (Dietler and Hayden 2001; Wiessner and Schiefenhövel 1996). From this perspective we get a framework for understanding how diet and foodways are used to express aspects of social status, including the zooarchaeological features that frequently distinguish elite from non-elite consumption practices (also see Arnott 1975; Crabtree 1990; deFrance 2009; Farb and Armelagos 1980).

These themes, including the concept of “luxury of variety,” are central to arguments made in the chapter by Susan deFrance (chapter 3), in which she examines elite use of fauna to structure inequality at the Wari center of Cerro Baúl, Peru. Here, the presence of a wide range of taxa involved in both ritual and subsistence practices provides overwhelming evidence that animals were actively used by Wari elites as highly visible symbols of their hegemony. In



addition, taxonomic richness is one of the persistent features used by Jackson to distinguish elite and non-elite diets in Mississippian North America, and is also used by Ashley Sharpe et al. (chapter 4) in their examination of evidence for inequalities in consumption practices and species diversity among the Preclassic and Classic Maya at San Bartolo, Guatemala. Moreover, Charlotte Sunseri (chapter 8) shows that, along with burial wealth and access to exotic artifacts, the consumption of animals and animal products provides a unique window into the construction of social difference among complex hunter-gatherers of the California coast.

These themes are also explored in Old World contexts, suggesting that consumption practices are truly universal signifiers of status difference. Michael MacKinnon (chapter 15) explores changing dietary preferences and pet-keeping practices associated with issues of ethnicity, power, and environment during the romanization of the Mediterranean world. In an innovative case combining texts and faunal data, Levent Atici (chapter 11) contextualizes the valuation and consumption of animals and animal products within the hierarchical, multi-ethnic, urban community represented at the Bronze Age site of Kültepe, Turkey.

In early complex societies, especially in the Old World, the economic power of elites was often built upon the development of complex commodity economies based on domestic animals. Three chapters address the development of wool production, one of the most important animal commodities in the Old World, and its ubiquitous role in early complex societies. Benjamin Arbuckle (chapter 10) marshals faunal data to suggest that the emergence of systems of intensive wool production in Chalcolithic Turkey was associated with the rise of increasingly hierarchical social organization, and he suggests that textile production may have been a significant source of wealth and power for emerging elites on the central Anatolian plateau. Bringing texts to bear on the question of wool production in Bronze Age Turkey, Atici presents convincing evidence for the central role of the wool trade in structuring economic and political life in the city of Kanesh as well as on its impact on the development of exchange relationships between Kanesh and city states in Mesopotamia. In a broad synthesis of faunal and archaeological evidence for state formation in Saxon England, Pam Crabtree and Douglas Campana argue in chapter 16 that the reorganization of the rural economy toward the development of systems of specialized animal production, especially wool sheep, was a critical factor in the emergence of the complex, stratified socioeconomic system of Anglo-Saxon England. Elite control over animal-based commodity production is therefore seen as one of the primary factors that fueled the rise of complex societies in multiple regions of the Old World.

In a fascinating counterexample to the use of animals to reify social hierarchies, Joshua Wright (chapter 13) focuses on Bronze Age Mongolia, concluding that the activities associated with *khirigsuurs*, stone monuments often assumed to represent the power of prominent elites and that often include the deposition of horse remains, instead functioned as leveling mechanisms designed to emphasize group membership and limit the development of inequality. By providing a theatrical space for the congregation of otherwise highly mobile and dispersed community members, these landscape features—and the events, including horse sacrifice, that regularly took place within them—emphasized communal activity as well as shared values and histories, and actively discouraged individualizing ideologies among the early horse nomads of inner Asia.

Clearly, animals are integrated into human cultures in many different ways and have been used for a wide variety of purposes at various times and in various places. The chapters in this volume represent a sampling of this variety of human-animal relationships, with case studies focusing on topics ranging from royal symbolism and state-level ritual to corporate identity and commodity production, and from the use of animals to rationalize social difference to their deployment to emphasize group solidarity—all at a variety of scales from household to empire.

Among the diversity of specific relationships, however, are common themes brought about by the resilient entanglements formed between people and animals in which the latter consistently play central roles in defining world-views and embodying social differences, while also serving as symbolic as well as material sources of power within complex and small-scale societies alike. Although representing diverse geographic and temporal contexts, the chapters of this volume all share this focus on exploring facets of the human-animal relationship and its universal role in structuring social inequalities. As such, these chapters reflect a sample of the exciting archaeological work that continues to target the complex and rich relationship between humans and animals as fertile ground for exploring the ancient world.

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