

Trends and Traditions in Southeastern Zooarchaeology

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Tanya M. Peres has assembled a collection of papers (most originally presented at the 2010 Southeastern Archaeology conference) that shows the diversity of research questions being addressed in southeastern zooarchaeology. The papers in this book fit well into what can be called the traditions of southeastern zooarchaeology: research is based on the identification and interpretation of actual faunal specimens (rather than, say, ancient DNA or stable isotope studies); taphonomic analysis is a standard analytical step; not only subsistence, but also ritual and paleoenvironmental questions are addressed; and shells (both bivalves and gastropods) are given equal weight with animal bones. In her preface and introduction, Peres highlights the role of several zooarchaeologists instrumental in creating these traditions—not only Paul Parmalee and Elizabeth Wing, who were the earliest, but also Walter Klippel, Elizabeth Reitz, Rochelle Marrinan, and others who have been influential in the region.

The rest of the book consists of two articles dealing with historical assemblages, one analysis of prehistoric dog burials, a wide-ranging essay on possible ritual use of animals, and three papers each taking a very different approach to interpreting shells.

Judith A. Sichler studies faunal remains associated with Confederate guards at a Civil War prison camp in South Carolina in the context of military procurement. Historical documents show that the Confederacy had problems distributing

adequate rations to its soldiers, but the faunal data from the Florence Stockade—more than 3,500 specimens, composed almost exclusively of cattle, pig, and chicken—suggest that Confederate guards were reasonably well fed, possibly having procured much of the food for themselves locally.

The other paper dealing with historical assemblages is Peres's look at variation in Upland South foodways at historical sites in Kentucky. The four assemblages are attributed to slaves, a middle class family, and two wealthy families. Her study supports the traditional view that pig was the most important meat source among Upland South people while also documenting the use of wild fauna as supplements by both enslaved people and less wealthy planters. This is an excellent paper that was previously published in *Historical Archaeology* in 2008.

A data-rich study of 29 dog burials from the Late Middle Woodland to Mississippian Spirit Hill site in Alabama is presented by Renee B. Walker and R. Jeannine Windham, who look at demography, pathologies, and association with human burials. This paper is primarily descriptive, although several vertebrae with curved spinous processes or evidence of fractures (and subsequent healing) are interpreted as evidence of dogs being used to carry packs. Given that the dogs were deliberately interred, and a small number of them were buried with humans, the authors point out (but do not elaborate on) the spiritual role that dogs played in prehistoric societies.

Cheryl Claassen's article, in contrast, is all about elaborating on the sacred. It certainly serves as a reminder that ritual uses of animals need to be kept in mind when examining any faunal assemblage. Gathering comparative ethnographic and historical data from throughout North America, including Aztec and Mayan cultures, she

surveys the varied ways animals are used in ritual. Expanding on recent zooarchaeological research on the identification of feasting, she proposes to establish criteria for identifying faunal remains associated with the broad range of other ritual activities.

Rituals can be ubiquitous, and it is unlikely anyone would doubt the human capacity to invest anything and everything (snakes, frogs, deer, birds, feet, feathers, heads, bones, shells, and more) with significance, but Claassen proposes so many possible ritual signatures that every conceivable faunal assemblage could be interpreted as the result of ritual activity. This identification of the sacred appears to come at the expense of a more subtle understanding of the inherent complexity of the zooarchaeological record. If the entire contents of a pit feature do not match what would be expected from accidental entrapment of small animals, for example, she seems to assume that none of them can be, and therefore the animal remains are attributed to ritual activity.

A fine example of how ritual and symbolism can be investigated with faunal remains is found in the paper by Aaron Deter-Wolf and Peres, who study shell symbolism from as far back as the Archaic period to as recently as the 19th century. Shell artifacts can convey multiple meanings and serve multiple purposes. For Archaic people in the interior Southeast, marine shell ornaments may have represented a deliberate link to their ancestral origins along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts. This association with the ancestors was present among historical Siouan-speaking tribes as well. Shell ornaments also signify cosmological concepts, and during the Mississippian period elites may have appropriated shells and their imagery to legitimize a new hegemony centered at Cahokia. By drawing connections among shells, other prehistoric artifacts and imagery, historical observations, and ethnographic data, the authors are able to look at

both the beliefs encoded in the artifacts and the political uses to which they were put.

While noting the symbolic value of shell artifacts, Maureen S. Meyers emphasizes theoretical issues of craft production and distribution. Excavation at the Mississippian Carter Robinson site in Virginia recovered evidence of a mound, plaza, and several structures, as well as 21 shell beads, a number of other worked gastropod and bivalve shell fragments, and several drills that may have been used to make the shell beads. Meyers places this relatively small frontier site in a regional context, arguing that beads and other items were produced here for trade as part of a larger prestige goods economy.

Shells are also valuable sources of information for environmental questions, as shown in the article by Evan Peacock, Stuart W. McGregor, and Ashley A. Dumas. After briefly summarizing current thoughts on Woodland period sedentism (or as they prefer, sedentariness) in the Tombigbee River valley of Alabama, they present a detailed explication of the implications of Atlantic rangia (*Rangia cuneata*), a type of clam found in brackish environments, for interpreting prehistoric salinity levels in the Tombigbee. They also record prehistoric range extensions for several mussel species in the same river valley.

“The enduring traditions in Southeastern zooarchaeology,” Peres says in the introduction, “are based on solid hypothesis testing via rigorous data collection and proven analytical methods” (p. 13). A continued reliance on these traditions means that, regardless of whether you have questions about paleoenvironment, subsistence, political economy, or ritual and symbolism, zooarchaeology can provide answers.

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