Beastly Questions: Animal Answers to Archaeological Issues

NAOMI SYKES

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Naomi Sykes has made a career of valuable contributions to the study of zooarchaeology, though due to her focus on Iron Age through medieval English contexts much of her work may be unknown to archaeologists who focus solely within the scope of historical archaeology. While this is unfortunate, Sykes's recent book *Beastly Questions: Animal Answers to Archaeological Issues* is highly recommended for historical archaeologists, not just historical zooarchaeologists. *Beastly Questions* is a journey through the thought-provoking subfield of social zooarchaeology where Sykes uses her text as a tool to help the reader think of archaeological animal remains as meaning more than just meat on a plate. She articulately argues that animals have influenced human supernatural ideology, daily behaviors, concepts of landscape, and social structures and how these have changed through time and with major developments such as human and animal diaspora. As illustrated through archaeological research, documentary evidence, cross-cultural ethnographic comparisons, and personal anecdotes about her own animal cohabitants, Sykes's arguments and questions are absolutely relevant to zooarchaeology of the historical period.

Throughout the chapters, Sykes addresses a range of topics within which archaeologists often place their collections while showing how well-established methodologies can also provide alternative interpretations from a social perspective. Sykes introduces zooarchaeology as a data-driven practice through a range of solid methodologies that produce identifications and quantifications that are often interpreted by others writing reports. Sykes challenges the reader to think beyond the modern western structures of Linnaean taxonomic classification and to consider how folk taxonomy could bring new meaning to what animals meant to the contemporary people, such as medieval perceptions of beavers as fish. Her emphasis on multiple lines of evidence is relatable to historical archaeologists who are experienced in bringing documentary and artistic resources into their artifact interpretations.

The archaeological evidence for "animal revolutions" is explored, or as it is often referred to, human manipulation of animals through the process of domestication and improvement. The topic of domestication is discussed along with the controversies or contradictions about how different animals are viewed through the lenses of taming, sedentism, and dependency. While domestication and other breed improvements have been considered secondary product revolutions for draft, milk, eggs, horn, wool, skins, and other materials, Sykes turns this around to consider that these resources were and are actually primary products. The old milch cow, the old draft horse or ox, the sheep, and the chicken that are very frequently found in the archaeological record were probably not reared for their meat. The consumption of their meat came secondarily

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after a life of providing power, wool, eggs, or milk. Also important, Sykes emphasizes questions about what this meant for people, such as dramatic changes in lifestyles cohabitating with their animals, changes in social structures and gender roles, belief systems, and even biology such as the genetic development of high degrees of lactose tolerance in central European populations. While domestication is often thought of as an ancient phenomenon, as a transition from wild to dependent, breed development and diversification has been a regular practice continuing through the modern day and therefore has great relevance to those studying how people viewed and managed their animals in more recent times.

Sykes uses the central chapters of her text to explore the fluid roles animals played in regards to how people experience their landscapes. Animals can define the landscape spatially as in parkland or wilderness, elite or common, as well as masculine or feminine. These questions push the reader to consider the skeletal remains of animals, domestic or nondomestic, in these terms. The roles that these animals play can raise interesting questions about representations and proportions such as why are wild animals often underrepresented in archaeological collections but they are central within art, folklore, place-names, and mythologies, while more often the opposite is true of domestic animals that are recognized with great economic importance.

A social zooarchaeology would not be complete without discussion of ritual. Many look for the aberration as evidence of a symbolic or spiritual action, which often means activities that are discrete and compartmentalized to a special time or location. While that is possible in human use of animals for ritual purposes, Sykes explores how ritual may play out throughout an animal's life and not just at its death. Additionally, animals often and widely play roles in spiritual concerns in a more regular integrated way such as medicines and their killing for everyday food. Sykes also explains how ritual can be and often is secular in that everyday behaviors are ritualistic. Looking at faunal remains in the perspective of everyday ritual can again be relatable to historical archaeologists who have long studied secular rituals aimed at socioeconomic maneuvering or conspicuous consumption.

Beastly Questions is an enjoyable, stimulating exploration about what animals may have meant to past peoples. Sykes reminds the reader about how our modern western biases have led us to apply our social and religious structures to interpretations of the past and the meaning of animals. Through the recognition of that bias, Sykes argues for the deeper consideration of animals as individuals that lived amongst humans and that "human-animal interactions transform both parties" (p. 5). *Beastly Questions* is highly recommended for all zooarchaeologists and archaeologists who should seek to better understand the dynamic relationships people and animals had throughout time.

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