

Seeing Beyond the Science: Multi-Strand Approaches to Human-Chicken Interactions

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This paper focuses on the chicken, an introduced bird species to Europe. Today chickens provide huge quantities of food products – both as meat and eggs, but they also are valued as pets, show animals, companions, and in some contexts as religious sacrifices. The domestication and subsequent introduction of animals in the past is frequently seen in terms of food. However, this is not always the case. Integrating scientific, archaeological and anthropological analyses allows insights into the varied roles that the chicken also held within ancient societies which included status symbolism, exoticism, religion/belief systems, sport, and food. Using case studies from across Europe, this talk explores how archaeological bone and eggshell can be analysed to reveal specific actions and activities in human-animal interaction. Isotopic bone data are used to explore shared and differential access to food resources between humans and chickens, providing information on animal husbandry and social perceptions of these animals. Archaeological eggshell can be challenging to investigate due its fragility in acidic soil conditions, the necessity of rigorous retrieval processes, and the resources needed to identify it taxonomically. However recent refinements in identifying eggshell to species via ZooMS (Zooarchaeology by Mass Spectrometry) have expanded the research possibilities. Such analyses can be combined with microscopy to identify the developmental stage of the eggs which can in turn be used to examine egg and meat production, use, consumption, and associated symbolism. By considering something as familiar as a chicken, this paper seeks to demonstrate the importance of looking beyond the science that provides the answers by relating these results to real life animal-human interactions.