Structured Deposition of Animal Remains in the Fertile Crescent during the Bronze Age

José Luis Ramos Soldado

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Abstract

Although most of the animal remains recorded throughout the archaeological excavations consist usually of large assemblages of discarded and fragmented bones, it is possible to yield articulated animal skeletons in some cases. Most of them have been usually picked up from sacred and/or funerary contexts, but not all of them might fit necessarily in ritual and symbolic interpretations, and not all of the structured deposit of animal remains may be explained due to anthropic factors. In addition, zooarchaeology has traditionally focused on animal domestication, husbandry and economy, and species identification above all, shutting out further discussion about these type of findings. Moreover, the limited condition of the data is also another issue to bear in mind. Thus, the aim of this paper has been to draw up a literature review of the structured deposits of animal remains during the third and second millennia BC in the Ancient Near East for its subsequent classification and detailed interpretation. In this survey it has been attested that not only most of the articulated animal remains have been found in ritual and/or funerary contexts but also that all species recorded–but some exceptions–are domestic. Hence, I argue in this paper that there is a broad religious attitude towards the main domesticated animals of human economy in the An-cient Near East, based on the closeness of these animals to the human sphere. Therefore, it seems that domesticated animals were powerful constituents in the cultural landscape of these regions, never simply resources.

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1. Introduction

The study of archaeofanual remains has mainly contributed to unravelling the origin of food production termed in the 'Neolithic Revolution', as well as to chronology and domestication, tracing the origin and evolution of livestock breeds (Davis, 1987: 20-21). In general, zooarchaeology is a resourceful and key discipline in reconstructing the environment of the past human societies.

Most of the animal remains recorded throughout the archaeological excavations consist usually of large assemblages of discarded and fragmented bones yielded from middens and domestic contexts. However, sometimes it is possible to find complete articulated individuals that appear usually in sacred and/or funerary contexts. Reasons behind such findings may be numerous, and their good state of preservation may not necessarily imply anthropic factors. Nevertheless, this kind of findings is rare and noteworthy, not always easy to interpret and understand. Thus, the aim of my dissertation is to develop single and coherent framework for the analysis and research of structured deposits of animal remains in non-domestic wastes and contexts in the Fertile Crescent–with the exception of Egypt, due to the limited nature of this paper–during the Bronze Age, in order to understand the meaning and socio-ideological significance of this phenomenon.

Among the key aims of this paper lie to develop a classification of the different types of structured deposits of animal bone remains depending on their contexts and further interpretation, in order to classify the evidence for a comparative evaluation as efficient as possible. In addition, I prepare to figure out any possible belief and cultic practice–if any–behind each type of deposit and their relation to each animal species, as well as to evaluate how and in which level the socio-economic and ideological changes of these cultures within the Bronze Age may affect this phenomenon. Unlike what it may seem, for such objectives a deep literature review is needed.

Although the study of topics such as animal offerings and burial, associated in most of cases with this kind of deposits, may generally be of little interest within the academic field due to an apparent strong database, what is certain is that this subject needs a deep literature review. This is not only due to the insufficient documentation published by previous generations of archaeologist. The bibliography is overall inconsistent, as well as the archaeological record. There are some reports where the information concerning faunal remains is deeply detailed, including references even to the sex, age, position and orientation of the articulated animal individuals, distinguished from the discarded ones. However, the majority of the reports does not include such detailed information and provide only basic data about the faunal assemblages. This unequal quality within the evidence would be unavoidably perceived all over this essay since there are plenty of information about some sites while barely a couple of lines about other ones. In addition, there are sites whose reports have not been updated or where new research has not been carried out, and I was even unable to access to some of them.

The limited nature of the evidence is also related to the fact that zooarchaeological research is usually focused on economy and husbandry, specie identification and animal domestication, shutting out other topics. Indeed, few zooarchaeological publications have focused on ritual and religion. Four main reasons for this have been pointed out (O'Day et al., 2004: xiii): first, sacred sites are usually inaccessible to archaeologists; second, some zooarchaeologists have traditionally claimed that ideological issues are either unimportant or are not subjects that this kind of studies can reliably contribute to; third, zooarchaeology tends to operate autonomously from other areas of both archaeology and anthropology; and four, faunal remains are rarely collected and/or analysed, as I have previously stated. Moreover, most of the reports that include a more detailed research about such topics are usually focused on offering and sacrifice, and with the exception of donkey burial, most of the information of this kind of topics is provided by the written sources rather than through the archaeological record. Woefully, textual evidence is also limited. Due to this hard scenario I needed to complete the information from the archaeological record with the information recorded at the texts.

Moreover, issues do not lie only in the quality of the bibliography. The understanding of the taphonomic processes is a key for the interpretation of findings of these types, and they are not always easy to interpret. There are discarded and fragmented bone remains that could constitute whole articulated skeletons back in time but that have been disturbed in time for several reasons. In the same way, deliberated burials can include disarticulated as well as articulated skeletal remains. Hence, the context is often more important than the finding itself, and the structured deposition of animal remains may not be interpreted as a phenomenon by itself at first sight. For such reasons I will include or allude remains from some sites that have not been found necessarily articulated but fit the type of evidence that I aim to compile in this survey.

This dissertation is structured in several sections which cover different aspects of this research. After a brief description of the historical and archaeological context of the Bronze Age–a necessary step in every historical research–the compiled data are organised by time and space for the consideration of their features and contexts in order to develop a solid comparative evaluation. Despite a detailed discussion section is worked out in the second half of the dissertation, main details and interpretations are provided in the sections of each site, in order to acquaint the reader with the evidence by establishing the bases of the further discussion of the framework exposed on this paper. I consider this structure the most suitable for this kind of essay according to the reports of similar research that I have consulted.