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# 1. Ethnozoarchaeology and the power of analogy

*Umberto Albarella*

Apparently the term ‘ethnoarchaeology’ was first coined in 1900 by the American zoologist and anthropologist Jesse Fewkes, who regarded its practitioner to be somebody who could bring “as preparation for his work an intensive knowledge of the present life” (David and Kramer 2001). Although this definition may be regarded as far too vague by contemporary archaeologists, the concept that it expresses has been instrumental to the genesis of this book. My ambition to become more involved with the world of ethnography does indeed derive from the awareness of ‘an intensive *ignorance* of the present life’ – at least the kind of life that is most relevant to archaeological, and more specifically zooarchaeological, interpretation. Whatever the value of ethnography to archaeological interpretation, I have invariably interpreted my own ethnographic work as a training session aimed towards that utopian dream of ‘intensive knowledge’. Beyond any theoretical concern for the usefulness of ethnographic analogy, I simply felt that I was interpreting phenomena, such as husbandry, herding and hunting, with which I had no direct experience, and I felt increasingly uneasy about this. If this sentiment represents the reason for my involvement in the world of ethnoarchaeology, of such need is this present book the rather obvious consequence. The complexity and diversity of the patterns of human behaviour are such that no single individual can possibly cover the study of their full ranges; a worldwide view necessarily requires teamwork and the contributions of a diversity of researchers and approaches. In this respect this book can be interpreted as a collection of field-based training sessions, in which the participants describe their experiences for the benefit of others (and each other).

As David and Kramer (2001, 2) have pointed out, “[e]thnoarchaeology is neither a theory nor a method, but a research strategy”. This is an important concept to bear in mind, as it explains the great and healthy diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches to ethnoarchaeology which also characterise this book. This ethnography-based strategy can be regarded to belong to the more general category of ‘actualistic studies’

(David and Kramer 2001, 13), which also includes other important investigations, such as those generally classified as ‘experimental archaeology’. Unlike the experimental archaeologist, however, the ethnoarchaeologist is an observer, albeit generally a proactive one, rather than a direct producer of evidence. Ethnoarchaeologists’ active participation in present-day life, for instance by discussion/conversations or experience-sharing with members of the societies that are being investigated, inevitably leads them to seek also a historical perspective concerning how those societies behaved in the past – either through oral accounts or written documentation. This directs the researcher to a strand outside actualistic studies and move towards the field more properly defined as ‘ethnohistory’. Although this categorization is useful, in reality the distinction between ethnoarchaeology and ethnohistory is often blurred, as many contributions to this book also prove. We must therefore consider that ethnoarchaeological studies very often offer a diachronic, rather than just synchronic, perspective, the length of which is very variable – ranging from years to centuries. This generates a potential continuity between archaeology and ethnoarchaeology, of which an excellent example is provided – in this volume – by the chapter by Hongo and Auetrakulvit, who apply archaeological methods to investigate a contemporary society. This diachronic perspective also addresses the criticism of the use of ethnographic parallels raised by Spriggs (2008). He laments the fact that European prehistory is unduly interpreted on the basis of Pacific analogues, which tend to ignore the history and evolutionary mechanisms of contemporary Pacific societies, as well as the impact caused on them by colonialist rule and interference. It is a fair criticism; however, it applies to the way in which ethnography is used, rather than the concept of ethnoarchaeological investigation as a whole.

Unlike ethnography, in ethnoarchaeology contemporary societies tend to represent part of a means rather than an aim. The means is to accrue evidence from modern societies that can illuminate archaeological interpretation, and as such this process inevitably brings about the issue

of analogical comparison between the present and the past, or, in the case of ethnohistory, between the recent and more distant pasts. Here is not the place to begin an extensive discussion of the much debated and controversial concept of ‘analogy’, but a few brief considerations may help in introducing some of the interpretive dilemmas that characterise most case studies presented in this book. Doubts have often been raised on the use of ethnographic analogy as a useful heuristic tool (e.g. Tilley 1999; Holtorf 2000), but at the same time emphasis has been placed on the fact that “archaeologists draw upon their lives and upon everything they have read, heard about or seen in the search for possible analogies to the fragmentary remains they seek to interpret” (David and Kramer 2001, 1). In other words, if we avoid using observations of contemporary societies for archaeological interpretations, we are just left with our personal experiences which, in turn, can only be used analogically for the interpretation of the past. We cannot directly observe the past, and any attempt to improve its understanding is based on comparative models, whether they are drawn from ethnographic observations or not. This led Hodder (1982, 9) to claim that “all archaeology is based on analogy”.

Conversely, Tilley (1999) believes that other heuristic tools such as metaphors and metonymies can in fact also play a role in archaeological interpretation, though he merely regards them as other forms of analogy. Holtorf (2000, 166), however, questions this view and goes further by claiming that “analogies reduce uncertainty and complexity by proposing sameness”. Consequently he proposes various additional forms of archaeological interpretations, ranging from jigsaw puzzles to hypermedia. Although I am prepared to accept that it would be self-limiting not to consider the possible application of a variety of other tools of investigation in archaeology, I still do not find Holtorf’s dismissal of analogy as persuasive. The reason is probably associated with a fundamental difference in the interpretation of the nature of archaeological investigation. While discussing the approach he used in his PhD dissertation, Holtorf (2000, 166) mentions that he “tried not so much to reconstruct what once was, but to make sense of the past from a viewpoint of today [...] As in advertising [he] wanted to stimulate the imagination, make sense and persuade by evocation and provocation, rather than by rational convincing”. This typical post-modernist approach may, I suspect, find limited sympathy in the work of many ethnoarchaeologists, including at least some of those contributing to this book. Although any attempts to understand the past will inevitably be filtered through the perception of contemporary enquiry, I do believe that ‘rational convincing’ still has an important role to play, and it is as part of this goal that analogy can represent a useful tool of investigation.

Holtorf’s criticism is in fact probably better applied to the use of ethnographic models that are over-imposed on the past, rather than simply any analogical application. Ethnographic models generally combine many complex relationships between different elements of the human society as well as different components of the human

ecosystem. To conceive even only the possibility that these could wholly be replicated in the lifestyle of past societies seems naïve and evokes the kind of ‘sameness’ approach criticised by Holtorf. The days of almost obsessive model-building in ethnoarchaeology seem, however, to be over and you will hardly find any example of this practice in this book. Here many different methodological approaches are presented, but they tend to be open-ended, avoiding providing rigid analogical correlates of the type advocated by Roux (2007).

This book focuses on the human–animal relationship aspects of the ethnoarchaeological ‘research strategy’. Its title – ethnozooarchaeology – aims to introduce a term that has so far minimally been used in the academic literature. A search of the ‘web’ carried out in 2006, at the time of the original presentation of the conference session that has led to the production of this book, revealed only two mentions of the word. Four years on, in 2010, the ‘web’ includes seven references to ‘ethnozooarchaeology’ – excluding those referring to this book – which does not exactly represent a rapid or substantial spread in popularity. There are probably good reasons why the word is not widely used, but we have been keen in putting it forward, not with the aim of creating a new sub-discipline, but rather because we wanted to provoke reflection on some key aspects of zooarchaeological research, which would benefit from emphasizing their links with ethnoarchaeological studies. However obvious this may seem, it is particularly important that zooarchaeologists do not forget that they deal with remains of what once were living creatures. Bones may end up being treated by zooarchaeologists as purely inanimate objects – almost like stones, but their interpretation requires an understanding of the animals and their life cycles, of which ethnoarchaeological observations may represent a healthy reminder.

There is another important and rather thorny aspect in which an ethnozooarchaeological approach can help in appropriately approaching the study of animal remains from archaeological sites. This concerns the artificial dichotomy between an ‘ecological/economic’ approach on the one hand and a ‘social/cultural’ one on the other, which seems to afflict much of archaeological interpretation. Ethnoarchaeological analysis clearly indicates that this separation is baseless, as human–animal relationships cover all aspects of human behaviour. The issue of the distinction between ‘environmental’ and ‘cultural’ archaeologists and the consequent difficult integration of different strands of analysis does not affect at all ethnography and indeed ethnoarchaeology. Ethnoarchaeological research on human–animal relationships naturally covers economic and ecological, as well as social aspects (cf. Sieff 1997; Schmitt and Lupo 2008; all contributions to this volume). ‘Ethnozooarchaeology’ therefore reminds us of the ludicrousness of regarding the role of zooarchaeologists as restricted to the reconstruction of palaeoenvironments and palaeoeconomies. It is a false perception deriving more from the organization of archaeology as an academic discipline than any heuristic logic (cf. Albarella 2001).

In placing the human–animal relationship at the centre of its ethnoarchaeological investigation, this book represents a novelty in the academic literature, but it has been preceded by a number of other volumes that – though with slightly different emphases – have provided important contributions to this field of study. Among these the most relevant is probably *From Bones to Behaviour* (Hudson 1993), which applies the two main areas of actualistic studies in archaeology – ethnoarchaeology and experimental archaeology – to the analysis of faunal remains. It is in this respect reassuring that Jean Hudson, the editor of that volume, is also a contributor to the current one, therefore creating a bridge between the two projects that encompasses almost twenty years of academic activity. Hudson’s volume, however, has some defining characteristics that are not shared by this book. For instance: all contributors are American; it has a special focus on hunter-gatherer societies and taphonomic analysis; and in general the book seems to be heavily inspired by a ‘new archaeology’ approach. Another book, which is very much relevant to the topics discussed here, is complementary to Hudson’s volume for its focus on Europe – rather than America – and pastoralism – rather than hunting (Bartosiewicz and Greenfield 1999). This latter volume provides a combination of what the editors define as archaeological, historical, ethnoarchaeological and ethnological approaches, though the distinction between these two latter areas of investigation seems to be blurred. Moving away from the literature in English I am keen in acknowledging the fact that the present book is not the first to propose the term ‘ethnozoarchaeology’ in its title, a primacy that must be credited to an ethnoarchaeological study of the use of birds in the far south of South America (Mameli and Estévez Escalera 2004). There is a plethora of other ethnoarchaeological works and projects that provide a very useful contribution to zooarchaeology, but the above-mentioned case studies are sufficient to indicate that this volume – despite its intended novelty – does not emerge from an intellectual vacuum.

The contributions to this book purposefully provide a broad geographic range, both in terms of origins of the researchers and the object of the research. Unfortunately the loss of some contributions from the original session has meant that some of the geographic coverage has gone amiss, but we still have a rather even spread of chapters by researchers based in America and Europe, and also one from Asia. In total 11 different countries are represented. The extent of the research projects is even wider, with all main continents represented. Excluding this introduction, the remaining fifteen chapters are based on research carried out in Africa (Lupo, Moreno-García and Pimenta, Arnold and Lyons, Ryan and Nkuo Kunoni), Europe (Marciniak, Cerón-Carrasco, Albarella *et al.*, Halstead and Isaakidou), Asia (Hongo and Auetrakulvit, Belcher),

North America (Corona-M and Enríquez Vázquez), South America (Dransart, Hudson) and Oceania (Jones, Hudson). In addition, the contribution by Johannsen is worldwide, touching on evidence from Europe, South America, Africa and Asia. Thematically the book also provides a diversity of perspectives that we have tried to classify into the more methodologically oriented papers, and those dealing with subsistence practices (fishing, foraging, hunting), food preparation and consumption, and finally, husbandry and herding. Despite the diversity presented in this book the range of human–animal relationships is such that only a fraction of it can here be represented. I hope that these examples, rather than generating ethnographic models that will acritically be applied to archaeological interpretation, will provide useful food for thought to those archaeologists who look at the present and the past with equal curiosity and investigative zeal.

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