In *Food Provisioning in Complex Societies*, editors Levent Atici and Benjamin S. Arbuckle outline the research agenda for “social zooarchaeology” (p. 6), which studies “the unique, yet predictably structured, provisioning systems” within complex societies (p. 16). By contextualizing animals within social relationships, the authors in this volume seek to “discern ways that animals are key contributors to, and cocreators of, complex societies in all periods and places” (p. 4). With case studies from central Turkey (Arbuckle), Mycenae (Jacqueline S. Meier and co-authors), eastern Ireland (Fiona Beaglane), northern China (Roderick Campbell), northern Ethiopia (Helina S. Woldekiros), Oaxaca (Patricia Martínez-Lira and co-authors), lowland Guatemala (Sarah E. Newman), and middle Tennessee (Tanya M. Peres). The editors lean into this regional and temporal variety to highlight the various applications for their theoretical and methodological agenda, emphasizing the following cross-culture themes: 1) the contemporary existence of multiple contingent provisioning systems, managed and acephalous, organized to fulfill multiple obligations; 2) recognition of both the embeddedness of food production within, and the role that food production plays in shaping, social, political, and ritual relationships; 3) the different degrees of elite monopolization of food production, with an observed emphasis of control of the
production of prestige goods for public rituals as compared to a more distributed production and provisioning system of utilitarian faunal resources; 4) use of text and/or ethnohistorical sources to provide relational context for food provisioning systems; and 5) the apparent cross-cultural role played by large mammals in overlapping systems of wealth, power, prestige, health, production, divinity, et cetera, with a recurring focus on the hunt as a form of ritual performance. Food Provisioning in Complex Societies is explicitly not a guidebook (p. 8), but individual contributors describe their methodologies; Martínez-Lira and coauthors are particularly thorough. Through these successful examples, the editors demonstrate the wide applicability of this new synthetic paradigm.

The individual contributions to this volume are strong. Arbuckle, Beglane, Campbell, Meier and coauthors, Newman, and Woldekiros demonstrate the value of textual evidence in association with zooarchaeological data. Some explore additional complementary lines of evidence, including isotopic analysis (Meier et al.), modeling of nutritional content and demographic profiles (Beglane), and faunal assemblage diversity/richness (Newman). Several chapters discuss secondary animal products such as dairy, hide, or traction that do not always have clear archaeological signatures. An important theme is how texts further our inquiry in some ways but often limit the scope to elite residential contexts (pp. 27, 73, 114, 131). Archaeological emphasis on ritual deposits feeds into this elite bias, leading Meier and coauthors to call for analysis of “different kinds of sites and contexts” (pp. 46-47). Successful chapters anticipate this call, such as Beglane's diachronic discussion of three early and later medieval sites, Newman's diachronic analysis of the EL Zotz collection, and Peres's synchronic analysis of two Mississippian sites. Woldekiros's synthesis of multiple Aksumite sites makes excellent use of published data, whereas Newman and Martínez-Lira and coauthors present new data in dialogue with previously research. In total, the volume contains nine novel datasets.

The editors' emphasis on complex societies is self-aware. Rather than seeking an evolutionary definition of complexity as a platonic form outside of the social relations that construct it,[1] the case studies in this volume employ a complex-systems approach in which “complexity” refers to the degree to which networks of actors are nested within each other and organized hierarchically.[2] Arbuckle's discussion of Acemhöyük's transition from an Early Bronze Age city center to a wealthy Middle Bronze Age kingdom and Martínez-Lira and coauthors' discussion of Pe, Nisa, and Pitao phases of Monte Albán shows the role of food provisioning in the contingent and historical emergence of these nested, hierarchical social systems.

This volume owes a (knowing) debt to the work of Melinda Zeder, whose work is cited in four of the eight case studies, particularly Feeding Cities: Specialized Animal Economy in the Ancient Near East (1991). The complex and independent systems of caring for animals, processing, and (re)distributing their products will vary according to the specific needs of the taxa in question, as filtered through existing social, economic, and religious relationships. Some contributions also discuss risk management as a motivator behind diversifying provisioning systems (Meier et al., Peres). The discussion of opportunistic but selective garden hunting between Newman (p. 161) and Peres (pp. 174-175) is particularly interesting. I appreciate the consistent emphasis on cross-cultural comparison, showing that analogies have interpretive value outside of reductive evolutionary categorization. More dialogue of this kind between chapters, and a concluding synthetic chapter, would have helped the volume to spell out more explicitly this new research program.

The volume challenges traditional binaries of urban/rural, elite/non-elite, and core/hinterland, pushing past static classifications toward defining the specific, dynamic relationships within each
case study. This work parallels trends in paleobotany towards the social life of plants.[3] For a truly holistic approach to food provisioning we must close the gap between paleobotany and zooarchaeology. Any discussion of food provisioning that focuses only on animal economies is necessarily incomplete. Beglane acknowledges the importance of cereals, fruits, and vegetables. Campbell further reminds us that to fully understand a city’s food provisioning one must consider “everything from metal to meat and from fabric to fuel” (p. 97). However, as the subtitle makes clear, this volume is focused on zooarchaeological signatures of complex and nested provisioning of animal resources. At least Peres has elsewhere explored ways to combine palaeobotanical and zooarchaeological data.[4] Differences in preservation pathways between plant and animal remains require methodological differences in recovery and analysis. I believe the contributors would agree that the pathway forward is greater collaboration between methodological specialists who can benefit from the common theoretical framework demonstrated by their chapters in this volume.

Given the absence of a concluding chapter, the reader must provide their own moral. Ultimately, Food Provisioning in Complex Societies succeeds through example, showcasing applied theory through specific methods. It is also a call to action for more holistic approaches to food provisioning.

Notes


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