

## HUMANS, ANIMALS, AND THE CRAFT OF SLAUGHTER IN ARCHAEO-HISTORIC SOCIETIES

In this book, Krish Seetah uses butchery as a point of departure for exploring the changing historical relationships between animal utility, symbolism, and meat consumption. Seetah brings together several bodies of literature – on meat, cut marks, craftspeople, and the role of craft in production – that have heretofore been considered in isolation from one another. Focusing on the activity inherent in butchery, he describes the history of knowledge that typifies the craft. He also provides anthropological and archaeological case studies that showcase examples of butchery practices in varied contexts that are seldom identified with zooarchaeological research. Situating the relationship between practice, practitioner, material, and commodity, this imaginative study offers new insights into food production, consumption, and the craft of cuisine.

Krish Seetah is an assistant professor of anthropology at Stanford University. He brings vocational experience as a professional butcher to his research on environmental archaeology, especially human–animal interactions, and the ecological consequences of colonialism. He is the co-editor of *Bones for Tools – Tools for Bones: The Interplay between Objects and Objectives* (2012) and editor of *Connecting Continents: Archaeology and History in the Indian Ocean* (2018).

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-42880-4 — Humans, Animals, and the Craft of Slaughter in Archaeo-Historic Societies  
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SOCIETIES

KRISH SEETAH

Stanford University



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India  
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108428804](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108428804)

DOI: 10.1017/9781108553544

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First published 2019

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJJ International Ltd. Padlow, Cornwall

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

NAMES: Seetah, Krish, author.

TITLE: Humans, animals, and the craft of slaughter in archaeo-historic societies / Krish Seetah, Stanford University.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2018023526 | ISBN 9781108428804 (hardback : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781108447317 (paperback : alk. paper)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Slaughtering and slaughter-houses—History. | Meat industry and trade—History.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC TS1960 .S44 2019 | DDC 338.4/76649029—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018023526>

ISBN 978-1-108-42880-4 Hardback

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## PREFACE

### FROM APPRENTICESHIP TO SCHOLARSHIP

The naissance of this book began well before I had completed my GSCE exams (British national examinations undertaken as part of secondary school education, from age fourteen to fifteen years). One month after my thirteenth birthday I was offered a job in a butcher's shop, in Brixton, South London. My qualification for the job was that I was 'tall for my age' (which I wasn't). I worked an average of twenty-five to thirty hours per week throughout my secondary and sixth form college education, and the initial period of my degree in biology, until the age of twenty: seven years, the length of time a butcher's apprenticeship has lasted since the medieval period. The knowledge and experience I gained during this period were crucial guides to the theses I undertook for my master's and doctoral studies. I would like to say that I planned my academic career around this past knowledge, having realized that a deep working knowledge of modern butchery would be instructive for my archaeological studies. This could not be further from the truth. The serendipity of meeting and subsequently working with Mark Maltby at Bournemouth will remain, for me, evidence of Fate. At the point of entering into a master's degree at Bournemouth, I initially commenced on a course in forensic archaeology and biological anthropology. However, my interests were focused as much on faunal as on human morphology, which was in fact the reason why, as someone growing up in urban London, I had accepted the job as a butcher's apprentice. To my young mind, this seemed a way to observe animals, albeit dead ones. Thus, I approached Maltby, as program convener of Osteoarchaeology, to ask if I might join the course. The circumstances of this interview were troubling. With the exception of my biology courses, I did not have any background or knowledge of archaeology, let alone osteoarchaeology (nor did I have the remotest idea of Maltby's own work). In desperation I mentioned that I had been a butcher and knew about animal anatomy from that perspective. The remainder of the narrative is self-evident. Had I known that Maltby had been working on Romano-British *butchery* since at least 1979, I might have led with that argument!

I explain these details in order for the reader to understand three things. The first is that while the knowledge of modern butchery might seem singular, it is only part of what I brought to the study of archaeological cut marks – and what is needed. Biology, in the guise of animal physiology, formed a major part of my school and undergraduate education. I was learning about muscle groups, attachments, and morphology in tandem with physically working with animal bodies in a professional capacity as a butcher. I also undertook a master's course in Ecology for Sustainable Development, with numerous modules focused on indigenous and folk knowledge and taxonomy. This training provided a usable point of departure for teasing out the details of human-environmental relationships and has been highly beneficial for the ethnographic studies I have been involved in. Thus, this academic diversity has provided an operational knowledge base that I have tapped into consistently throughout my archaeological research.

Second, the above should illustrate the specific alignment of circumstances that brought me to archaeology. In so doing, it should also demonstrate how and why it is relatively rare that those with vocational knowledge make the transition to academia. Modern-day meat trade butchers are generally not interested in contributing to archaeological debates. Furthermore, despite having a well-developed working knowledge and utilising animal morphology, they do not approach the subject from the perspective of animal biology. In short, people from different walks of life enter these two paradigms of learning, vocational versus academic. This is not to imply that my case is unique. Derrick Rixson put the many years of professional engagement as a butcher to good service in both his publications on meat trading and butchery (1988, 2000). Nor is this example specific to archaeology. Dominic Pacyga drew heavily from his own personal experiences of working in the meat trade, and that of his family, in his book *Slaughterhouse* (2015), an insightful historic account of Chicago's meat packing industry.

Finally, the above is offered in part to help explain why it has taken quite some time for this book to see the light of day. During my PhD, I spent relatively little time thinking about the meaning of butchery; instead, I recorded cut marks and drew conclusions. Despite consistently reading and being informed that butchery was an important aspect of zooarchaeological research, that there were inadequacies in the methods used, that the subject (of which I should have cared about deeply) was receiving less and less attention, I was still not motivated to *think* about butchery. This obtuse mindset stemmed from the time I worked in a professional capacity. Although working as a butcher, I had no aspirations to stay in the meat trade. My ambition had always been to pursue a career in academia. Thus, butchery became a means to an end, not an end in and of itself. Ultimately, it served as an idiosyncratic path into an academic career. It has taken time, and much astute mentorship from

colleagues near and far, to realize my error. For all my apparent expertise in the practice, I had very little sense of what zooarchaeology required, and what I might bring to the study of cut marks. Indeed, I had a tendency to disregard my own past knowledge and tried to think in terms of an academic understanding of practice. The situation was a quintessential example of the blind leading the blind. I couldn't see the conceptual gap between my knowledge and the current use of cut mark recording to interpret butchering behaviour. I began to understand the extent of this gap from a range of sources, and often indirectly. One revealing situation followed an article review. The referee pointed out my naivety at an assumption I had made in the manuscript, suggesting that I had failed to realize that analysts were recording what they saw, not the behaviour. Eureka! This statement revealed with alacrity the fundamental error in my view of the mechanics of cut mark recording. I did indeed believe faunal analysts were recording actions and behaviour – and in fact, I was. However, this realization also revealed an academic sleight of hand. If analysts were not recording actions and behaviour, what exactly were they recording? This served as the first domino to topple in a long chain. I began to understand some of the more fundamental issues, many of which had been long recognised but remained unresolved. A discussion of these issues forms a major component of Part II of this book.

Coming back to knowledge: one never stops being a butcher. There is a sensory legacy that cannot be erased: the smell of the butcher's shop, a coalescing of sawdust and raw meat, comes to my mind whenever I hear Mike and the Mechanics' 'The Living Years' – the song that was playing on the radio the first time I walked into the butcher's shop to start work. Over time, my olfactory sense became entirely inured to the smell and it was only ever brought back as memory when I heard the song.

Nor can the training be unlearned. I cannot help but see animals in their constituent parts; I never think about *how* to butcher an animal, the knowledge is now institutionalised as action: psychology and physiology work in tandem without significant conscious direction. Thus, during my early research analysing cut marks it was a straightforward process to interpret archaeological butchery and deduce what had taken place in the past. I tested this model. I gave a number of bones to my former colleagues in the butchery profession; to my surprise their conclusions resonated with my own. The harder task was in explaining my observations and bridging the gap between practice and theory – which has formed the basis for Chapters 4 and 5. Recording my efforts was an even greater challenge, one that I faced since I started looking at cut marks for my master's thesis in 2002. Initially, I tried using the systems already in place. These protocols did not provide an appropriate way of recording my observations, so I developed my own form during my PhD. I amended very little from my PhD supervisor Preston Miracle's recording

scheme, which I had been using extensively. However, even the small changes I made were undertaken in a mechanical way. I did not give any thought as to why I needed new parameters; I merely added them based in part on intuition and trial and error. In time, and as a consequence of working on a greater variety of assemblages, I went back to using the recording database developed by colleagues at Bournemouth University. This Access-based system allowed for subforms and served as a major departure from the recording protocols I had used previously, providing the breadth to record the dimensions of butchery that reflected on behaviour. The butchery subform, which underpins the main topics and case studies outlined in Part II of this book, permitted a simple yet important development. It allowed for an effective way to record and therefore better understand the relationship between the tool used and the outcome in the form of a cut mark, effectively leading to better interpretations of butchery practice. Other basic issues also surfaced during my PhD, particularly with regard to terminology, noting, for example, the interchangeability of ‘chopper’ and ‘cleaver’ (the latter a more accurate description of a specific tool, as opposed to an action), which could lead to ambiguity and misrepresentation, as well as subjectivity in interpretation.

Despite identifying numerous lacunae and how to resolve these gaps, it has only been through the process of writing this book that I have come to realize the true complexity of butchery and butchering – terms that I unpack and define in Chapter 2.

I had been guilty of not taking the time to think through the problem, of seeing the misconceptions that surrounded the subject matter but assuming they were specific to individuals, rather than an outcome of deeper-seated problems with our methods and approach to interpretation. Viewed from the perspective of knowledge, forming the driver for Part I of this book, we have a lens on the richness of the subject matter, placing greater emphasis on the behaviour associated with carcass processing rather than on the outcomes of butchery practice. This stance also initiates the process of addressing a long-held concern: that primacy has been placed on the minutiae of the cut mark and not on the wider meaning of butchering. However, focusing on butchery and butchering, and not the infinitely more salient topic of meat, has been a challenge; even my reviewers posed the questions ‘I assume you’re talking about meat and products at some point . . .’ and ‘Where in the book will you cover meat by-products?’ This exemplifies the deep-held notion of butchery and butchering as equating to meat, which of course it does; however, that is not the sum of the subject. Once we observe butchery as an activity like any other, and butchering as behaviour like any other, we can appreciate the inherent limitation in concatenating cut marks, butchery, butchering, and meat. We wouldn’t study glass production by looking only at beads, or metallurgy by looking only at knives. To understand the entire picture, we

need to reconceptualise the broader topic, separate it from meat, and situate it within its proper context.

Without euphemism, but a large measure of humility, I hope the reader will agree that this book is needed. Butchery – for all its promise as a remarkable window into the past – is increasingly becoming a dead end. I am convinced that most zooarchaeologists would agree that there has not been a clear conceptualisation of the subject and that debate and questions around the topic have stagnated. Nor is this situation singular to archaeology. Different disciplines have focused on aspects of butchery; however, none has carved out the subject matter in its own right nor situated the knowledge. Although I discuss the products and outcomes of butchery, the book complements but is fundamentally different to the extensive literature on taphonomic investigations of butchery, economic studies using cut marks, or writings on meat. It is my aspiration that this book and the research that underpins it can emulate and follow in the footsteps of Eric Higgs. One underlying aim is to bring to archaeology, a discipline that focuses on the progression of human day-to-day life, valuable layman knowledge in a form that is accessible, academically supported, and can be used to advance the theory and practice of the subject.

Ultimately, to appreciate the complexity of butchery, more attention is needed on the many ways in which this activity fits into society. Such an endeavour cannot be undertaken from a single viewpoint. Moreover, ‘butchery’ is more than one topic. For these reasons it has been necessary to draw on a wealth of source material – anthropological, ethnographic, historic, and archaeological – in order to stimulate our awareness of the possibilities of butchery to inform us about past (and present) social practice. Thus, for this book, archaeology brings the technological context, and anthropology and ethnography illustrate the social role. In addition, historical sources alongside contemporary analogues from the modern industry provide details of economic production and how one learns and applies the craft today. From this multidisciplinary standpoint, we can start to tease out the nuances and contours of this remarkably rich source of data.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have many individuals to thank but will start with institutions and funding bodies that have supported my efforts throughout the processing of gathering the data, and generating the ideas, that have made their way into this book. In 2003, I was exceedingly fortunate to be awarded a Research Scholarship from Peterhouse, Cambridge, to complete my PhD. I will always be in debt to the Master and Fellows of the college for this life-changing fellowship, but also for all that college life at Peterhouse had to offer. I hope that this book can serve as a small recompense. Creating the medieval cleaver formed part of a project carried out at the Lejre Centre, Denmark, in August 2003. The project took advantage of the Lejre Centre's excellent facilities, including its forge, and was very kindly funded by the centre. Numerous other small grants allowed me to undertake overseas travel for research purposes and to disseminate results, including awards from the Dorothy Garrod Fund, Fitzwilliam Trust Research Fund, H. M. Chadwick Fund, Worts Travelling Scholars Fund, Cambridge Philosophical Society, F. S. Salisbury Fund, Kathleen Hughes Fund, Ridgeway-Venn Fund, Anthony Wilkins Fund, Emslie Horniman Fund, Council for British Archaeology Publication Grant, Prof. Dame Elizabeth Hill Fund, Hugh Last & Donald Atkinson Fund, and the Royal Historical Society: Grant for Individual Travel. More recently, I have been extremely grateful to receive a grant from the Lang Fund for Environmental Anthropology, Department of Anthropology, Stanford, in support of ethnographic research in Kenya; to be selected for the Manuscript Review Workshop, Stanford Humanities Center, Stanford, which was an invaluable opportunity for me to receive feedback and critical commentary on the manuscript; and to be awarded a prestigious Hunt Post-Doctoral Fellowship from the Wenner-Gren Foundation, to complete this manuscript.

Given the nature of this book, special thanks are due to a group of individuals who have provided assistance, and indeed knowledge and training, with regard to practical aspects of butchery. One of the more interesting aspects of my academic research was in fact entirely applied and focused on the creation of cleavers from the Roman and medieval periods. I will forever be grateful to Hector Cole and Aaron Hvid for generously sharing their knowledge and craft skills during two separate periods spent working with them creating a range of

knives. However, where practical matters are concerned, my most sincere and deepest thanks are due to my ‘boss’ Paul Salih, and to Andy George, Eddie Hakki, and colleagues at Atlantic Meats, still operating in Brixton, South East London, at the time of writing. I learnt the craft of butchery through these individuals, and much more. Needless to say, without their training, in particular and especially the patient guidance of Paul Salih, this book would simply not have been possible.

I am profoundly indebted to members of the Maasai community who operated the Kuku Game Reserve, Oliotokitok, Kenya, for their assistance with the ethnographies that have become such an important part of this book. James Maantoi in particular showed a willingness to discuss a number of topics that are deeply rooted in Maasai cosmology. I am also very grateful to Daniel Mabuvve, sadly now deceased, who expertly guided me through the processes that underscore Maasai butchery. Finally, I am very pleased to still be working with my close friend and colleague Jackson Killinga, who since 2010 has been of immeasurable support within the Maasai community and beyond in the wider region of Kimana.

At the meeting point of vocational and academic learning are two especially important and noteworthy colleagues, Mark Maltby and Preston Miracle, respectively, my Master’s and PhD theses supervisors. They have provided the essential means and support to help me bridge the gap between practical and scholastic aspects of my research.

I can’t imagine that any single authored book is ever actually the work of a single author! Certainly, in my case, this book attained balance through the comments and advice of my colleagues and reviewers. I am deeply indebted to Daniel Sayer for his insights on the nuanced role of the clergy in medieval Britain, to Ryan Rabett for his clear views of the ways in which archaeological and modern contexts could show resonance – ‘hunting and gathering in supermarkets’ – and to Alan Outram for feedback on earlier experimental archaeological research, which has since been useful for this book. Many individuals reviewed chapters of this book, and I am very grateful to Saša Čaval, Diego Calaon, Aleksander Pluskowski, Ryan Rabett, Mark Maltby, Richard Roberts, and Bryan Hanks for providing many insightful comments that helped improve the manuscript. Intellectually, the book was refined considerably following the Manuscript Review Workshop, and I am immeasurably grateful to Preston Miracle, again, and to Bryan Hanks, Mike Shanks, Pam Crabtree, Jonas Nordin, and Guy Geltner for the detailed and thoughtful commentary they provided during the workshop. I am also indebted to two anonymous readers solicited by Cambridge University Press for their comments on the final draft version of the text. In terms of the structure and flow of text, I will forever be equally amazed and grateful to Ian Simpson, and

especially Kelda Jamison, for their capacity to draw out both meaning and nuance from the text I produced.

In addition to their academic guidance on this book or aspects thereof, I am also enormously grateful to Laszlo Bartosiewicz, Alice Choyke, and Aleksander Pluskowski for their unwavering belief in the merits of producing a book on butchery; their conviction formed the basis for my own.

Since joining Stanford, two vitally important and remarkable colleagues have provided not only much needed guidance on all aspects of producing this book, from conceptualisation of the idea to the process of bringing a book to press, but also resolute and definitive mentorship on all aspects of building one's academic career. I am humbled and honoured to be able to count Ian Hodder and Lynn Meskell as my guides and mentors.

I owe an especial and heartfelt debt of thanks to Saša Čaval, who shouldered a heavy burden and provided unequivocal support while I completed this book.

Finally, my first monograph is dedicated to the two most important people in my life, DLSS and KJSS.

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