The World Wide Reference Collection: Zooarchaeological Twitter and the Case for an International Zooarchaeology Database

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Social media platforms such as Twitter have allowed for a substantial increase in collaboration between academics, allowing access to information and advice from one side of the world to the other. This is especially true among both archaeologists and zooarchaeologists, who often turn to Twitter with faunal bones that they have been unable to identify so that another pair of zooarchaeological eyes can help. In many cases, Twitter has allowed access to reference collections that would have otherwise been inaccessible due to distance and monetary reasons.

Based on numerous experiences in using the zooarchaeology community on Twitter to successfully identify archaeofaunal bones, this paper proposes that the next logical step for continuing collaboration among zooarchaeologists to is to develop an international digital database of faunal bone references, crowdsourced from reference collections of zooarchaeologists and institutions around the world. This database could bring zooarchaeology into the Open Access movement that will arguably define the future of archaeology in the digital world.

With the rise in popularity and use of social media networks such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter, it has never been easier to collaborate with academics across the world. This is especially true for the archaeology community on Twitter, in particular with zooarchaeologists. There are many instances of interactions on Twitter where zooarchaeologists and others in zoology-related fields have helped in the identifications of faunal remains based on photos posted by others. This has led to a common practice when faced with a mystery bone to tag photos with the hashtag #Zooarchaeology to get the attention of this community on Twitter. Of course, this is not only limited to one website – even before the rise of social media, the zooarchaeology community was helping each other with identifications and other

issues through the JISCMail emailing list, which is still in use today with an online archive of answered questions. On Tumblr, another social media network specifically catering to bloggers, there are resources such as “Bone Identification”, which has readers send an anonymous Tumblr user photos of bones to be identified. This Tumblr blog has been in use since 2014 and is still actively identifying mystery bones, arguably due to the continuous interest in the identification, care, and collection of faunal bones often referred to as “vulture culture” online. With these examples in mind, I propose that the natural progression of these resources is an international digital reference collection that is open access to everyone.

There is precedence for such a large scale project in the form of numerous individual digital collections; some examples include BoneID (Abel and Butler 2016) and the University of Nottingham’s Archaeological Fish Resource. With advances in virtual technology, there have also been interactive, 3D references, such as the free paleontological models available from the Witmer Lab at Ohio University (Witmer 2015) and the specimen models available from the Virtual Zooarchaeology of the Arctic Project (Maschner et al. 2017).

The foundation for this hypothetical project has also been laid recently with Historic England’s project, led by David Orton and Eva Fairnell with consultation from other zooarchaeologists in Britain, called the National Zooarchaeological Reference Resource (NZRR); this online database hosts information regarding several British collections, including what kind of specimens are available, policies for access, and location and contact details. This allows for a “shortcut” of sorts, where zooarchaeologists and others in need of a specific specimen for reference can easily locate nearby collections that may be useful for their needs. Orton and Fairnell have stated that future plans for the NZRR may include consultation and support for further digitisation of collections and resources (Fairnell and Orton 2016; Fairnell and Orton 2017).

A future platform like that is clearly in demand, but I would suggest that the final goal should take the concept a step even further, based on the recent push for open access resources in archaeology: the creation of an internationally-sourced, digital reference collection. I propose that this occurs in stages, as I understand that such a large scale digitisation project will be logistically difficult to not only organise, but

maintain over time. However, in this hypothetical case of having the time and labour available for such a project, I would first suggest that the existing NZRR continue to be built upon by supporting and encouraging digitisation projects, as suggested by Orton and Fairnell. By creating a database of these digital resources, hopefully other institutions will follow, seeing the increase in popularity and use of such resources. The ideal goal should be that this, in turn, leads to a collaborative effort between institutions around the world to synthesize digitised collections into one, all-inclusive one – not only would this promote the institution's collection by providing the sort of details, but also increases the accessibility to the collection. Open access means that the resource needs to be able to be used by anyone, no matter their situation; as of now, some archaeologists are unable to physically visit reference collections that may be vital to their research. A digital reference collection would be vital in increasing this accessibility. Ideally, success in this sort of endeavour could create opportunities for the creation of more specific digital databases: paleopathology, butchery, taphonomy, etc. For zooarchaeologists, this would be a particularly useful collaborative effort, as it could help unify a lot of research around such topics that may otherwise cause confusion due to differences in opinion (i.e. the vague use of the word taphonomy, no real uniform definitions for types of butchery marks).

It is understandable that there could be concerns that the existence of such a database would render zooarchaeologists redundant and ultimately unnecessary. On the contrary, I'd argue that such a resource would help increase the interest in zooarchaeology. Again, the increased accessibility would not only aid in current research, but it may also introduce the field to others and allow for greater collaboration with what some may consider a relatively "niche" discipline. As older textual resources become harder to access, creating more open access databases will become more important to survive in the future.

Of course, the actual logistics of a large scale collaborative project like the one proposed in this paper would be difficult, if not impossible without many resources, time, and labour. And in truth, I do not have the answers to questions on how this should specifically be undertaken (although I am always open for suggestions and collaborations). However, I believe that this is a worthy goal that we, as zooarchaeologists, should try to achieve in the future. As the Internet continues to move us all closer together in the electronic world and allows us to work alongside

each other despite the physical distances, I think archaeology as a whole must be fully committed to progressing towards a more open access future, lest the discipline is left in the past with the materials it studies.

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