

Cultural and Scientific Perception of Human-Chicken Interactions

Dr Mark Maltby BOURNEMOUTH UNIVERSITY

SCIENCE IN CULTURE



This project aims to unite scholars from different disciplines, members of the public, interest groups and school children through the study of the chicken, an under-researched species that has the potential to provide vital information about the past, present and future of human society.



“The project is an exciting opportunity to pursue my research interests in palaeopathology and the archaeology of poultry husbandry. I am delighted to be involved in research of such unprecedented scope and ambition.”

Tyr Fothergill Post-Doctoral Researcher, University of Leicester

The domestic chicken has been transported around the world by people over the last 8,000 years – no other livestock species is so widely established. Despite the social importance of chickens (as a provider of meat, eggs and feathers; widespread use in cockfighting; association with ritual, magic and medicine) surprisingly little is known about the timing, circumstances and cultural/environmental impact of their introduction and management in Europe. Given the growing popularity of chicken-keeping, current debates about chickenborne diseases, food security and environmental ethics, analysis of human-chicken interactions is long overdue and has the potential to provide data of the highest quality and relevance for a wide range of disciplines and audiences.

Our trans-disciplinary team will work together to address when, how and why domestication and the husbandry of chickens took place in Europe. It will consider how rapidly chickens spread into different parts of Europe and how this diffusion was linked to population movements, trade or cultural changes. The team will reflect on when poultry and egg production emerged and consider how intensively chickens were exploited for these products in different regions and periods. It will ask when and where modern chicken breeds developed. It will question how chickens changed society and culture in antiquity and in modern times, considering how evidence from the past may be used to inform modern chicken management.

With partners from across Europe the project will develop a comprehensive review of past and present human chicken interactions. Key collections of ancient and modern chicken remains will be targeted for metrical, morphological, genetic and isotope analyses. These results will be combined with analyses of eggshells, lipid residues in ceramics and studies of material culture, iconography and

documentary evidence. These diverse datasets will establish the role of chickens in ancient societies, the development of selective breeding, the rise of intensive husbandry and how these can inform on human cultures both past and present. Interpretations will be assisted by anthropological research in Britain and abroad, to gain a more nuanced perspective on the archaeological data and open up new areas for scientific research.

The results of our anthropologically-informed scientific investigations will be communicated to a wide range of audiences and will bring significant community benefits. The familiarity of chickens makes them an engaging reference point for schoolchildren to explore science and cultural history. Working with an educational artist, we will be taking our research into inner-city schools, and creating a film and exhibitions, including the launch of “The Chicken Trail” in venues that will include the Natural History Museum and Fishbourne Roman Palace.

Our project, which integrates approaches and evidence from across the Humanities (Anthropology, Archaeology, (Art) History, Philosophy) and Biological Sciences (Biomolecular studies – DNA, isotope and lipid analyses), would be unthinkable without this award. Indeed, it is probably for this reason that the natural, cultural and environmental history of chickens has remained unexplored until now. It is our intention to change intellectual paradigms and open up new pathways for generating and disseminating knowledge.

Cover left: Chickens are increasing in popularity as domestic pets, kept in urban and sub-urban numerous gardens – a return to the ‘Good Life’ or serious health hazard? (source: University of Nottingham, Sykes)

Cover right: Chickens were not always considered as ‘food’. This bronze cockerel cage from 4th-3rd century BC Ban Don Ta Phet (Thailand) highlights the deep-time importance of cock-fighting, possibly the reason why chickens were initially domesticated (Source: Dr Ian Glover).

