This photo was taken during a visit to the London butcher shop where I used to work. I’m showing my former colleague Andy George (at left) the cut marks on some cattle tibia excavated from the Romano-British site of Cirencester. I’m studying ancient butchery for my Ph.D. in zooarchaeology from Cambridge. Andy was initially skeptical of the connection between modern butchery and archaeology, but after I showed him the Roman material I’m working with, he was pleasantly surprised. The tools were similar to what butchers use today. Still, he said, the cut marks on the bones were odd—very “choppy.”

From a modern butcher’s view, commercially bred cattle are much larger and their bones are so dense that chopping has become quite impractical. To zooarchaeologists, the choppy bones recovered from Romano-British urban sites were unlike anything seen in earlier periods, or even rural sites from the same period, and were often viewed as evidence that these butchers were crude and unskilled. But it turns out they were developing new techniques to process a large number of carcasses quickly—to keep up with the demand that resulted from increased trade. These techniques were probably developed at military sites.

I was originally more interested in physical anthropology than archaeology per se. It was the animal bone factor that got me involved in osteoarchaeology, the study of bones from archaeological sites, but it was pretty much serendipity that I was able to use my past experience as a butcher. Hands-on experience only helps when you’re looking at past cultures. Next I’m going to try to identify processes involved in prehistoric butchering. I’ve already butchered a deer with stone tools. It’s a tall order as the cut marks are much less prominent, but definitely worth a shot.