In “Cattle Before Crops” Marshall and Hildebrand (M+H) discuss a salient topic in this weeks readings: resource exploitation in the Holocene period. M+H frame their article around the need for “predictable access to resources” and how this influenced the domestication of cattle and then crops. M+H first present their theory of predictable access. They argue that Holocene Africans think from day-to-day rather than seasonally. They use the ethnographic example of the Sheko & Norther Dizi Farmers who will only transplant plants nearby when need is great so they have predictable access of food. Alternatively, M+H also present the Piik ap Oom Okick who eat wild meat regularly but will only eat domesticated meat during festivals or ceremonies, not because of its religious importance, but because it’s availability is predictable.

Having formed a basis of predictable access as the driving force for domestication, M+H transition into plant and crop exploitation in Africa. Cattle was domesticated first by hunter-gatherers, between 10,000-8,000 BP in the eastern Sahara. M+H argue that there was the “perfect storm” of factors that caused this to happen, as opposed to 17,000 BP when people where initially inhabiting the same space. These factors include the concept of ownership, storage technology (ceramics), and environmental conditions. They argue that subtle variation in rainfall, as seen in 9,000 BP, is more important to day-to-day predictability than acute aridity as resources became less reliable. Therefore, they began to domesticate cattle. M+H then transition into describing food production and its uneven spread throughout Africa, listing such factors as disease, environmental and spatial variation as key. Finally, the authors present the late domestication of plants as a product of scheduled consumption, predictability, and the mobile nature of early pastoral societies.

I do have some issues with the case studies Marshall and Hildebrand use to convey their model of predictable access. The authors used ethnographies to reconstruct how past hunter and gatherer societies would have acted. Is this acceptable? Additionally, the authors argue about how important a multitude of very specific factors are required for the “prefect storm” of domestication. If these “present-era” communities aren’t under similar factors, is their relationship to resources the same, as M+H would like us to believe? In a similar vain, the authors often present domestication as an act that only occurs when there is a perfect alignment of factors. While M+H have certainly done a good job at presenting these factors and their effects, is this the best way to describe domestication of resources? Do you think any of the factors they present are faulty or do you think there are additional ones they disregarded?

This article was a nice compliment to Wendorf & Schild’s piece on Nabta Playa which acted as a site case study over the Holocene to examine many of the food production processes discussed. Edwards, a piece specific to enigmatic hunting activities, and Haaland, an article that focused on diet and symbolism, also discussed food production but in a different vein than M+H. Finally, Peters also discussed resources, but at a characteristically different site of inhabitation and its relationship to year round scheduling.