

BOOK REVIEWS

Relational identities and other-than-human agency in archaeology, edited by E. Harrison-Buck and J. A. Hendon, Boulder CO, University Press of Colorado, 2018, 296 pp., £56.80 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-60732-746-2

Over the last two decades the ontological turn in archaeological theory has had an impact, good or bad, on all areas of evidence and every chronological period, from remote prehistory to the present, from the Arctic to the tropics. Harrison-Buck and Hendon's contribution brings a welcome global perspective to the burgeoning literature on this topic, covering such varied areas as Eskimo interactions with other-than-humans, objects with voices among the Ancient Maya, and the deposition of ornament agents in Ghana. The geographical scope of the book is broad, with four chapters considering North America, two Central America, and a chapter each on the Arctic, Australia, Africa and prehistoric Britain (nothing on Asia, however). The agency of fossil grave goods in Early Bronze Age Britain is discussed by Joanna Brück and Andrew Meirion Jones; the significance of birds on the North American Plains by María Nieves Zedeño, Wendi Field Murray and Kaitlyn Chandler; and the agency of Torres Strait canoes as social and predatory object-beings by Ian J. McNiven – the focus of this review.

In 'Finding Networks, Making Persons', Brück and Meirion Jones question the ingrained assumption that prehistoric grave goods are signs of status (usually 'high'), and a fixed identity for the human individual. Some finds – copper and bronze daggers, bronze axes, highly decorated pottery and in rare cases gold – have been traditionally taken as prestige goods, symbols of power or supernatural vestments for individuals such as druids, shamans or chiefs. All of this, Brück and Jones propose, may tell us more about modern Western ways of thinking than about those of the prehistoric past. Instead, they cite thoughts about personhood from Chris Fowler (in which people are composites of substances which can change, rather than fixed and singular identities), and on fragmentation from John Chapman and Bissierka Gaydarska (in which people divide things up and re-accumulate them in different, meaningful ways). Drawing on these and other thinkers sceptical about human individuality, they point to burials from the later part of the British Early Bronze Age of southern and eastern England (c.1900–1500 BC) where grave goods such as fossils suggest entanglements between subject and object, self and other, and culture and nature, rather than the prestige of the individual. A young woman and a child were interred with around 200 fossil echinoids at Dunstable Downs in Bedfordshire, for example. In another case, an earth-fast ammonite was positioned at the centre of a pond barrow at Down Farm on Cranborne Chase in Dorset. Fossils could be polished, shaped and incorporated into something including jewellery. And cultural objects could be fashioned to mimic natural things: grape cups were decorated to look like those fossil echinoids. The location of such things in the graves was 'carefully choreographed' in performances of 'bundling' into 'ontologically complex assemblages' which 'situated the person in narratives of belonging and genealogy'. Brück and Jones' discussion takes us beyond the idea that individual human subjects have an active status while inert objects passively represent identity; instead they consider the co-constitutive relationships of becoming between human people and other-than-human people.

In their chapter, María Nieves Zedeño, Wendi Field Murray and Kaitlyn Chandler challenge the established archaeological model which sees trade and exchange as something passive and external to social relations. They focus on the circulation of birds, bird objects, bird knowledge and bird-related services as gifts, commodities and inalienable possessions among northern Plains tribes of the Missouri basin. Birds are recognised as powerful other-than-human-persons in American Indian thought; naturally communicative, they can transfer knowledge and power to favoured human-persons. Under the appropriate circumstances, when rituals and offerings have been made and taboos have been respected, inalienable eagle medicine can be passed from one seeker to another, affording much-coveted ritual knowledge to the receiver and social, ritual and material prestige to the giver. Eagles themselves were (and are) pre-eminent in this process; they are agents of the Thunderbirds and are therefore inalienable, with strict rituals surrounding the acquisition and circulation of their body parts. Among the Blackfoot, the right to trap eagles was probably patrilineal and the tail feathers of golden eagles were used in war bonnets and other ceremonial items. The restricted access to eagle feathers, combined with a significant demand for them, meant that individuals with eagle trapping rights could accrue large fortunes (a single eagle feather could be traded for a horse). But the highest status a human-person could achieve was measured not by wealth but by the acquisition and transmission of social patrimony. Other birds, less powerful and precious than eagles, could accumulate value in other ways; the exotic Carolina parakeet was included in personal sacred bundles which also contained eagle parts. And these structures were subject to historical change; when Europeans introduced artificial dyes (which were alienable) to colour feathers (which were not), this contributed to the dynamic of human-bird and human-human relations. Like Brück and Jones, the authors challenge the division of subjects from objects, demonstrating that in Native North America, humans, birds and other things 'are all engaged in cultural and social reproduction'. And they disrupt economic anthropology's divide between the alienable and inalienable by questioning the way that archaeologists distinguish an objectified system of trade and exchange from a subjective world of social relations. Instead, they show that inalienability is not intrinsic to the object but is found 'in the social patrimony (the greater good) [which] gift exchange and commodity trade create and return, sometimes multiplied, to those who procured and circulated the goods in the first place'.

Ian J. McNiven examines canoes as social and predatory object-beings and other-than-human persons among Torres Strait Islanders of northeast Australia, situating this thinking within wider Melanesian concepts of personhood. Canoes were much more than essential transport for these marine fishermen; they had 'sentience' and the 'capacity of autonomous action'. Reviewing the thinking of Gell, Alberti and Marshall, Ingold and others on agency and animism, McNiven then articulates clearly how the animacy and possible sentience of canoes manifested from the very start of their manufacture through their biography until they were retired. They 'bled' in the swamps of lowland New Guinea when the trees were originally felled. Complex taboos were observed by the workers who laboriously carved the hull with stone adzes: they might not swim in the sea, for their bodies were at risk of drowning by sympathetic magic as the sap flowed from the tree. The prow, stern and hull of the boat were carved with zoomorphic imagery; the hawk-like bird-head on the prow and the serrated edges on the stern-staves indicated a sea eagle, a voracious catcher of fish. The canoe was named as an individual and 'woken up' before hunting trips through closely observed rituals and the swinging of bull-roarers. At the end of its life, the remains of a canoe-person would be treated much like the body of a human-person, with parts of its body and

personhood being distributed and re-used to acknowledge the dead canoe's 'ongoing sociality, agency, enchainment, and entanglement'. These Torres Strait canoe-persons convince McNiven that Tylor was wrong, that animism is not a false belief in which personhood is projected onto objects. It is instead 'the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence'.

This is a book which takes non-human agency and relational personhood seriously and recognises humans and other-than-humans as co-equal persons in the world. The papers discuss relational identities and other-than-human agency in a diverse range of archaeological and anthropological contexts. And yet a position which takes indigenous animism seriously, as something of equal stature to western thinking, offers little direct benefit to indigenous communities. Animist thinking may assist in decolonising archaeological thought, but it is not going to decolonise wider society. The editors state that while their contributors have gained from thinking through their material with animism, a 'critical revision' is needed to escape the 'vast ontological divide between "the West and the rest"', as realism and modernist objective science unhelpfully reject one another's position. It is in the theorising of the final chapter, by Harrison-Buck, that a solution is put forward in the form of 'embodied cognition' as 'conversely co-creative' due to the diverse ways in which people engage with 'their physical world'. Rather than attempt to resolve the mind/body dualism, Harrison-Buck suggests that we 'invert our logic by considering the relationship of the body *in* the mind', or bodily experiences 'operating *inside* the embodied mind', so that 'thinking and doing are co-creative conditions in the formation of agency, materiality, and personhood'. This is more than just semantics, even if those problematic terms 'mind', 'body' and 'physical world' remain in play. Overall, this book marks an important 'effort to move the ontological project forward in archaeology' and will be essential reading for anthropologists, archaeologists and other thoughtful scholars.

Robert J. Wallis

Richmond University, London

 WallisR@Richmond.ac.uk

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Transforming landscapes of belief in the Early Medieval Insular world and beyond: converting the Isles II, edited by Nancy Edwards, Máire

Ní Mhaonaigh, and Roy Flechner, Turnhout, Brepols, 2017, 526 pp., £127.75 (hardback), ISBN: 978-2-503-56868-3

Between 2012 and 2014, the Leverhulme Trust financed 'Converting the Isles: An International Network for the Study of Conversion to Christianity in the Insular World'. To discuss this pivotal process in the creation of early medieval Europe, academics came from various fields, mostly meeting at Cambridge. This is the second Brepols volume arising from the project: Nancy Edwards, Máire Ní