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Article

From Human Remains to Powerful Objects: Ancestor Research from a Deep-Time Perspective

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Abstract: Family history research has seen a surge in popularity in recent years; however, is this preoccupation with who we are and where we come from new? Archaeological evidence suggests that ancestors played crucial and ubiquitous roles in the identities and cosmologies of past societies. This paper will explore how, in the absence of genealogical websites and DNA testing, kinship structures and understandings of personhood beyond genealogy may have influenced concepts of ancestry. Case studies from later prehistoric Britain will demonstrate the ways in which monuments, objects and human remains themselves created bonds between the living and the dead, prompting us to reflect on genealogy as just one aspect of our identity in the present.

Keywords: archaeology; bereavement studies; continuing bonds; problematic stuff; ancestors; personhood



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1. Introduction: Ancestors for the Archaeologist

From commercial DNA tests to the rise of genealogy websites and the popularity of TV shows tracing the family trees of celebrities, ‘ancestor research’ has hit the mainstream in recent years. Archaeologists have long recognized the central role that ancestors played in the lives, and identities, of the living, and the recent increased interest in exploring our ‘roots’ can perhaps be explained by the highly mobile and globalized societies in which so many of us now live.

Early definitions of ancestors in the anthropological literature perceive them as ‘a named, dead forbear [sic] who has living descendants of a designated genealogical class’ (Fortes 1965, p. 124), but there are several elements within this definition that require unpicking. Genealogy is defined as ‘the history of the past and present members of a family or families’ (Cambridge University Press 2022), but need all members of a ‘family’ necessarily be blood relatives (i.e., determined by DNA)? Indeed, other definitions, such as those based on work among the east African Bantu (Gluckman 1937, p. 125), refer to descendants only as living ‘kin’, and as this paper will explore, notions of kinship vary widely across the world. Amongst the Lugbara of Uganda (Middleton 1960, p. 33), ancestors can be unnamed, collective and even childless, and ‘are not significant *qua* individuals’. Thus, does this focus on the known, named individuals of the (fairly) recent past in our own ancestor research ignore the central role of other types of ancestor (and kin) in the creation and maintenance of social identities? Indeed, the application of the same DNA breakthroughs are revolutionizing our understandings of the prehistoric past, and with it, our understanding of ancestors.

At the broadest scale, ancient genome sequencing has led to the discovery of new early human (hominin) species (Krause et al. 2010; Brown et al. 2016) and unions between these species (Fu et al. 2015; Slon et al. 2018), forcing us to rethink human ancestry at the most fundamental level. Meanwhile, recognition of previously unknown large-scale migrations (Brace et al. 2019; Haak et al. 2015; Olalde et al. 2018, 2019; Patterson et al. 2022)

has revealed multiple significant discontinuities in population in various parts of Eurasia over the last several thousand years and requires us to confront the complex relationship between biological and social identity. At the smaller scale, the investigation of Bronze Age intercommunity reproductive exchange (Mittnik et al. 2019) and the reconstruction of Neolithic family trees (Fowler et al. 2022) is giving us insights into the ways in which different kinds of biological and nonbiological relatedness were harnessed within kin groups, while the identification of prehistoric incest (Cassidy et al. 2020) asks us to reconsider culturally-specific taboos and alerts us to the possibility that biological heritage may sometimes be unknown or deliberately hidden.

Even before this scientific revolution, it was clear from the archaeological and ethnographic record that, though ubiquitous, the social roles of ancestors vary widely across time and space. While they may often be known biological relatives with distinct relationships to particular individuals, they may also be envisaged as the more distant progenitors of a whole (perhaps dislocated or fragmented) community. They can also be imagined; particularly in societies in which oral traditions are communicated over many generations and whose cosmologies draw on fuzzier distinctions between humans and the natural world. This paper explores some of the ways in which ancestors have been conceived at different times, in different places, examining in particular how concepts of kin and personhood shape and constrain our understandings of ancestors. I will then explore the ways in which the places, landscapes, objects and the bones of the dead themselves shaped the daily lives of prehistoric communities, and demonstrate that individuals identified by DNA in family history research are but a few of the ancestors we draw on to understand our place in the world around us.

2. Ancestors and Kinship

Closely related to the concept of ancestors are those of kinship and personhood, because the definition and characterisation of the latter two ways of being in the world will influence who, or indeed, what can be considered an ancestor. Because kinship is a socially and culturally constructed expression of ‘relationships between people that are based on real or imagined descent’ (Darvill 2021, p. 112), it need not correlate directly with biological relatedness. This is indeed one of the challenges of integrating ancient DNA (aDNA) research into archaeological narratives.

At the Neolithic chambered long cairn of Hazleton North in Gloucestershire, UK, dating to c. 3700–3600 cal. BC, recent aDNA analysis of 35 of an estimated 41 individuals has revealed close biological relatedness between 27 people buried in the tomb (Fowler et al. 2022), suggesting a relatively close correlation between biological and social relatedness in this particular community. This is important because many megalithic burial monuments, including Hazleton itself, represent collective tombs in which bodies disarticulate and disintegrate, and through natural processes or manual manipulation by successive generations of descendants, bones eventually become commingled, leading to the interpretation that monuments such as these were designed specifically to facilitate the transformation of known individuals into a communal ancestor. At Hazleton North, however, the bilateral design of the tomb appears to have reflected the kinship structure of its builders; a spatial order that was respected by all five successive generations of interment (with only minor deviations resulting from the collapse of the north passage which blocked the north chamber). This five-generation family was descended from a single male, who had reproduced with four separate women (though we cannot know on present evidence whether the unions were polygamous or represent serial monogamy). Members of the four subsequent sublineages, descended ultimately from the original male and each of the females, were interred together in either the north or south chambers, i.e., two sublineages per chamber. Women who had reproduced with males from this family were present in the tomb, whilst adult lineage daughters were absent, suggesting virilocal burial and female exogamy; a similar finding is suggested by aDNA analysis of a Bronze Age population from the Lech Valley in southern Germany (Mittnik et al. 2019).

Not all sampled individuals were, however, biologically related to the five-generation family at Hazleton North. Biological sons of mothers who also reproduced with lineage males were buried in the tomb, indicating the adoption of half-siblings and step-children into the family, as attested ethnographically by the Nuer of southern Sudan (Stone and King 2019, p. 81). Meanwhile, eight sampled individuals were not biologically-related to any of the other sampled individuals. Three were female and may therefore have been partners of lineage males who either did not reproduce or whose offspring were either not present in the tomb or were not sampled. It is likely, however, that the presence of at least some of these individuals indicates that biological relatedness was not the sole criterion for inclusion in the monument upon death and that other forms of kinship were possible.

The new aDNA analyses at Hazleton North have demonstrated a clear awareness of genealogy, which dictated the design and construction of the burial monument from the outset as well as the maintenance of links with the ancestral dead over at least five generations. Biological relatedness has clearly been a key part of kinship structure for millennia, but there are many other, complementary, ways in which kinship can be perceived and articulated, as we will now explore.

3. Reconsidering ‘People’

The centrality of the biologically-bounded individual as the core unit of kinship may in fact be a concept rooted in Western science and philosophy (Robb and Harris 2013; Büster 2018). Personhood refers to the concept of ‘what or who was considered to have the capacity of being a person in a given historical context’ (Lund 2018) and any universal concept of corporeal identity should not be taken for granted. Indeed, different perceptions of personhood can be found in societies across the globe and may well have existed in the past, particularly in societies where funerary treatments facilitated or even encouraged the commingling of remains (Fowler 2004). In Melanesia, persons are conceived as constituted from a series of parts, which can be separated, exchanged and reconstituted, for example, through the act of gift giving, while in India, persons (particularly ritual practitioners) are considered to be permeable and can be influenced and reconfigured through flows of various substances (Fowler 2004, pp. 7–9; Strathern 1988). Dividual types of personhood such as these are *relational*; that is, they are dependent on the network of relationships between people and, in some cases, things. I suggest that, even within a society in which the bounded individual is the dominant form of personhood, we might see kinship as operating on this same relational level. Indeed, we might even question how universal the concept of the bounded individual is in Western society (Sundberg 2014), when we think, for example, of the capacity for individuals to become ‘possessed’ by malevolent spirits or overcome by the power of God in certain denominations of Christianity. Even outside of specifically religious contexts, such as our attitudes towards the dead or the processing of grief (Crossland 2010), more dividual aspects of personhood might become elevated, with the capacity for objects (particularly those, such as clothes, which have touched the dead body) to retain some ‘essence’ of the recently departed or the description of the bereaved as ‘filled with grief’. Conversely, the ubiquity of family pets (who often feature in family portraits or as named individuals on Christmas cards) demonstrates that we do not restrict the concept of ‘individual’ to humans and would have no problem considering these non-biologically-related ‘persons’ as members of our kin group (Haraway 2003).

In this sense, our perception of kin might conform more to the concept of the ‘house society’ (Lévi-Strauss 1982), where kin affiliation depends on membership of a particular household rather than biological-relatedness. In some societies, the house *itself* is considered alive and an active ancestor of the household within its walls. Many of the architectural features of the Māori meeting house, for example, were considered to represent parts of the body of an ancestor (veranda = face, porch = brain, ridge-pole = spine, etc.) (van Meijl 1993), with movement along the axis of the house perceived as a progression from past to future (Bradley 2005, p. 51). Among the Batammaliba of Africa (Boivin 2004, p. 7), the clay used to make houses is considered akin to flesh and the plaster applied to the

surfaces of walls is referred to as ‘skin’. The etymological origins for architectural elements of longhouses (‘window’ = *vidauge* = ‘wind eye’, ‘gable’ = *gavl/geblan* = ‘head, skull’, etc.), together with the ‘cremation’ and ‘burial’ of some high-status halls, suggests a similar perception of houses in Viking Scandinavia (Eriksen 2016). Though biological-relatedness is an important part of kinship, it is, for many societies both in the past, and today, only one way in which kinship can be perceived. From flatmates to the family pet, genealogical links are not the only, and not always the strongest, articulation of identity for the living.

4. The House as Ancestor

The Iron Age hillfort of Broxmouth in southeast Scotland was a long-lived settlement, with roughly 800 years of continuous occupation from c. 600 cal. BC to cal. AD 200, over perhaps as many as 32 generations (Armit and McKenzie 2013, p. 513). Roughly one third of the 158 radiocarbon dates obtained for the site indicated redeposited material, out of stratigraphic position (Hamilton et al. 2013), while virtually all of the interior features had been truncated by successive phases of occupation, leaving only the final, Late Iron Age settlement, preserved. This attests to the daily encounters each generation of inhabitants must have had with the material remains of their predecessors, either known, named individuals, or perhaps more communal ancestors. Indeed, one of the Late Iron Age (Phase 6) roundhouses seems to have been sited and oriented in relation to a Phase 1 burial interred some 20 generations earlier (Büster and Armit 2021, p. 30, Figure 4.2).

The Late Iron Age phase of the settlement, dating from c. 100 cal. BC to cal. AD 155, consisted of eight surviving roundhouses of timber and stone, including several structures (Houses 4, 5 and 7) which had undergone systematic remodeling on a number of occasions. House 4, the best preserved, had seen five stages of modification on a roughly generational or bigenerational basis (i.e., every 25 to 40 years) (Büster 2021a, p. 667, Figure 5). The modifications were not structurally necessary, and each time, rather than reusing the previous fabric, the new structure was built *inside* the shell of its predecessor, resulting in successive arcs of concentric walling and paved floors laid one on top of the other, ultimately reducing the final footprint to less than 40% of its original size. Furthermore, during each rebuild, objects were placed between the wall faces, under the paved floors and inside pits before their infilling, quickly becoming hidden from view as construction progressed. The types of objects chosen, and their placement within the building, appeared to reference one another across the generations: a bone ‘spoon’ placed under the stage 1 wall was mirrored by a second, tucked under the stage 5 wall, five or more generations later; quernstones for grinding grain (deposited upside down with their grinding faces deliberately smashed away) were repeatedly placed towards the rear of the structure, and very often over the infilled pits. It has been suggested (Campbell 1991, p. 133) that the feeder pipes of rotary quernstones would have facilitated, for example, the pouring of votive libations into the features below (Büster 2021a, p. 669, Figure 8), creating tangible links with previous structures and any ancestral spirits thought to reside within them. Certainly, a similar phenomenon existed at the first-century BC cemetery complex of Goeblingen-Nospelt in Luxembourg, where a large ceramic vessel (known as a *dolium*) was placed over the grave chamber of a high-status female and, having had its base removed, formed the focus for votive offerings for at least 175 years (Metzler and Gaeng 2009; Fernández-Götz 2016, p. 175, Figure 9). In an increasingly mobile and global world, it is unlikely that many inhabitants of a particular house will represent the fifth generation of their family to have lived there. What Broxmouth shows us, however, is the power of past generations (known, unknown, real or imagined) to shape the world in which we find ourselves and that feelings of responsibility towards their remembrance are ubiquitous and deeply rooted.

5. Redefining Ancestors

The deposition of human bone (the physical remains of ancestors) within roundhouses is not uncommon. In House 4 at Broxmouth, described above, cranial and mandible fragments from separate individuals were deposited at the base of the stage 2 wall before it

was sealed during construction of the stage 4 roundhouse. The condition of these human remains relative to the faunal bone which accompanied them suggests that they had been curated prior to deposition (Büster and Armit 2021, p. 33). A similar phenomenon can be found at Cnip, Lewis, Scotland, where, sometime in the first century AD, a human cranium, together with a pot sherd and a stone mimicking the shape of the cranium, were placed into a scoop dug prior to paving of the floor of a small building appended to an earlier structure (Armit 2006, p. 58). The human bone appeared to be weathered, suggesting that it had spent time elsewhere before deposition, but in this instance, subsequent radiocarbon dating (to 1540–1410 cal. BC; Armit and Shapland 2015, p. 42) indicated that it predated the structure by more than a millennium and a half and was likely derived from a Middle Bronze Age cemetery a few hundred metres away (Dunwell et al. 1995). We cannot know whether the cranium was deliberately exhumed from the cemetery or whether it was a chance find, having eroded out of the sand over the intervening 60 generations, but it is likely that, as with the Phase 1 burial outside Late Iron Age House 2 at Broxmouth, this ‘ancestor’ (if this is indeed how they were perceived) had passed into the realm of mythical time (Gosden and Lock 1998).

A more overt example of interaction with the long dead may be represented by two individuals buried under the floor of a Late Bronze Age roundhouse at Cladh Hallan, South Uist, Outer Hebrides, Scotland. A combination of osteological, isotopic, aDNA and histological evidence (Parker Pearson et al. 2005, 2007; Hanna et al. 2012; Booth et al. 2015) revealed that both individuals were composites of three people (i.e., six in total) and were subject to mummification processes which may have utilised the acidic and anaerobic conditions of nearby peat bogs. Both bodies appear to have spent considerable time in other contexts, perhaps above ground amongst the living, as the radiocarbon dates of their various skeletal elements considerably predate their Late Bronze Age depositional context. Indeed, there is no overlap between the cranial and postcranial elements of one of the ‘mummies’, who appears to be a composite of individuals who would never have known in each other in life, and who died several hundred years before construction of the roundhouses which served as their final resting place.

Interaction with ‘mummy bundles’ of the long dead is also evidenced at the Sculptor’s Cave in northeast Scotland (Armit and Büster 2020); a rare example of a surviving funerary population from Late Bronze Age and Iron Age Britain in a period when the dead become virtually invisible archaeologically (Harding 2016, p. 4). This remote sea cave, on the south coast of the Moray Firth, formed the focus for funerary and ritual activity over roughly 1500 years, in a landscape that had itself been a place of the dead since the Neolithic (c. 4000 BC) (Büster et al. 2020). At an adjacent cave, Early Bronze Age (c. 2400–2200 BC) human remains were redeposited in sediments associated with Late Bronze Age (c. 1100–800 BC) funerary activity, indicating close engagement with and manipulation of ancestors (Büster and Armit 2016). At the Sculptor’s Cave, evidence for Iron Age visitors is attested by thick accumulated deposits including structures, grain processing waste and hearths for the preparation and cooking of meals. This suggests frequent visits to and provision for the ancestral dead, who (thanks to earlier funerary treatment and the exceptional preservational qualities of the salty cave environment) may have resembled something akin to mummy bundles (Armit and Büster 2020, p. 251), dressed in finery such as the gold-covered hair rings later gathered together and deposited as a cache at the furthest recess of the cave.

Caves themselves are known, from prehistory to present, to be liminal places between worlds and would therefore have been appropriate places for communion with the ancestral otherworld (Büster et al. 2019). After a further 1500 years of visitation, including more funerary activity in the Roman Iron Age (c. first to fourth centuries AD), the ancestral power of the cave was harnessed in another dramatic way, as the arena for the execution of up to nine individuals by decapitation sometime in the third century AD (Armit and Büster 2020, pp. 253–55). While it would have been much more practical to execute these, presumably unwilling, victims at the nearest settlement, or even on the cliff top, surrounded by a large audience, it was felt necessary to escort them on the arduous journey down

the cliff and across the rocky foreshore to the cave itself. The Sculptor's Cave, and its ancestral inhabitants, must therefore have been crucial to the event—either for legitimising this violent act or as witness to the desecration of a long-sacred landscape.

Whatever the precise circumstances, funerary activity at the cave ceased shortly afterwards, sometime in the fourth century AD ([Hamilton et al. 2020](#)). One of the last visible acts was the carving of a series of symbols around the cave's distinct twin entrance passages in the Pictish period (c. sixth to eighth centuries AD, but perhaps as early as the fifth century based on emerging evidence elsewhere in Scotland; [Noble et al. 2018](#)). This pictographic writing system, which rarely occurs in caves and is more commonly found on freestanding 'symbol stones', has not yet been 'decoded', but one interpretation is that the symbols, which often occur in pairs (as at the Sculptor's Cave), represent two-part personal names ([Samson 1992](#); [Forsyth 1995](#)). It is possible that the symbols merely represent attempts by a newly Christianised community to warn people away from or symbolically close off a dangerous pagan place ('strewn with human bones', as the original excavator found it in 1927; [Benton 1931](#), p. 177), or, if they really were names and carved within a century of the decapitation event, they may represent a memorial to the fallen who died within living memory. Though we cannot know the precise meaning of the carvings, it is clear that this ancestral place, which necessitated constant visitation over more than a millennium, had now become somewhere to avoid, and this reminds us that encounters with ancestors are not always welcomed and that they can bring about negative and unwanted feelings.

6. Reimagining Ancestors

Caves are often the sites of enduring funerary and ritual activity. We have already considered their liminal nature, but the fact that they are hewn from solid rock makes them durable places in the landscape. In fact, in some societies, stone is considered representative of the dead (and the ancestors) themselves. In Madagascar, for example, biological and social ageing is conceptualised as a kind of 'hardening' ([Bloch 1995a, 1995b](#), p. 215), and so wood is reserved for the construction of houses for the living, while stone is used for tombs and for standing stones perceived as portals for communication with the dead ([Parker Pearson and Ramilisonina 1998](#), p. 311). Among the San peoples of South Africa and Indigenous communities in Australia, the dulling and darkening of rock carvings through weathering is thought to indicate the reclaiming of images by the spirit world, and frequent recarving and repainting is required to maintain these communication channels with ancestors ([Ouzman 2001](#); [Taçon 2004](#), p. 39). If we view the Late Iron Age roundhouses at Broxmouth through this lens, perhaps the periodic remodeling of the structures, in which timber elements were gradually replaced in stone (as in House 5) or the encasing of one house within the stone shell of its predecessor (as in Houses 4 and 7), was similarly seen as a kind of biological 'hardening' and was a tangible cue to the longevity of the household within. Likewise, remodeling of the structures, and the deposition of particular objects, may have been considered necessary to maintain links with genealogical ancestors.

Certainly, the caching of objects within the walls of House 4 at Broxmouth would have been central to the biography of each household; the stories passed down about now-hidden objects and their owners constituting an important part of their identity. Objects are powerful mnemonic devices. We see this, literally 'at play', in House 4, with the curation of two distinctive gaming pieces deposited at the base of the stage 2 wall with the human bone fragments during construction of stage 4 roundhouse; their partner was deposited in a large pit during remodeling of the stage 2 roundhouse several generations earlier ([Büster and Armit 2013](#), pp. 138–52). These personal and highly tactile items, perhaps still played with, would have represented a tangible link to past events and deceased relatives in much the same way that heirlooms do today. The recollection of specific details about the nature and location of long-buried artefacts over multiple generations may seem like a stretch in communities who could not rely on photographs or written documents, but ethnographic evidence attests to the transmission of genealogical histories, and even the names of houses

(Best 1927, p. 96), over periods of between 500 and 700 years (Ballard 1994); more than sufficient to encompass the time which lapsed between, for example, the deposition of the paired bone spoons under the walls of the first and last iterations of House 4. Family history research is a popular hobby and pastime today but tends to be undertaken by lone individuals sifting silently through archival documents or ancestry websites. In the past, and in many societies around the world today, however, the transmission of genealogical narratives would have been a core part of everyday life, with song, dance and stories told and retold in communal settings, and perhaps even in the presence of ancestors themselves.

7. Ancestors and Objects

There is of course a paradox in the interpretation of the cached objects in House 4 at Broxmouth. If objects were so fundamental to the maintenance of ‘continuing bonds’¹ with the dead, then why do we find them cached so often in the archaeological record? Whether a grave or a midden, it is, after all, the stuff that people throw away, those things taken out of circulation amongst the world of the living, that are left behind for us to find. Furthermore, why do we so often find these items deposited in such unusual ways in the houses of Iron Age Britain? Indeed, this phenomenon is so common on later prehistoric settlements in Britain that it has its own classificatory category: ‘structured deposit’. Originally coined in specific reference to the spatial patterning of pottery, flint and bone at Neolithic causewayed enclosures (Richards and Thomas 1984), structured deposition is now commonly used to describe any deposit which appears to represent the deliberate deposition of material in nonfunerary contexts (Garrow 2012). The use of different classificatory terms for cached objects in funerary and nonfunerary contexts is an important one, reflecting the different trajectories of each subdiscipline within archaeology. It has, however, as I have suggested elsewhere (Büster 2021b), hindered interpretation of this latter category of material.

During research on the ways in which archaeology can encourage discussions around the often-taboo topic of death, dying and bereavement in the UK today (Croucher et al. 2020), many of the group discussions I helped facilitate focused not on the dead body itself but the objects left behind. On several occasions, it became clear that these objects were not, as we might think of grave goods in the archaeological record, treasured heirlooms with long biographies serving as mnemonic devices for cherished moments. An old pair of worn out and misshapen shoes provoked memories of an individual past their prime, while a jar of Horlicks (a powdered malted drink) had been acquired during a routine shopping trip and gifted to the bereaved only days before their relative’s death (Büster 2021b, pp. 976, 981). Overnight, the jar of Horlicks ‘became like an artefact’ and hugely problematic for the bereaved individual; they did not like Horlicks and perhaps they would not have felt comfortable drinking it in any case, but despite this, they could not bring themselves to throw it out with the routine rubbish of daily life, and it stayed in the cupboard for five years until it became solid. The owner of both the shoes and the Horlicks did eventually throw these items away, citing respectively that ‘it was a sign of getting through the grief’ and that ‘you have to hold onto things until it’s time to release them’ (Büster 2021b, pp. 976, 981).

The rise of ‘death cleaning’ movements (Magnusson 2017), where people are encouraged to sort out their affairs long before their death, and the increasing popularity of ‘tidying experts’ (e.g., Kondo 2014), suggest that these are not isolated stories and that ‘problematic stuff’ (Büster 2021b) need not be restricted to the belongings of the dead. Indeed, there are attics, cupboards, garages and basements bursting with cassette tapes from teenage years that can no longer be played and baby clothes that no longer fit. This material represents the problematic stuff not of the physical dead, but the socially dead personae of the living. Humans are very good at making things—it is perhaps what makes us human in the first place—but the constant creation and/or acquisition of stuff is emotionally heavy, and throwing away *some* things is difficult; it requires special processing outside of the normal practice of waste disposal.

This poses a particular problem for the later prehistoric communities of Britain. Funerals are highly structured and ritualised events, which means that graves make good places to deposit problematic stuff. As noted previously, however, the majority of the later prehistoric dead in Britain are invisible archaeologically. The general absence of human remains and their weathered and isolated nature when found (usually as part of structured deposits) suggests that excarnation by exposure (during which the body is left to naturally disarticulate and disperse; Carr and Knüsel 1997) was probably the majority rite. If this was the case, there was no *body* to bury, no need for a grave pit, and thus no appropriate context in which to deposit problematic stuff. It may, therefore, be the case that structured deposits (that is, cached objects in pits and in other formalised contexts such as round-houses) are the grave goods of later prehistoric Britain, but that prioritisation of the physical human body in our interpretations has led us to overlook them as such. As outlined earlier, foregrounding the bounded individual in this way may, in fact, be a relatively recent and culturally-specific perception of the world. In fact, objects have the potential to be as, if not more, emotionally powerful than the physical dead, *particularly* in those societies where the living are detached from post-mortem care and funerary treatment of the dead body. Acknowledging this fact does not make objects any less problematic for us in the present, but it helps us understand that the visceral reactions evoked by certain objects at certain times are an inevitable and enduring part of grief.

8. Conclusions: Living with Ancestors

It has been suggested that ‘there are too many ancestors in contemporary archaeological interpretation, and they are being asked to do too much’ (Whitley 2002, p. 119). The study of ancestors, however, lies at the heart of archaeology, history and allied disciplines, and in this sense, everything we study is ‘ancestral’. As we have seen, from attempts to arrest the decomposition process in the Bronze Age ‘mummies’ at Cladh Hallan to current ethical debates over the digital legacies of the deceased (with the estimated 30 million legacy profiles on Facebook exceeding the number of living users), ancestors, in various forms, have always formed a central part of our understandings of the world and continue to play fundamental roles in the lives of the living. Though they can be used for positive effect, their continued presence is not always welcomed (as attested by the challenge of disposing of ‘problematic stuff’), and the current rise of populist, nationalist agendas is once again seeing their misappropriation and misuse for contemporary political ends (Bonacchi forthcoming). The deep-time and global perspective presented here demonstrates that our relationships with ancestors are complex and multi-faceted, that concepts of ancestor and kin are culturally and contextually specific, and, that whether positive or negative, comforting or problematic, ancestors are an ever-present and ubiquitous part of life.

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- ¹ Continuing bonds is a theory developed in contemporary studies of death, dying and bereavement (Klass et al. 1996; Stroebe et al. 2012; Walter 1996). It grew from dissatisfaction with traditional models of grief which emphasised the need for detachment from the deceased (Freud 1917), or asserted that the grieving process progressed through a unilinear series of stages towards the restoration of a pre-bereavement status quo (Kubler-Ross 1969; Bowlby 1973, 1980; Worden 1991). Grief, in practice, is far more complex than a linear trajectory of ‘recovery’, and (consciously or unconsciously) individuals often form new types of relationships (‘continuing bonds’) that endure to a greater or lesser extent throughout the rest of their lives (Shuchter and Zisook 1993, p. 34).

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