# SPECIAL SECTION
# Debating Posthumanism in Archaeology

# Posthumanism in Archaeology: An Introduction

Manuel Fernández-Götz, Andrew Gardner, Guillermo Díaz de Liaño & Oliver J.T. Harris

Posthumanism is a growing field of interdisciplinary study that has emerged, principally in the last 20 years, as a broad church which seeks to reconceptualize human beings' relationships with the world. At its heart, Posthumanism seeks to destabilize and question the category of 'human', which it sees as having previously been treated as transcendent and ahistorical. In its place, the figure of the posthuman aims to capture the complex and situated nature of our species' existence, outside traditional dichotomies like culture and nature, mind and body, person and environment, and so on. From animal studies (e.g. Despret 2016; Wolfe 2009), via a rekindled attention to the material world (Coole & Frost 2010) to the cutting edge of quantum physics (Barad 2007), Posthumanism draws on a diverse range of inspiration (Ferrando 2019). This diversity also covers a significant internal dissonance and difference, with some posthumanists taking relational approaches, others arguing for the essential qualities of things, some focusing primarily on material things without humans and others calling for explicitly feminist investigations.

For many posthumanist thinkers, the claims to human exceptionalism that have dominated Enlightenment thought have been deeply damaging (Braidotti 2013). Drawing on the anti-humanism of Michel Foucault in particular, posthumanists have argued that the figure of the human in much of Western thought rests implicitly on a particular vision of 'Man': white, able-bodied, adult, heterosexual, middle-class, educated, and so on (Frost 2016). All visions of the human are then measured against this subject, and those that do not match up are found wanting. Supporters of a more traditional Humanism do not defend this particular figure, of course, and suggest instead that a more nuanced notion of 'the human' can now be found in its place, one that makes space for all varieties of our species. Posthumanists contend, however, that the model implicitly remains unchallenged. The tension around Posthumanism both within and outside archaeology often circles around this central issue: to what extent does Posthumanism's refusal to elevate human beings ontologically represent an intellectual and ethical position from which we can better deal with the political issues facing the world? For posthumanists, it represents the only hope for a politics capable of dealing with today's challenges (e.g. Carter & Harris 2020). For posthumanists' critics, it represents a dangerous abandonment of the human, and with it the possibility for safeguarding allied political concepts, like universal human rights.

Within archaeology, the reception of Posthumanism has been mixed. The criticisms of modernity found in the work of Bruno Latour (e.g. 1993) have inspired symmetrical archaeology to offer one version of Posthumanism (Olsen & Witmore 2015; Olsen *et al.* 2012; Witmore 2007; 2014; and this volume). Others have come from those influenced by New Materialism (e.g. Fowler & Harris 2015), which emphasizes the active nature of matter, and often draws its inspiration from the assemblage theories of Jane Bennett (2010) and Manuel DeLanda (2002), themselves indebted to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2004). Karen Barad's (2007) agential realism has also been critical to work undertaken to rethink the ontological implications of archaeology, and has been provocatively combined with the work of anthropologists like Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (e.g. Marshall & Alberti 2014). This has raised the potential for a posthuman archaeology to offer a radical vision of the different worlds of the past,

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rather than simply the complex understandings past people had of a singular, and shared, world. Most recently, new emphasis has been placed on approaches drawing from Object-Oriented Ontology (e.g. Edgeworth 2016) and the feminist Posthumanism of Rosi Braidotti (e.g. Crellin 2020). These theories take very different positions on the world and are linked more by what they reject (the dualisms of Humanism) than what they share.

Posthumanist approaches have not only been critical, but also generative, developing multiple proposals on how archaeology can rethink (and dissolve) these dichotomies to conceptualize a world inhabited by a meshwork of humans and non-humans. As Alberti (2016) points out, many of these approaches have decided to use diverse Western philosophers to rethink reality, particularly those following Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2005), Object-Oriented Ontology (Harman 2018) or New Materialism (Deleuze & Guattari 2004). Others, such as the New Animisms, the related Ontological turn or approaches in between (see Cipolla 2018; Wilkinson 2017), have tried to find inspiration within non-Western thinkers (cf. also Marshall, this volume, with the Maori theory of whakapapa). The question of the degree of compatibility, overlap and intellectual genealogy between these multiple elements of Posthumanism, and particularly between Indigenous concepts and Western philosophically derived approaches, remains very much alive (e.g. Alberti 2016; Cipolla 2019; Crellin *et al.* 2021; Todd 2016; Wilkinson 2017).

As with any theoretical innovation in archaeology, alongside adoption and experimentation (e.g. Haughton & Kay 2019; Selsvold & Webb 2020) has come critique and resistance. Despite the variety of posthumanist positions available (see Crellin & Harris, this volume), these criticisms have notably been focused on three issues: the attribution of agency to non-human entities, the claim that posthumanist approaches are contributing to dehumanizing archaeological practice and interpretation, and that they are promoting an excessively critical but insufficiently analytical perspective.

In relation to the first point, the posthumanist critique of the privileging of human agency, and the potential consequent attribution of agency to every actant which might be said to have an effect upon the world, has been understood as turning agency into a vacuous concept (Gardner 2011; Lindstrøm 2015; Ribeiro 2016; 2019; see also Díaz de Liaño & Fernández-Götz, this volume; Gardner, this volume; Ribeiro, this volume; for an alternative take, see Crellin & Harris, this volume). The ethical implications of 'object agency' also represent a matter of concern for many archaeologists (e.g. Fernández-Götz *et al.* 2020; Van Dyke, this volume), where the ramifications of unsettling the importance of intentionality and responsibility in legal and moral attributions of agency are profound. Whether this is either the intention or the consequence of Posthumanism is, of course, a matter for debate.

Regarding the dehumanization of archaeology, denying the status of humans as ontologically privileged entities has raised numerous alarms (Lucas 2012). The calls for being non-anthropocentric or object-oriented disturb many scholars who strongly argue that the ultimate aim of archaeology is the study of humans (e.g. Díaz de Liaño & Fernández-Götz, this volume; McGuire, this volume; Van Dyke, this volume), or that it is impossible to be anything other than anthropocentric in our comprehension of the world. Some posthumanist approaches have discussed these issues. Thus, several new materialist authors have stated that they do not wish to ignore the importance of humans, but rather that they seek to acknowledge them in connection to other beings in the world. The point of disagreement is this: is our ontological attention a zero-sum game, where the elevation of one set of entities immediately means the downplaying of others, or is it possible to recognize that we need to treat all entities as *ontologically* equal without damaging those previously elevated? The answer for posthumanists is unambiguously the latter, while humanists defend that acknowledging the constitutive role of things and non-human entities on people and society does not justify denying the ontological centrality of humans.

Perhaps the most profound critique has emerged from Severin Fowles (2016), who has argued that the archaeological interest in objects has arisen precisely at the moment when, through postcolonialism, some of the traditional subjects of archaeological research, human beings in colonial contexts, have achieved sufficient political capital to speak back. Such criticism focuses primarily on the language employed by certain symmetrical archaeologists, with their desire to 'liberate' the 'subaltern' things from the tyranny of humanity (e.g. Olsen 2003). Whether this critique applies to other posthumanist approaches working with, for example, new materialist or feminist tools remains another bone of contention.

Finally, the analytical capacity of Posthumanism has been denounced for paying excessive attention to connectivity while simultaneously neglecting or underestimating other phenomena such as growth,



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labour and production (Ingold 2014). At the same time, the focus on things has been perceived by some scholars as a fetishism, or a return to some sort of 'antiquarianism' (Barrett 2016). According to some critics, non-humans, particularly inanimate things, have become an exotic issue. They are often idealized, producing a sense of awe in the researcher, while their role in the development and maintenance of social inequalities receives far less attention (Hodder 2014).

This special thematic issue of the *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* aims to serve as both an introduction to and a critical analysis of Posthumanism in archaeology. It reflects, continues and expands on a session that took place at the TAG conference 2018 in Chester, entitled 'Flat ontologies or a Disney approach? Debating non-human agency' and organized by Manuel Fernández-Götz, Andrew Gardner and Guillermo Díaz de Liaño. In addition, it incorporates discussions on 'The politics of things, agencies and ontologies' from a session at TAG 2019 in London, organised by Oliver Harris and Andrew Gardner.

The papers collected in this special issue include views that are pro- and anti- Posthumanism and various shades of grey in between. Following this introduction, Robert Preucel examines what he terms 'the predicament of ontology' and critically explores how the new intellectual tools developed in archaeology are being deployed with regard to a specific series of predicaments: modernity, alterity, interpretation and ethics. This is followed by an article by Rachel Crellin and Oliver Harris, who argue that many of the critiques of Posthumanism have emerged from the conflation of different approaches and from a series of generalizations. In particular, they suggest that claims that Posthumanism accords agency to objects is a misreading of part of the literature, and indeed that agency as a concept may be past its sell-by date. Developing a feminist posthumanist position, they advocate for deeper discussion of affect and difference to reconsider the place of the human in the light of Posthumanism.

Christopher Witmore elaborates on an object-oriented archaeology, focusing on the exploration of the very notion of 'things'. His approach is guided by symmetry, but goes beyond, exploring the irreducibility of things to their components or effects, and the notion of strangeness as a quality that things out of place display to attract archaeological attention. In Witmore's approach, things are not to be conceptualized as remains of the past, but as actual, contemporary entities that produce the past. In a clear contrast to this, Ruth Van Dyke argues that certain elements of posthumanist approaches, specifically symmetrical archaeology, flat ontology and non-anthropocentric approaches, compromise our ability for ethical critique. She asserts that archaeologists should reject the term posthumanist, even if elements of the turn to New Materialism are useful. She also warns against the unacknowledged appropriation of Indigenous concepts.

Van Dyke's chapter is followed by Randall McGuire's staunch defence of relational Marxism and a critique aimed primarily at symmetrical archaeology, which he argues has misrepresented Marxism. Emphasizing the plurality of Marxist approaches, McGuire argues that such perspectives are far better suited to understanding the relational nature of the past and the politics of the present. From an equally humanist position, Andrew Gardner seeks to put Posthumanism into the context of broader trends in the building of archaeological theory and argues that there are still many insights to be gleaned from practice-based approaches that have been unfairly dismissed within some of the posthumanist literature.

The two papers that follow this engage in the connections between Posthumanism and Indigenous worlds. First, Craig Cipolla argues that many of the critiques of Posthumanism are really aimed at symmetrical archaeology. By clearly delineating what is meant by contested terms like 'flat ontology' and broadening beyond symmetrical archaeology, Cipolla emphasizes the potential of collaborative Indigenous archaeology. Second, working with the Maori concept of *whakapapa*, Yvonne Marshall makes an argument in her paper for treating Indigenous concepts as a form of theory. Far from being limited to a kind of analogy for understanding past contexts, or even as a tool for rethinking archaeological objects, recognizing *whakapapa* as a form of theory allows Marshall to connect it to a host of contemporary issues, including the application of genetic research in archaeology. Following this, Christina Fredengren examines how posthumanist feminism can help us rethink approaches to bodies and gender. Fredengren argues that the critical role of feminism in developing many elements of posthumanist thought has been underplayed. Drawing on Barad in particular, she examines how we can reconceptualize our approaches through understanding archaeological work as emergent via particular apparatuses that produce specific phenomena. This allows Fredengren to reconfigure bodies as 'transcorporeal assemblages'.

Artur Ribeiro offers a more philosophical, rather than ethical, critique of Posthumanism. He argues



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that archaeologists should draw on a wider range of thinkers than those advocated for by posthumanists. In turn, drawing on John Searle's 'Chinese Room' thought experiment, Ribeiro argues that agency is a more useful concept when retained exclusively for human beings. Finally, Guillermo Díaz de Liaño and Manuel Fernández-Götz discuss some of the challenges posed by the posthumanist rejection of Humanism. This includes the exploration of alternative ontologies as well as issues related to object-agency and the notion of 'things-in-themselves'. Overall, they aim to return to the human as the central subject of archaeology within the framework of a 'New Humanism', although they recognize the importance of many elements of what Posthumanism has to offer.

Our aim in editing this special thematic issue is not, ultimately, to impose one perspective over the other, but rather to stimulate reflection and debate. One thing that we believe all of the authors contributing to this section agree on is that archaeological theory develops through collaboration and debate, rather than isolation, and we hope that this debate can be realized at future events, such as the TAG meetings in the UK and around the world. We leave it not only for the reader to decide, but to join the discussion. Let us learn from one another—even if, or particularly when, learning means disagreeing!

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