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Debate Article

Exploring human possibilities

Martin Furholt*

* Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History, University of Oslo, Norway (✉ martin.furholt@iakh.uio.no)

Joanna Brück's (2021) article is a timely intervention into the current debate about the use of ancient DNA (aDNA) data to reconstruct prehistoric kinship, based on the archaeological record. Her contribution is clearly a critique of the tendency towards a new empiricism, which is connected to novel molecular biological methods (e.g. Kristiansen 2014). Brück's critique addresses the use of specific kinship concepts in archaeogenetic work, and is a constructive contribution of a type that is crucial to the further development of archaeogenetics research. Indeed, I would argue that we need similar discussions in relation to other interpretative concepts frequently used in archaeogenetic work, such as the study of mobility, social organisation, gender-identities and human-animal relations.

aDNA studies provide us with a rich, new dataset, which allows us to examine the spatial and temporal patterns of biological relatedness, and to contextualise this with our knowledge of social relations and cultural expressions. In theory, this could offer new insights into past kinship systems, as well as human mobility and social organisation. Such novel insights, however, are as yet hard to find. Instead, as Brück points out, in the archaeology of later prehistoric Europe, kinship has largely been conflated with biological relatedness. We have likewise seen in other research topics—mobility and social organisation, for example—a problematic, default application of modern ideas that presuppose a coherence between social identity, biological relatedness and material culture, through the reproduction of nineteenth-century prejudices that were brought into archaeology in the form of 'cultures' a century ago. The reason for this, I argue, is a basic lack of engagement by archaeogeneticists and archaeologists with previous anthropological and archaeological work. Why not consider, and choose from, a wider spectrum of anthropologically described forms of social organisation?

As Brück makes abundantly clear, as with almost everything related to human action, kinship is a concept that is subject to considerable cultural variation. This is by no means secret knowledge: it is readily available in the anthropological literature, and it is disappointing how little this openly accessible knowledge actually informs our archaeological and archaeogenetic research. Brück (2021) shows that we can, with little effort, investigate a more varied spectrum of human possibilities when it comes to exploring kinship and its representation in the archaeological record. Instead of seeking to confirm the existence of a kinship system that mirrors our own hetero-normative, patriarchal and monogamous core family model, we must be able to test for the existence of other configurations of social and biological proximity. Here, Brück usefully points to several archaeological cases, in which such alternative concepts of kinship better match the data than our default assumption of happy, suburban family lives projected back into the Bronze Age.

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I agree with those who are enthusiastic about the new possibilities of aDNA and molecular biological methods more broadly, and consider a new emphasis on data-driven research to be positive. It is, however, crucial to integrate this approach with the type of critique of our conceptual framework that Brück presents.

While most archaeologists (I assume) have the goal of generating new knowledge about the past, it is quite shocking how often we unconsciously project our own, historically shaped prejudices into the past about how things are or ought to have been. It is unsurprising, therefore, that this results in narratives more or less reproducing those very same sensibilities. Usually, as Brück points out, it is the notion of nature—of 'biological fact'—that is being used as a justification for essentialising our own assumptions, as we fail to acknowledge the historical situatedness of this concept of nature itself. The result is the kind of teleological, Euro-centric grand narratives that govern the textbook view of long-term human history, and a number of popular bestsellers (e.g. Diamond 1998; Harari 2015). This projection of modern perspectives into the past has far-reaching consequences, seriously undermining our sense of history. It weakens our social creativity, our understanding of our own possibilities and, not least, our ability to overcome problems caused by our current social and economic arrangements. If archaeologists produce narratives of the past that can be read as 'there never was an alternative', then the audience will tend to believe that it is also unlikely that there can be alternative ways of organising ourselves today. This serves to stifle a sense of optimism about engaging oneself with a more positive vision of how things could be. What most people outside of the discipline do not know, however, is that archaeologists are terrible at actively looking for alternatives. With regard to the justification of archaeology as a scientific subject, if we assume that everything in the past was as it is now, why, then, must we conduct empirical research at all? In order for archaeological data to be able to have any effect on our reconstruction of the past, we must at least allow for variants of human behaviour or conduct, from which we can then choose.

Finally, while largely agreeing with Brück's (2021) critique, I would also emphasise the importance of integrating these discussions into archaeogenetic discourse and large-scale analyses. Pointing out the possible variability of concepts of kinship, and deconstructing an uncritical essentialisation of our own beliefs will achieve little if not followed up with a more systematic investigation of kinship relations in the archaeological record. As Robb and Harris (2018) demonstrate in the case of gender identities, there might be larger patterns discernible in our evidence, including changes of kinship systems and kinship concepts, both regionally and through time. This is something that archaeogenetic data and models can reveal, but only if we examine the data with a greater openness to a wider spectrum of human possibilities.

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