Cambridge Archaeological Journal (2026), **36**, 251–253
doi:10.1017/S095977432610047X

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Research Article

Special Issue: *Kinship Trouble: Traversing Interdisciplinary Boundaries between Archaeology, Archaeogenetics and Socio-cultural Anthropology*

Commentary: Leaning In to Kinship Trouble

Emma Kowal
Deakin University, 221 Burwood Hwy, Melbourne, Victoria 3125, Australia

Abstract

In this commentary, I approach 'kinship trouble' as a cultural and medical anthropologist with two decades of ethnographic and collaborative engagement with genetics, and as someone deeply committed to and interested in interdisciplinary collaboration. From this perspective, the collection's significance is its focus on the emergent encounter between two very different fields—new kinship studies and palaeogenetics—both of which intersect with archaeology. Combining the intellectual explosion of new kinship studies with the data explosion of palaeogenetics is an enticing premise. What can happen, kinship trouble asks us, if the creativity that characterizes the new kinship studies could be married with the rich new layers of genomic information that have sedimented archaeological scholarship? And what could be lost if this opportunity is squandered? The contributions to this collection read archaeological and palaeogenetic evidence against the grain to reveal active kin-making practices that often disrupt presentist, ethnocentric and heterosexist assumptions. These vibrant interpretations of relatedness provide many 'carrots' to entice anthropologists, archaeologists and palaeogeneticists to become 'oddkin' and to 'lean in' to kinship trouble.

(Received 26 March 2025; revised 26 March 2025; accepted 31 July 2025)

This collection is the timely product of an interdisciplinary encounter between three fields that are depicted succinctly in Figure 2 of Cveček, Raghavan and Bickle's introduction: sociocultural anthropology, archaeology and genetics. In this commentary, I approach these essays as an outsider to archaeology but with deep familiarity with the other two-thirds of Cveček, Raghavan and Bickle's Venn diagram. I am a socio-cultural and medical anthropologist, although my training in the 1990s and early 2000s was heavily skewed away from the 'old' kinship and towards the 'new' (Franklin 2013; Strathern 1992). I have studied genetics from a social science perspective for 20 years, particularly the implications of genomic research for Indigenous populations in Australia (Kowal 2023). I am also someone deeply committed to and interested in collaboration across disciplines, founding a network at my university to facilitate collaboration between the sciences and the humanities and social sciences. From my perspective, the significance of this collection is that it captures the emergent encounter between two vibrant and expanding but very different fields—new kinship studies and palaeogenomics—both of which intersect with archaeology. This intersection has not always been cordial. All the overlapping parts of the diagram have been the site of defensiveness and disdain at perceived encroachment by the other discipline/s—one aspect of the 'trouble' that inspired Cveček, Raghavan and Bickle's title of this collection. But if these negative feelings are not allowed to be an obstacle to interdisciplinary engagement, the potential for innovative archaeological knowledge about human pasts, presents and futures is immense.

As Cveček, Raghavan, and Bickle's introduction explains, the last few decades of anthropological scholarship under the banner of 'new kinship studies' have exploded ideas of family and relatedness. Inspired by anthropology's foundational obsession with the 'old' kinship (Whiteley, this issue), and infused with the myriad implications of the technological revolution in reproduction (Bamford, this issue), the 'new' kinship builds on feminist, queer and postcolonial approaches to shatter received understandings of familial relations (Goldfarb & Bamford 2025). The new kinship sees kinship as a social practice, kinning as a verb, and kin-work as an active process that can continue after death (Bamford & Leach 2009; Frieman and Schuster, this issue).

Concurrently with the new kinship studies, advances in genomics began to intersect with archaeology through the

Corresponding author: Emma Kowal; Email: emma.kowal@deakin.edu.au
Cite this article: Kowal, E. 2026. Commentary: Leaning In to Kinship Trouble, in Special Issue: *Kinship Trouble: Traversing Interdisciplinary Boundaries between Archaeology, Archaeogenetics and Socio-cultural Anthropology*, eds S. Cveček, M. Raghavan & P. Bickle. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 36, 251–253. https://doi.org/10.1017/S095977432610047X

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S095977432610047X Published online by Cambridge University Press

ability to extract DNA samples from ancient biological materials (Strand & Källén 2024). In the last 15 years, sequencing of ancient genomes has increasingly been possible and genome-wide information from over 10,000 individuals is now available (Callaway 2023). Combining the intellectual explosion of new kinship studies with the data explosion of palaeogenomics is the enticing premise of this special issue. What can happen, it asks us, if the creativity and capaciousness that characterizes the new kinship studies could be married with the rich new layers of genomic information that have sedimented archaeological scholarship? And what could be lost if this opportunity is squandered?

Many contributions to this special issue read archaeological and palaeogenetic literatures against the grain to reveal active kin-making practices that disrupt presentist, ethnocentric and heterosexist assumptions of the normative nuclear family. Reading the essays together, the array of possibilities is dazzling. Mittnik and Bentley (this issue) argue for a complex relationship between matrilineal and patrilineal kinship systems in ancient Europe. Herrero-Corral (this issue) and Scaffidi (this issue) both discuss the use of isotopic methods to compare the diet of people found together in a household or burial context. This amounts to what we might think of as 'companionship'—breaking bread together. In a posthuman approach to relatedness, kinship is made not through being made of the same substance, but consuming the same substance: consumption rather than constitution (Carsten 1997). Such deep engagement across disciplines reveals multiple and creative points of engagement, and some important correctives.

Unsurprisingly, one striking fault-line produced in this collision of anthropological, archaeological and palaeogenomic knowledge concerns the significance of biological relatedness. Straightforward assumptions by some genome scientists and even archaeologists that biological relations translate to kin relations are easy pickings for critical scholars who can point to any number of non-biological possibilities. However, claims that biological relationships have no bearing on social relationships are equally vulnerable to criticism from scientists and non-academics.

Contributions to this collection span a wide range in their position on the relative importance of biological and non-biological information about relatedness. As you might expect for a group of authors who are writing against the perceived dominance of genetics—an idea neatly encapsulated as 'molecular chauvinism' (Horsburgh 2024)—all contributors 'lean social'. This inclination is perhaps best illustrated in Cveček *et al.*'s quotation from Read (2018) that kinship 'has to do with cultural systems that include biological facts, not biological systems that include cultural facts'. This precaution holds for most of the contributions, but Moots *et al.* (this issue) take the strongest stance. Drawing from a range of case studies, they present kinship as a social construct with virtually no place for biological relatedness: kin are those whom the descendent community perceive are kin, and biology can only get in the way of these interpretations. When biological relationships are assumed to be kin relationships, devastating consequences can ensue: children are torn from their families, and Indigenous and descendent communities denied rights to access and bury their Ancestors and kin.

But this does not mean that biology is unimportant. To begin with, and extending a point made by Amorin and Raff (this issue), one of the ironies of the field is that genomic information is required to demonstrate queer kinship. Two men intimately buried together (Walsh *et al.* 2022, cited in Frieman & Schuster, this issue) are discovered to have been non-local and each from different places. Four Pompeii victims who were assumed to be a nuclear heterosexual family turn out to be two men and two children who are not biologically related to each other (Pilli *et al.* 2024, discussed in Amorim & Raff, this issue). Several high-status women of the Lech Valley appear to be childless, suggesting their role in social reproduction did not include the production of biological descendants (Mittnik & Bentley, this issue). In each of these cases, the genomic information challenges contemporary assumptions that, in all likelihood, would otherwise have remained unchallenged.

These examples point to how both the 'old' and 'new' kinship studies can enter into a symbiotic relationship with an archaeogenetics-powered archaeology, supercharging kinship studies and our understanding of past societies. Frieman and Schuster's contribution (this volume) powerfully captures the challenge that archaeology, socio-cultural anthropology and genetics can collectively address. They describe the task of deciphering kinship from graves as inferring the plot of *Hamlet* from the empty stage at the end of the play: 'all the players are still, the story is done, just the props and the sets are left to hint at what transpired' (Frieman and Schuster, this issue). This is a delicious challenge—archaeology plus archaeogenetics combining into an extreme form of socio-cultural anthropology. Rather than raise the flag of surrender in the face of tremendous difficulty, the contributors to this collection are 'leaning in' to the trouble.

Cveček and Gingrich (this issue) raise the question of ethics, and whether a solely scientific approach to kinship is reliable and hence ethical, given the possibility of misinterpretation if socio-cultural expertise is left out. This point is central to the collection as a whole. Ancient DNA science has received criticism for inappropriate access and use of Indigenous peoples' Ancestors and producing genomic knowledge that offers no benefit to Indigenous people but can potentially produce harm (Kowal *et al.* 2023; Tsosie *et al.* 2020; 2021a,b,c). Engaging expertise across disciplines is one way to address this, along with privileging the voices and expertise of descendent communities.

The audacious wager of this collection is that bringing the new kinship studies, archaeology and palaeogenetics into a relationship with each other as 'oddkin' (Haraway 2016) can produce innovative understandings of relatedness (Cveček, Raghavan & Bickle, this issue). This will inevitably be a painful process. New kinship studies itself warns us that 'kinship and family are often hard, alienating, and even traumatic' (Frieman & Schuster, this issue). How can we overcome the negative feelings that might be generated to realize the fruits of this interdisciplinary relationship?

https://doi.org/10.1017/S095977432610047X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Contributors to this collection offer two possible avenues: let us call them the carrot and the stick. The 'stick' refers to regulation or field-specific norms that ensure quality and prevent exploitative research practices. Some would see this as the purview of ethics review, peer review and the institutions of scientific publication. Ethics review boards should ensure that research plans are sound and that projects are conducted ethically. Journal editors should seek peer reviews from the right range of experts, including Indigenous and descendent communities, and editors should ensure these comments are adequately incorporated. Of course, this is an imperfect process, hampered by everything from the temptation for journals to publish sensational and easy-to-understand narratives that may oversimplify research findings, to a lack of understanding of appropriate protocols for engaging Indigenous communities and protecting Indigenous cultural and intellectual property.

All these mechanisms of research ethics and research integrity are tremendously important and are central to university policy and legal requirements in many countries. These essays, however, highlight that the 'carrot' of nuanced interpretation can be a strong motivation for engaged transdisciplinary scholarship. Again and again, it shows that archaeological analysis that incorporates the latest palaeogenetic methods and the best socio-cultural expertise reveals new ways that humans organize and relate to each other. This collection is full of carrots—in fact, a whole panoply of delicious and nutritious vegetables—that will spark interdisciplinary collaborations for years to come. Archaeologists, anthropologists and palaeogeneticists who might have previously recoiled from the challenge will be inspired to 'lean in' to kinship trouble.

References

Bamford, S. & J. Leach (eds), 2009. *Kinship and Beyond: The genealogical model eeconsidered*. London: Berghahn.

Callaway, E., 2023. 'Truly gobsmacked': ancient-human genome count surpasses 10,000. *Nature* 617, 20.

Carsten, J. 1997. *The Heat of the Hearth: The process of kinship in a Malay fishing community*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Franklin, S., 2013. *Biological Relatives: IVF, stem cells and the future of kinship*. Durham (NC): Duke University Press.

Goldfarb, K. & S. Bamford (eds), 2025. *Difficult Attachments: Anxieties of kinship and care*. New Brunswick (NJ): Rutgers University Press.

Haraway, D., 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham (NC): Duke University Press.

Horsburgh, K.A., 2024. Concluding commentary, in *Critical Perspectives on Ancient DNA*, eds D. Strand, A. Källén & C. Mulcare. Boston (MA): MIT Press, 167–75.

Kowal, E., 2023. *Haunting Biology: Science and Indigeneity in Australia*. Durham (NC): Duke University Press.

Kowal, E., L.S. Weyrich, J.M., Arguelles, *et al.*, 2023. Community partnerships are fundamental to ethical ancient DNA research. *HGG Advances* 4(2), 100161.

Pilli, E., S. Vai, V.C. Moses, *et al.*, 2024. Ancient DNA challenges prevailing interpretations of the Pompeii plaster casts. *Current Biology: CB* 34(22), 5307–18.e7.

Read, D., 2018. Kinship systems, in *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. H. Callan. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1–16.

Strand, D. & A. Källén, 2024. Critical perspectives on ancient DNA: an introduction, in *Critical Perspectives on Ancient DNA*, eds D. Strand, A. Källén & C. Mulcare. Boston (MA): MIT Press.

Strathern, M., 1992. *Reproducing the Future: Essays on anthropology, kinship and the new reproductive technologies*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Tsosie, K.S., A.C. Bader, K. Fox, D.A. Bolnick, N.A. Garrison & R.W.A. Smith, 2021a. Ancient-DNA researchers write their own rules. *Nature* 600, 37.

Tsosie, K.S., R.L. Begay, K. Fox & N.A. Garrison, 2020. Generations of genomes: advances in paleogenomics technology and engagement for Indigenous people of the Americas. *Current Opinion in Genetics & Development* 62, 91–6.

Tsosie, K.S., K. Fox & J.M. Yracheta, 2021b. Genomics data: the broken promise is to Indigenous people. *Nature* 591, 529.

Tsosie, K.S., J.M. Yracheta, J. Kolopenuk & R.W.A. Smith, 2021c. Indigenous data sovereignties and data sharing in biological anthropology. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 174, 183–6.

Walsh, M.J., S. Reiter, C.J. Frieman, F. Kaul & K.M. Frei, 2022. In the company of men: alternative masculine gender identities in the Nordic Bronze Age. Re-interpreting a same-sex double-grave from Karlstrup, Denmark, in *Life and Afterlife in the Nordic Bronze Age. Proceedings of the 15th Nordic Bronze Age Symposium Held in Lund, Sweden, June 11–15, 2019*, eds A. Tornberg, A. Svensson & J. Apel. Lund: Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Lund University, 159–82.

Emma Kowal is Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Co-Convenes the Science and Society Network at Deakin University, Australia. She is a cultural and medical anthropologist and Past President of the Society for Social Studies of Science(4S). Her latest book is *Haunting Biology: Science and indigeneity in Australia* (Duke University Press, 2023).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S095977432610047X Published online by Cambridge University Press