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Debate Article

Making posthumanist kin in the past

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"*Kin* is a wild category that all sorts of people do their best to domesticate" (Haraway 2016: 2)

As Brück (2021) eloquently highlights, many archaeologists are dissatisfied with the narratives that are emerging from ancient DNA (aDNA) research. Oliver Harris and I have argued that one of the central problems with aDNA research is its theoretical foundation (Crellin & Harris 2020). We suggested that a nature-culture binary shapes the narratives that emerge from this work and has real political consequences. In this binary, nature has been aligned with scientific fact and made primary, whereas culture has been presented as secondary and associated with a 'froth' of human variability. Brück's (2021) article is a timely addition to the debate, as studies of kinship that draw on aDNA research are increasing (e.g. Knipper *et al.* 2017; Mittnik *et al.* 2019; Sjögren *et al.* 2020), and they are, as she shows, caught in the same binary trap. Genetic relatedness is not a necessary measure of kinship, and as Brück's cross-cultural comparisons demonstrate, there are many varied ways to make kin.

Brück and I both want a wider and more critical discussion of kinship in archaeology. I approach this work through a theoretical lens by bringing posthumanism into conversation with kinship. Posthumanist thinking has three key aspects: it is post-anthropocentric, it is post-humanist and it is post-dualist (Ferrando 2019; posthumanism is the umbrella term for the theoretical approach; post-humanist is the specific term for the part of posthumanist thinking that reacts against the humanist figure of Man). There is much to critique about normative descriptions of kinship relations from a posthumanist perspective. Traditional models of kinship are anthropocentric, focusing on humans alone; they uphold a humanist image of the family as heterosexual and led by a man; and they are predicated on dualisms (i.e. man-woman, nature-culture, related-unrelated).

In their posthumanist volume on critical approaches to kinship, Riggs and Peel (2016) argue that kinship practices are often naturalised. They consider the children's book *King & king*, in which two princes fall in love, and the sequel *King & king & family*, in which the married princes go on honeymoon and adopt a child (De Haan & Nijland 2002, 2004). The original book was controversial in the USA, sparking moral panic and political debate; the follow-up was not. Riggs and Peel (2016) argue that this is not because people were happier to accept two gay men adopting a child, but because the story is one of naturalisation, where difference is made familiar as the princes adopt a child to form a family unit. We make kin in many and varied ways, but this process is often naturalised through comparisons to a heteronormative standard narrative about kinship. Riggs and Peel (2016: 4) argue that the kind of critical kinship studies they undertake—rooted in posthumanism—aim to "examine practices of naturalization, to think of kinship as a technology rather than as a taken

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for granted". The volume highlights the diversity of kinship relations that exist, including those with non-humans, and the processes by which we naturalise these. To give an example, consider how we might share our lives and homes with pets, who we care for and love, who bring us comfort and support, and who we might even refer to using phrases such as 'cat children'. These are non-humans with whom we are not related and have very different DNA sequences, but they are kin nonetheless (see Haraway 2008).

One of Brück's critical points focuses on the role of colonialism in naturalising heteronormative monogamy in the Americas (see TallBear 2018). The colonial process imposed particular kinds of kinship relations on Indigenous communities particularly as a product of the Dawes Act (1887) and allotment process, which divided communally held Indigenous land into individual plots owned by nuclear families, effectively forcing Indigenous communities into the coloniser's kinship structure. Western models of kinship are deeply entangled with capitalism: it matters who our parents are because of the effect of that relationship on inheritance and class. For many Indigenous groups, non-humans—particularly landscapes and places—are central parts of their communities (see, for example, Watts 2013; TallBear 2017, 2019). Kinship need not be limited to humans. My point here is not to provide an analogy, but to highlight how the forms of kinship we see today are narrower and more homogeneous because of colonialism and capitalism. Even when we consider Brück's diverse, cross-cultural examples, we must remember that we are looking at kinship relations that have been 'translated' into Western terms—naturalised to make them more relatable. Posthumanist analysis leads us to this same point: it calls on us to think more creatively about kinship, beyond simple relatedness and beyond the human.

Kinship takes work; we create it through our relations and actions. There are many different ways to 'make' kin, and making kin is not limited to either the humans with whom we are biologically related or humans more broadly. aDNA evidence, of course, provides one route by which we could critically research kinship, although concentrating on burial evidence is not the only way. If kinship is a process, then we might think about the decisions that we make about who we live with and how we choose to live with them as key in the process of making kin. The Western tradition of living in discrete houses as family units serves to materialise and normalise a particular set of family relationships. Rather than assuming that ancient houses were home to heterosexual family units, we should think more creatively about the different types of people who might have lived together at different stages of their lives. Thinking about houses gets us away from considering kinship through the lens of biological relatedness. We can think about the house as one technology (among many) for making kin (see, for example, Thomas 2013; Richards & Jones 2016).

As my opening quote from Haraway argues, kinship is often something wild that we domesticate. Kinship is neither wholly natural nor wholly cultural. Thinking in terms of either social construction or biological relatedness in isolation is unhelpful. Rather, we need to create heterogeneous assemblages of data to explore kinship critically. aDNA can, of course, be part of this, but it should be one component of many. The archaeological record is undoubtedly a rich place in which to explore the many, varied and ever-changing forms of kinship. Keeping the variety and potential difference of the past in mind is key.

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