

The View from the Cheap Seats

An Archaeologist Grappling with Multispecies Entanglements

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Moving beyond entanglement as a generic cue for human-animal relationships requires intellectual enquiry and an engagement with various approaches and different strands of evidence. Christina Fredengren has produced a stimulating text that enfolds these factors. It is rich in theoretical discussions and brings out important nuances in approaches to relationships between humans and more-than-humans, and she explores ways of pushing the boundaries for how close we can get to past multispecies lifeways – and deathways. Throughout the text she raises a number of interesting questions that can help us push our horizons further. I will address some of these.

Let me, however, start with one question that is missing from the text (but see Boyd 2017), namely: how far can we go in our understanding of past human-animal relationships, whether they be knots, entanglements or species-specific historically situated becomings? Are there limits? Can we push beyond understanding human and more-than-human knots and interweavings, beyond entanglement, beyond a ‘rich description of the complex relationality of situated world makings’ (Fredengren 2021:17)? The inherent problem is that as archaeologists, we are very often limited to the cheap seats. By this I mean the seats at the very back of the theatre, often behind obstructions, so that we have to crane our necks in order to see what goes on at the metaphorical stage, where past lifeways and deathways are play-

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ing out. So how does this impinge upon how theory meets archaeological datasets and their contexts?

Fredengren leans heavily on Karen Barad's work on physics and post-humanism, which does not accept the distinction between 'human' and 'nonhuman' as a given. The lesson from Barad (2007) is that on the inside, everything is inextricably bound to everything; at a molecular level there is always intra-action, and no body *becomes* in isolation. This is the true nature of being. Human perception, however, mostly deals with the outside of things, of surfaces, and bounded bodies, entities and objects, and consequently the trajectories of manifesting culture resonate as cultural appropriations of those bodies that on the inside is always and forever becoming-with, but on the outside are perceived according to a culturally constructed ontological rationale. As archaeologists we try to untangle how that ontological rationale has come into place and what the shapes and forms of the surfaces meant to the people who performed their lives according to them.

Fredengren's project is tied up with how we can, as archaeologists, address the inside processes as well as the outside form – and go beyond just knowing that the true nature of being is entangled, towards how these entanglements are created in certain knots, clusters and absences of the where and how. Anthropology and other social sciences that study living individuals can study how these inside intra-actions manifest as particular surfaces through agency and choice (intentional or not), how the onflow of life (e.g. Thrift 2008) is shaped by the rich interaction between innovation, tradition, beliefs, and so forth. They can also study, to a certain extent (taking into account the bias of researchers being embedded in the same ontological matrix) how these things happen as they happen. The enviable position of front row seats! Not so with archaeology. The archaeologist finding herself at the cheapest back row seats, with her view obstructed by a column, or by a person sitting in front with a large hairdo, and certainly by chatty and giggly popcorn-tossing teenagers, struggles to see such a rich interaction. The action on stage is far away and can only be glimpsed through murky filters of time that have added layers and layers of taphonomical processes. This is the hand we are dealt. How can we deal with it in a constructive way?

There are advantages to the cheap seats: speculation. This is a word that appears in Fredengren's abstract, where she mentions the testing of speculative methods. One avenue proposed by Fredengren is to 'trace several underlying processes of how the world came into being in situated ways and what effects this might have had' as a response to her question '*cui bono?*', who benefits (Fredengren 2021:17). This is one of the main questions raised in the text and is central to the closing summary. Fredengren proposes pushing beyond rich descriptions into identifying power structures and pinpointing winners and losers: who gets to live and who must die. She explores

and speculates about this through the lens of her *Water of the Times* project and the concept of killability, and brings out important reflections on who is chosen for death and when death happens – is lack of care the first stage of killing? She teases us with referring to her own works in press and a manuscript that will explore this data and these questions further – this is something to look forward to!

There is an undercurrent of intersectionality to this way of framing research questions, thinking through power relations as intersections of several strands of social status that manifest in different ways but give each other extra momentum and extra weight, so that the total sum is bigger than the parts. I agree that questions of care and neglect have great potential for multispecies archaeology, and the question raised by Fredengren, ‘To what extent can archaeology provide examples of multispecies care – that account for both exploitative and non-exploitative practices’ (Fredengren 2021:29) goes beyond questions of power into the realm of understanding processes that fundamentally shifted status quos in history – pivotal moments in time – like domestication. I have previously suggested that domestication as a historical process should be diffracted through the lens of ethics of care, and that the domestication of animals uniquely shifted past societies onto a novel track, into a position of care, of providing for and protecting animals (Armstrong Oma 2018a). By doing what Fredengren suggests, tracing several underlying processes, different strands of the archaeological record can together weave complex stories. Combining the traces embedded in human and animal bodies – both the state of the remains and molecular traces, with space-making where humans and animals both hold and co-define space, with depositional contexts, and so forth, speculative methods can take us far by prodding into central tenets and processes of world-making.

Other important issues raised by Fredengren concern how archaeologists should – and could – get out of the ivory tower and expand our methodological approach, our scope of dissemination and our role in policymaking. She suggests cooperation with scientists and artists, as well as more direct engagement with current political societal challenges. Archaeologists certainly have a long tradition of working with scientists, and recently the focus on aDNA and other bioarchaeological studies have given new and unique insights into past lifeways, and continue to hold enormous promise – as long as the results are carefully considered from a strong theoretical standpoint. Collaborations with artists are currently underexplored and also hold great promise, as they are, in my experience, often able to comment upon, conceptualise and visualise our academic work in ways that are original and go beyond our own scope. This is excellently demonstrated by Fredengren in her reference to her own collaboration with artist Signe

Johannessen and the resulting work *Posthumous Dialogue*. The hybrid being produced by the artist simultaneously evokes Donna Haraway's (1991) cyborgs and composite bodies from Bronze Age art (e.g. Ahlqvist & Vandkilde 2018), and Migration period Animal Style 1 art (e.g. Kristoffersen 1995, 2010), as well as from Iron Age cremations where animal bones and human bones are intermingled (e.g. Mansrud 2006).

My own experience of collaborating with artist Anne Helen Robberstad (2013) in three of her projects (*Sårbar* – video installation at Hå Gamle Prestegard in 2013, *Om sauene* – exhibition with various media at Kinokino in 2018 (Robberstad 2018), *Den svarte ulla*, exhibition at Soft gallery in 2022) has been instrumental in challenging some of my own understandings and not least expanded my horizons. For example, in the video installation *Sårbar* (Vulnerable), Robberstad explored the different pressures put on farmers today, in which their own financial situation and the low price they get for their produce intersect with conflicting issues like demands on animal welfare systems that require new, costly investments and the triple-whammy conflict between preserving habitats for birds and other wildlife versus developing farmland versus developing housing. Farmers are also subjected to intense scrutiny by both public bureaucracy and consumers. There is growing concern about food webs, and consumers want to know as much as possible about the food on their plates. Financially pressured farmers hail in despair to their historical forebears – the free farmers – and want to be left alone and manage their farm in peace. But politically they are increasingly pushed into new public management regimes and their experience is that they spend their time filling out forms rather than providing good animal welfare. This brought home to me how fundamentally different the life of a farmer is today – alone on the farm, burdened by heavy bureaucracy, struggling to get ends to meet, and the historical farm, a working cooperation between all members of the household, humans and animals both (e.g. Armstrong Oma 2018b), though perhaps all on the threshold of starvation. Very different entanglements, knots and absences! By actively engaging with artists and their unique vision, we can more deeply understand, and more richly contextualise our own studies of both past societies and of time-depth as examined by diachronous studies, such as Fredengren's *Water of the times*.

The last of Fredengren's wishes for the future is that we engage in what Haraway (2008:3) calls *autre-mondialisation*: making visible other, less harmful ways of living than the current dire straits we find ourselves in, considering the code red alert that the IPCC (nd) has given regarding climate change, loss of species, diversity and loss of habitats. This is a radical step, moving away from being a discipline whose main task is providing thick descriptions, to actively engaging with hammering out new visions

for the future both by public dissemination, and even activism and policy-making. This step requires careful navigation lest we relinquish our academic neutrality, and thus remove credence for our research. At the same time, legwork is key: it is the thick descriptions that show the way to different world-makings, and thus have the potential to form the basis for imagining other kinds of living-with and dying-with. A word of warning, however, is that this navigation requires clear speech and succinct language, free of jargon only understood by an academic in-group. Like in other disciplines, archaeologists tend to write to and for each other. Even though Donna Haraway is hailed by feminists and Human-Animal Studies scholars, she is also criticised for using a jargon-heavy language with much semantic acrobatics, which leaves many readers with a feeling of alienation. Fredengren's text hovers near the same pitfall. The intention of Fredengren's text is, however, not to reach a general public, but some of her phrasings are unfamiliar and obscure and might also leave many archaeologists somewhat puzzled.

To return to the cheap seats – one of the ways to upgrade the seats and get closer to the action is by collaboration, by exploring human-animal relationships together, and together with artists, scientists and across the wide spectrum of archaeology.

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