Christopher Watts (ed.),
*Relational Archaeologies. Humans, Animals, Things.*

This volume explores current archaeological theorising on how people in the past structured the world they experienced around them, expressed through what are called relational ontologies or cosmologies. Relational approaches to studying past societies have drawn from anthropology and ethnography, as well as philosophy, resulting in theoretically innovative and compelling ways of investigating past ontological systems. Editor Christopher Watts has assembled an engaging variety of responses to how archaeologists can interpret not just the material record, but also the ‘entanglements’ between humans, objects and the natural world that underpin the structuring of past communities.

While post-Enlightenment western thought prioritises binary categorisations that separate humans from non-humans (plants, animals, objects), the contributors to *Relational Archaeologies* focus instead on the idea that many past societies understood themselves as existing within a dynamic and fluid network (or ‘meshwork’), one where connections between humans and non-humans were actively engaged, and where a non-human entity could have ‘personhood’. As Watts notes in his extensive introductory chapter (Chapter 1), these connections—or the relationships between things—focus analysis on how entities are considered ‘processes rather than existents’ (1). Relational approaches incorporate the concepts of personhood, identity-construction, animist cosmologies, engagement with landscape, object agency and Indigenous ownership of culture. While most often applied to hunting or foraging cultures (both prehistoric and contemporary Indigenous), relational perspectives can enable compelling reinterpretations of other times and other cultures, as evidenced in the chapters presented here.

The strength of relational approaches is apparent in the diverse range of cultures,
times and locations to which they are here applied. The eleven case study-based chapters engage with relational ontologies and cosmologies apparent in Indigenous circumpolar (Inuit), Indigenous Australian (Torres Strait Islander), North American pueblo (Southwest Chaco and Hohokam regions), Peruvian, Neolithic Turkish, Neolithic and Bronze Age British, Bronze Age Aegean, Neolithic Central European, and seventeenth-century Swedish cultures. As implied in the sub-headings of Watts’s introduction—‘Humans’, ‘Animals’ and ‘Things’—the case studies focus on how human and non-human entities (generally thought of as separate in the post-Enlightenment west) actively engage both with each other and with their environments.

Archaeology has long benefited from its intersections with the methodologies of anthropology and ethnography. The authors in this volume engage critically with the thinkers who have done most to formulate relational approaches: Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism, Descola’s divisions of animism, totemism, analogism and naturalism, and especially the subtle and thought-provoking work of Ingold. Most authors acknowledge the (sometimes varying) success with which relational approaches have destabilised the entrenched ideology of post-Enlightenment western thought that categorises the world into opposing pairs of elements, while simultaneously resisting the meaninglessness of ultimate ontological equivalence between human and non-human ‘beings’. As Ingold suggests in his concluding essay, the world of objects and their agency is predicated on human subjectivity. Tellingly, Ingold critiques the notion of agency, preferring the concept of ‘animate life’ (248) in a world dense with meshwork, where meaning is constructed in the context of a dynamic atmosphere (referring to the actual atmosphere that we breathe), a labyrinth of eternal ‘becoming’.

Relational Archaeologies case study chapters begin with Weismantel’s (Chapter 2) examination of the imposing stone sculptures of Peru’s Chavín de Huantar. She explores how these massive works may have been experienced bodily by visitors to the site, through senses other than sight. The essence and agency of the stone itself is important to Weismantel’s argument, as it is in Boric’s (Chapter 3) exploration of Göbekli Tepe’s stone carvings, replete with dangerous and predatory animals. Boric argues these are manifestations of an animist interior world, accessed by shamans, where humans and animals meet.
The liminal place that exists between death and life is often a focus of relational ontologies, and many case studies in this volume reflect this. Losey et al. (Chapter 4) examine human burials containing bear remains at Shamanka II (Lake Baikal), using ethnographic data to illustrate the depth of human-bear relationships, and the special place accorded to bears in this foraging society. McNiven (Chapter 5) specifically highlights the mediating role of material culture in relations between human and non-human beings in his discussion of Torres Strait Islander dugong hunters, and the relationship between the living and the dead, both hunter and hunted. The importance of ancestors to hunting practices is evident in the use of human remains in the Torres Strait hunting ‘kit’.

Depositional practices, and the object assemblages that result from them, are the focus of two chapters. Zedeño (Chapter 6) focuses on curated bundles of objects in Blackfoot Plains culture in an attempt to integrate theoretical relational approaches with practical fieldwork methods. Similar to the bears and dugongs of earlier chapters, here it is Blackfoot bison hunting and the associated rituals that reveal how relational ontologies are premised upon the active engagements between human and non-humans. Murray and Mills (Chapter 7) use the concept of an ‘identity community’ (136) to examine the social relationships formed when specific artefacts are ‘cached’ (deposited) in the traditions of the pre-hispanic North American Southwest. The objects in these structured deposits are engaged in social relations with people, spaces, and also with other objects, building community identity through similarity and difference.

Moving to Europe, Hofmann (Chapter 8) explores the *Linearbandkeramik* culture of central Europe and what she sees as unstable beings (bodies, pottery, houses) that are required to be constantly maintained in a system imbued with transformation and fluidity, where categories of beings seem not to have been fixed. Harris (Chapter 9) examines Neolithic and Bronze Age British communities, and the changes that occur across space and time, using several archaeological case studies to explore how these ontologies are constructed and changed, with De Landa’s assemblage theory as a theoretical backdrop.

Non hunting-foraging societies are examined in two chapters: Shapland’s (Chap-
ter 10) on the Bronze Age Aegean and Herva and Nordin’s (Chapter 11) excursus on seventeenth-century Sweden. These chapters offer some of the most interesting delineations of relational perspectives in their choice of larger scale societies. Such societies are not normally associated with the ‘magical’ thinking implicit in relational cosmologies, which are normally associated with forms of animism and sympathetic magic, deep environmental awareness and sensitivity. Shapland is concerned with a perhaps more cynical manipulation of objects in the connections made by new elite groups on Late Bronze Age Crete, who differentiated themselves through using and distributing new materials and technologies. Herva and Nordin take us far from hunting societies to early modern Sweden, where interest in both Sweden’s own Gothic past, and classical (Greek) architecture paradoxically prompted both magical and rational ways of thinking about the world.

Whitridge’s (Chapter 12) essay follows the pathways of animals in Labrador (northern Canada) as they are walked upon by humans: both animal and human share the experience of their lives upon these paths. Here, Whitridge connects animal and human activities with the environment. As with many of the other case studies in this volume, this reveals the intimate environmental engagement that is so central to relational ontologies.

Tim Ingold’s (Chapter 13) concluding chapter reflects upon human ways of experiencing the world, using the metaphors of maze and labyrinth to delineate two different modes of being. While this appears an initially confusing distinction, Ingold’s apportioning of a critiqued notion of agency to the maze, and of his preferred ‘meshwork’ to the labyrinth, offers a succinct and implicit analysis of relational thinking.

This volume is a highly engaging and successful contribution to archaeological theory and the ways in which archaeologists can engage thoughtfully with the past. The various authors and their case studies reveal that neither human centrality, nor post-Enlightenment western ontological thinking, are essential to thinking about the past. Exploring past societies in the context of their own ontologies is both methodologically possible and satisfying.

Larissa Tittl (University of Melbourne)