



Book Reviews

BRONZE AGE WORLDS: A SOCIAL PREHISTORY OF BRITAIN AND IRELAND BY ROBERT JOHNSTON

Abingdon, Routledge, 2021. 390pp, 101 B&W illustrations and photographs, pb, ISBN 9781138037885, £27.99

My first impression was that this book was going to fall firmly in the tradition of thematic-centred overviews of the Late Neolithic and Bronze Age used to such great effect by Richard Bradley in his black-book or 'circle' trilogy, starting with *The Significance of Monuments* (also published by Routledge). These often read like a quick sprint, a clever idea deftly communicated through a lively though selective use of examples. In comparison, *Bronze Age Worlds* is more of a long walk, a slower pace, its points more densely explored. The structure of the book is more circular than linear, returning again and again to the same subjects – sepulchral traditions, metalwork deposits, settlements, landscape architecture – but at different scales of inclusivity. This provides a rich and rewarding reading experience on the Bronze Age of Britain and Ireland for the period c. 2500–700 BC.

The book begins with a discussion of the discovery and previous interpretations of the Late Bronze Age associated deposit from Dowris, County Offaly (IE), supplemented by Johnston's own: "a gathering of things and a gathering of persons" (p.5). Here, each artefact in the deposit is suggested to have been individually contributed (as part of a wider 'gift economy'), each embodying a different 'person'. Broader scales of both time and space are also represented. This includes the condition of the artefacts, as reflected in use-traces and repairs, and in their morphology, which variously embody local, regional and supra-regional 'styles', as well as differing periods of manufacture. The function of certain artefacts, such as the bronze cauldron and buckets, may also reference collective events where participants gathered to feast. Finally, the location of the deposit, whilst possibly meaningful in its own right (isolated, marginal), may have embodied further meaning in respect of the other kinds of places that surrounded it.

This extended discussion of Dowris serves to introduce the central theme of the book: kinship. It also places what follows, albeit briefly, in its wider archaeological milieu (post-processual; unequivocally anthropological). Following recent trends in post-processual archaeology, Johnston adopts a 'relational' approach. As an archaeological schema, it is concerned with describing associated things. Emphasis is therefore placed on the various kinds of assemblages

that comprise the archaeological record for the British and Irish Bronze Age, and the relationships and activities that may have brought them together, which Johnston discusses in terms of the practice of kinship, termed kinwork.

Johnston describes these developments as providing both a 'theory' and 'method' for achieving a particular kind of social archaeology (pp.11ff). I was personally drawn to the book through my interest in the European Bronze Age, rather than its association with a specific theoretical trend. I will therefore leave it to others to judge its validity as a 'method', and whether the analysis of archaeological assemblages indeed reflect past relational processes (to my mind an avowedly essentialist proposition). Whilst the approach is broadly associated with these trends, the book is Johnston's own rejoinder to recent criticisms of these ideas, wherein he develops a rather novel approach to the concept of kinship.

Kinship is described as "a distinct form of relation" and the "distinct practice of relating" as kinwork (pp.13, 349). These are argued to elevate kinship over other kinds of relations due to their degree of intensity and mutuality, a relationship defined by a greater sense of belonging or closeness to other things than that obtained through other relationships. The emphasis here is upon kinship relations that do not rely upon biological affiliation, as is traditionally the case. Rejecting this precondition means that relations need no longer be restricted only to people and can, if one desires, be extended to include animals, objects and places. A clear and concise discussion of what kinship means in these terms is provided, based on a range of global anthropological models and ethnographic examples. Conspicuous by its absence is a critical discussion of the concept of kinwork and how it relates, in practice and theory, to archaeological units and their analysis.

The book consists of eight chapters, including an introduction and conclusion. The central part of the book (Chapters 2 to 7) is divided into three parts, each structured around one of three thematic subjects – gifts, dwellings and landmarks – with each consisting of two chapters. These are preceded by this relatively short and concise discussion of kinship in the introduction. The theoretical background is also brief, clear and unlaboured, and important concepts are explained largely by use of ethnographic and sociological examples, with philosophical abstractions kept largely to a minimum. As post-processual archaeology is still a rather limited tradition within global archaeology, for those whose interests extend beyond explanatory theory alone this will come as blessed relief. Given the wider potential of this novel approach to kinship, especially the concept of kinwork, it is to the author's credit that its discussion is treated rather pragmatically rather than being theoretically entrenched. For those seeking a more detailed reading of the underlying theory, this might be disappointing but brevity should not be

confused with simplicity and there is much to appreciate in Johnston's approach. Whether it satisfies the critics of so-called relational approaches remains to be seen.

The introduction also includes a brief but important critical discussion on the issue of scale and distance, wherein the small-scale or local and regional do not necessarily have to be contrasted with the large-scale, long-distance or inter-regional but are effectively related and mutually constitutive. This mirrors recent shifts toward Darwinian population or materialist thinking in archaeology, which have major epistemological consequences for archaeology at large. Unfortunately, the point here is pursued only in anthropological and behavioural terms. As well as being a major theoretical point, it also provides the basis for the rather clever structural device for how each chapter unfolds, and is then largely repeated in each subsequent chapter.

Each of these begins with a brief historical allusion relating to the discovery or investigation of an archaeological find combined with a short evocation of a particular location or landscape, with occasional flourishes during and at the end of chapters as well. These end in individual bibliographies, presumably so that they can be approached as an independent essay. However, the book functions best as a largely singular narrative.

This narrative concludes with a brief summation of the books stated aims, followed by a discussion of a select number of suggested 'key' centuries that best highlight the three thematic subjects, as well as being perhaps emblematic of broader processes that shaped the period in question.

From the beginning, the book is extremely well illustrated, with good use of drawings of sites and finds, as well as photographs. Johnston does himself a disservice by not including a distribution map, which would have served to highlight the wide geographical range of examples used and in particular the excellent highland coverage. A useful chronological summary is also absent. The latter feels less an oversight and more an ideological intent. Like many similarly synthetic books written in the broadly post-processual tradition, established chronological schemes are dispensed with in favour of some alternative approach. Here discussion is framed in terms of the use of calendar dates, based on centuries, and very occasionally on decades where mortuary practices are concerned. It's become a rather tiresome cliché that typically doesn't fulfil the stated ambition of offering something *usefully* different. At the very least, traditional schemes provide a vital basis for correlation across the various sub-fields of specialisation that comprise European Bronze Age studies.

Across each of the foregoing chapters, the scale of perspective increases outwards, the discussion continually circling back upon the same subjects of burial, deposition, settlements and landscape, whilst maintaining focus on the issue of kinship, through the practice of kinwork.

Part I is comprised of Chapters 2 and 3 and concerned with the theme of 'gifts', covering the periods 2500–1700 BC and 2000–700 BC respectively. Chapter 2, *A Patina of Journeys*, starts with the appearance and multifarious associations of Beaker pottery, moving from long-distance Continental connections to local manipulations, as part of Chalcolithic sepulchral traditions. We push on to contemporary artefacts: copper, gold and stone. Then, circling back, discussing each again for the subsequent Early Bronze period. Here Beakers give way to Food Vessels, and bronze replacing copper, and all the attendant changes in treatment and context that these involved. In this first step, the emphasis is upon the individual or person, and how the journeys "taken by the human dead" (p.29) reference wider connections of kinship by means of their treatment, context, and in particular associations, posited as gifts. Chapter 3, *Dispersed Lives*, continues with discussion of the Early Bronze period, early and middle, with bodies now cremated, and again associations, pottery and otherwise, as well as the reuse of burial architecture, and various treatment of remains. Changes in burial architecture take us down into Middle Bronze. This is followed by discussion of the deposition of metalwork – votive exchanges – between late Early to late Middle Bronze (or early Late, depending on the scheme), with treatment and context, as well as connections, altering alongside these changes in the treatment of the dead. And finally, circling back again to both (the dead and metals), for Late Bronze and into Iron. Here the scale of inclusivity of kinwork and gifts has broadened a little, from people to groups.

The theme of 'dwellings' is the focus of Part II, comprised of Chapters 4 and 5, with the former covering the period c. 2500–1200 BC and the latter c. 1400–700 BC. Having reached the Iron Age, we circle back in Chapter 4, titled *Home Ground*, starting with a discussion of hearth and home, pits and deposits, and the incorporation of substances during the Chalcolithic and middle Early Bronze period. Discussion of burnt mounds takes us once more down to Middle Bronze. Changes and regional variation in domestic architecture and settlements from the late Early to Middle Bronze period continues the theme, including house biographies, growth and decay. Chapter 5, *Living and Gathering*, discusses the creation of place, through these processes of dwelling from Middle Bronze to Early Iron Age. We return again to houses, starting with Late Bronze down to Iron Age, their variation and use, including craft practices and metalwork, expanding out to include related processes of enclosure and their use. Through its focus on processes of inhabitation, our understanding of the wider connections of kinship are broadened further, to communities and place, and the ever greater variety of activities – kinwork – that became incorporated into these dwelling places, a "gathering of relations" (p.226).

Part III is concerned with the final theme of 'landmarks', as discussed in Chapter 6, covering the period 2500–1500 BC, and Chapter 7, covering the period 2200–700 BC. Chapter 6, *Enchanting Places*, begins with a discussion of the various kinds of monumental landscape architecture – earth, timber, and stone – that developed during the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze period, and the meanings embodied in their construction and use. The significance of stone, as circles, alignments, mounds and mausoleums, as well as a medium for art, get special attention as gathering places, beginning earlier still (Neolithic) and running down to Middle Bronze. Chapter 7, titled *Akin to Land*, extends the discussion of landscape architecture to settlement and agricultural practice, from Chalcolithic to Middle Bronze, taking in trackways and field boundaries, and the incorporation of artefacts, ritual and mortuary architecture, as well as natural places. A discussion of varying field systems, and their construction and use, takes us from Early down to Late Bronze, and linear earthworks and pits finally to the Early Iron Age, wherein we reach the limits of Johnston's discussion of Bronze Age kinship.

The issue of change concerns the concluding chapter, *A Social Prehistory*, as six individual centuries are selected to briefly summarise certain processes related to the main themes of the book, focused on Beaker pottery (24th century), regional mortuary traditions (21st century), circular monuments and mortuary traditions, as well as early houses and fields systems (17th century), settlements and exchange (14th century), enclosures (11th century), and finally middens, resulting from communal enterprises. Each is discussed in terms of specific developments largely focused around issues of local or intra-regional developments versus inter-regional developments in respect of kin relations.

One of the things I appreciated most about the overarching narrative of the book was that it attempted to address these patterns of change and continuity. Eschewing traditional chronological nomenclature in favour of calendar ranges certainly helped give an impression of continuity in certain practices, particularly in discussion of sepulchral traditions. However, in some cases it can be more illusory than real, a consequence of the broad date ranges afforded individual sites, and the generalising nature of the book's narrative. Alternatively, traditional sequential schemes certainly can give an exaggerated sense of change, particularly where metalwork assemblages are concerned, with phase-assemblages being typically finer-grained than changes in settlement structure or pottery complexes. Johnston's decision to reject these as part of his narrative framework is easy to appreciate. However, without resource to correlation between kinds (pottery, burials, settlements, metals, etc.), which traditional schemes provide, the extent of continuity or change, as well as its tempo, are hard to measure. A satisfying narrative and aesthetically pleasing scheme is not always a relatable or convincing one.

Johnston posits *Bronze Age Worlds* as a “narrative synthesis of the Bronze Age in Ireland and Britain” (p.347). It therefore relies on the pre-existing interpretations of historical processes argued by others and – very successfully – employs them to highlight issues of kinship. Many of the interpretations therein, however, are presented largely uncritically, giving the (perhaps unintended) impression of ‘historical fact’ rather than tentative archaeological conclusions subject to challenge and review. Drawing attention to such qualification would, to this reader, have been welcome, however perfunctory or brief. This is particularly important for a period and area specialisation such as the European Bronze Age where so many of our ideas are based on palimpsest models constructed from divergent ethnographic analogies.

Epistemological quibbles aside, I have only one significant criticism: that the concept of kinwork was not more fully developed as an explicitly archaeological concept. Instead it was employed primarily as a rhetorical device, acting as a simple synonym for ‘doing things’ explainable in terms of kinship. This felt like a missed opportunity to develop the concept as something distinctly archaeological, as truly useful both theoretically and methodologically. In many ways, this is one of the core strengths of the book, that its key conceptual devices were sufficiently loosely tied to a theoretical proposition that readers of diverse and varying theoretical and metaphysical positions in archaeology can ultimately benefit from them. This measured approach is to Johnston’s credit, and I highly expect to see discussion of kinwork cropping up in various corners of archaeological interest in the near future.

The book represents the best of what European Bronze Age studies can be and is a worthy successor to the sort of narrative tradition established by Barratt, Bradley and others in the 1980s. It also demonstrates that investigation of the European Bronze Age, as an archaeological concept, doesn’t have to rely on the sort of processual models that came to dominate Continental European studies during the same period. Despite the above mentioned misgivings, I found the narrative compelling and broadly convincing, and very well written. Johnston has clearly invested tremendous energy and time into constructing his narrative, which incorporates numerous and wide ranging examples, both old and new. Johnston’s style and approach to kinship is employed to great effect and has considerable potential in respect of archaeological interpretation, and it would be pleasing to see it applied elsewhere. The overall approach was novel and innovative and the emphasis upon kinship in the development of relational approaches may provide some longevity to what might otherwise be a typically short-lived post-processual fad. Beyond such niche interests, there is much to learn from Johnston’s contribution here, whether one is interested in the European Bronze Age or not.

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