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Book Reviews



PREHISTORIC MATERIALITIES: BECOMING MATERIAL IN PREHISTORIC BRITAIN AND IRELAND. By Andrew Meirion Jones. Pp. xii and 230, Illus 40. Oxford University Press, 2012. Price: £60.00. ISBN 978 019955 642 7.

This book considers the performative nature of materials. Following the work of social scientists, such as Bruno Latour (e.g. *We Have Never Been Modern*, 1993), Jones argues that we need to go beyond dialectical understandings of the relationships between people and things in order to comprehend the complexities of the human past. Materials, he argues, mediate the social (pp. 11–15). This is by no means a new argument in archaeological debates, but it is certainly a dialogue that needs to be continued.

Chapters 1 and 2 lay the theoretical groundwork. Semiotic, representational and functional approaches are rejected, and the active nature of materials is emphasized. It is convincingly argued that material engagements are composed of iterations — repetitive but impromptu acts that refer to past events and look towards future events — and that such performances are integral to the very constitution of society (pp. 20–22). This draws implicitly on the theory of citation and the *longue durée* and it is a relatively novel concept that enables Jones to consider the processes through which material traditions were maintained or disrupted over time.

Different elements of materiality are tackled in Chapters 3–7. Each chapter begins with a theoretical discussion and is followed by two case studies. Processes of miniaturization and gigantism are discussed in Chapter 3: the latter is a less well-explored concept and is achieved through the analysis of Irish Neolithic passage tombs. The materiality of colour and light form the focus for Chapter 4. This includes an interesting discussion of the performative nature of rock art production in Argyll, which highlights how the carving of the rock-face and the action of sunlight produced a dynamic interplay of concealment and revelation (pp. 84–85).

The problems of classification are revisited in Chapter 5. It is argued that the desires for order and categorization have come at a cost, with the fluid and messy nature of the past becoming overlooked (pp. 100–5). This is a theme that is set out in Chapter 1 and is engagingly revisited in Chapter 8 through the analysis of three remarkable artefacts or sites. The nature and context of pottery manufacture, use and deposition on settlements in Neolithic Orkney is then examined. Jones suggests that changes in pottery traditions are the result of people's interactions with materials and landscapes and through subtle experimentations in production techniques and decoration (pp. 117–19). Discussion of beaker assemblages in north-east Scotland reveal how the commonalities of mortuary tradition and pottery decoration are maintained through a suite of material performances

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which provided a ‘technology of remembrance’ in society (p. 123). The themes of assembly, display, memory and personhood are discussed in Chapters 6 and 7: the former tackles Early Bronze Age depositional practices, particularly burials and hoards, while the latter considers the ritualized performances and protracted nature of monument construction and deposition at some causewayed enclosures, as well as the barrow cemetery of Snail Down, in southern England.

These case studies provide engaging and useful analyses of key sites and assemblages. Jones’s detailed study of selected objects enables vivid and nuanced interpretations to be presented. There are some weaknesses, but these are minor. While the chapters are clearly structured and well-written, some of the theoretical sections might prove difficult for those unfamiliar with the literature, and the presence of frequent summaries tends to create slightly repetitive text in some chapters. This is a shame, particularly as some arguments could have been taken further; questions such as *who* were involved in key performances, and *how* they were possibly experienced and conceptualized, are sometimes missing. Moreover, despite the title — ‘*Prehistoric Materialities*’ — analysis is restricted to Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Britain. This is not a problem as such, but many of the themes explored are relevant to recent discussions of materiality and performativity in later prehistoric Britain, and it would have been useful if this literature had been touched upon, if only in passing. Nevertheless, it was refreshing to see referenced an array of literature from the social sciences which does not usually populate archaeological discussions of material culture theory. Jones’s dynamic approach to materials, which privileges processes of creativity, performance and experimentation, presents the reader with a past that is far from static. This book adds significantly to the literature on materiality and it deserves to be widely read.

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