Prehistoric Materialities puts materials and their various properties and ‘affects’ at the centre of an analysis of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age archaeology from Britain and Ireland. It showcases some spectacular evidence, introduces the reader to a spectrum of social theories relating to materials and materiality, and raises some thought-provoking lines of enquiry. Whether the book succeeds in its attempt to free archaeology from the shackles of inert materials (lumped into static categories and framed by rigid contexts) and to assist in the process of dealing better with the ‘reality’ (the messy, fragmentary and complex character) of archaeological evidence is, however, arguably less clear.

The structure of the book is simple and strong. Jones starts with a description of three out-of-the-ordinary ‘artefacts and sites’: an unusual ceramic vessel from Liff’s Low, Derbyshire, the carved chalk drums from Folkton, Yorkshire, and Silbury Hill, Wessex. All of these, he suggests, archaeologists currently find hard to deal with, since they challenge the boundaries of traditional archaeological categories. On this basis, he sets out the book’s main aim to develop ways of coping more adeptly with archaeological entities which are ‘out of place’, messy, fragmentary and complex. Having highlighted what he sees as some of the shortcomings of previous interpretative approaches - namely the tendency for archaeologists to maintain an ontological distinction between ‘things’ and ‘people’/‘society’ and to treat materials, categories and contexts as passive, fixed and self-evident entities - he points readers in the direction of archaeologists and social theorists (primarily Chapman 2000; Butler 1993 and Derrida 1988) whose thoughts (the concepts of ‘fragmentation’, ‘citation’ and ‘iteration’) in combination Jones thinks might facilitate the process of moving on from this situation. In particular, he argues for the adoption of a stance that focuses on the ‘performance of materiality’, thus allowing for a rethinking of the notion of archaeological categories and of context.

The chapters making up much of the remainder of the book are papers which could, as Jones acknowledges, be read in any order or even in isolation from the book as a whole. Each chapter introduces a key theme — scale, light and colour, categories, assemblages and performances - designed to foreground different aspects of the vibrant and mutable character of archaeological matter. In each case, the theme is outlined and then theorised in relation to case study evidence. The case studies are wide-ranging geographically and more broadly. They span the whole of Britain and Ireland and include (amongst other things) material from southern English causewayed enclosures, Irish passage graves, ‘Migdale period’ axe hoards in Scotland and northern England, and activities associated with the initial construction and later development of a Wessex barrow cemetery. To finish, Jones highlights the fruits of his theoretical labours by returning to the three ‘out of place’ ‘artefacts and sites’ he introduced at the beginning of the volume. Viewed in the light of his (re)conceptualisation of materiality, he argues, these ‘artefacts and sites’ are interpretatively less problematic. In conclusion he bolsters his approach by reference to aspects of yet more archaeologists, geographers, Actor Network Theorists and
others’ understandings of materials and their relationships with other animate beings (people, animals and so on).

In sum, he argues, (archaeological) materials, and the categories via which we use and try to understand them are much more vibrant, transient, complex, and socially culpable than archaeologists have previously allowed for. Such qualities can be elicited by using an approach which asks how materials, categories, socialities of various kinds are performed.

At a broad level, I think the book works well. The Neolithic and early Bronze Age sites, artefacts and assemblages Jones discusses in his case studies can hardly be viewed as being representative of the broad spectrum of material from these periods. However they are well chosen in terms of foregrounding the spectacular and curious nature of aspects of the Neolithic and Bronze Age evidence base, and these qualities are enhanced by the ‘thick descriptive’ style he adopts in discussing them. The themes around which Jones focuses the main chapters – scale, light, assemblages and so on – generally provide thought-provoking ways into the material at hand, and cover topics – for instance scale – which certainly do need further thought within archaeology. Jones also raises some very interesting lines of enquiry. I particularly enjoyed his discussion of the potential created by the emergence of bronze mould technologies in the ‘Migdale period’ (c 2100-1900 BC) for making very similar items which could then be differentiated using secondary working, decoration and so on. His associated notion that this created ‘extended’ assemblages (widely dispersed items related by common origins) and ‘repetitive’ assemblages (composed of similar yet subtly different items which, he suggests, emphasises their repetitive traits) is also potentially interesting, although I didn’t feel that this idea was necessarily worked through as far as it could have been. Additionally, much of the work which Jones draws upon is certainly worth following up - for instance Law’s (2008) exemplary study of Early Bronze Age ceramic traditions, and the architect Delong’s (1981) consideration of the relationship between temporal and spatial experiences of scale.

Once examined in detail, however, I found Prehistoric Materialities puzzling and slightly frustrating on a number of different levels.

To begin with, I feel uncertain as to whether or not either Jones’ critique of previous and current approaches to archaeological materials, or the ways in which he suggests we might move on from such understandings, are as novel as they are made out to be. Later 20th century approaches to artefact categorisation, context, relationships between materials and people, and attributions of meaning to the archaeological record have already been critiqued on a number of previous occasions (eg, Barrett 1994; Gosden 2005; Lucas 2012). Although Jones’ own take on materials and materiality is necessarily specific to him, it is also worth noting that there is an increasing body of literature covering broadly comparable ground (eg, Hodder 2012; Olsen 2010). Indeed Jones has himself aired previously many of the themes concerned (eg, 2005; 2006; 2007; 2010a; 2010b). Jones does touch upon recent work by other archaeologists using similar sets of ideas – for instance animist approaches (eg, Alberti and Bray 2009) and studies emphasising the extent to which material entities and qualities are produced through performance (eg, McFadyen 2007). He also mentions the broader ‘material turn’ which archaeology is currently experiencing. However in doing so he arguably adds to the difficulty of asserting that the ‘re-conceptualisation’ of materials and materiality he presents in this book is particularly distinctive.

In relation to this point, the way in which Jones develops his argument by combining aspects of an eclectic mix of existing (mostly anthropological, Science and Technology Studies and geographical) conceptualisations of materials, performance, assemblage, ritual and so on, comes across as overly complex. It is arguably very difficult to adopt this strategy and to succeed in generating a distinctive and, perhaps more importantly, coherent way of approaching prehistoric
materials. Overall, it appears that Jones’ primary role is as a bricoleur – it is not always entirely clear what he himself - as opposed to those whose work he admires - stands for. More problematically, at various points in the book, and in particular having read Jones’ revisiting of the three ‘out of place’ artefacts and sites in Chapter 8, I was left wondering if his theorisation of this topic had actually helped him significantly with his aim to deal better with prehistoric materials. It is often quite hard to see the extent to which the various ideas which he draws upon and develops actually operate in practice. To pick one example, despite Jones’ wholehearted support for Chapman’s notion of ‘fragmentation and enchainment’ (to the extent that he suggests that this concept could be viewed as ‘an essential constitutive condition of archaeology’), both in an introductory chapter and again in the chapter on ‘Materials and assemblages’, it remains very difficult to pick out the direct influence this set of ideas at any point in his analysis of case study.

This ambiguity regarding the impact of his theorisation almost certainly, once again, almost certainly relates to the complexity of the task he has set himself. It would have been very difficult to follow through clearly the diverse set of ideas which he draws upon. Jones’ emphasis on performance does to a certain extent unite his assemblage of approaches. However his case for the performative qualities of material entities is arguably weakened by the fact that most of the case study material he uses is from situations which many archaeologists would recognise already as being highly dramatic – hoards, burials, monuments and so on. There is a danger that the argument can seem obvious and to a certain extent generic. Overall, it is worth emphasising that I am not suggesting that Jones analysis is not interesting. Moreover I think that his endeavour to develop the ideas he raises in relation to Neolithic and Early Bronze Age evidence is valuable in itself. Rather I feel that some of his most interesting lines of enquiry could have been arrived at without the theoretical preamble.

One further sign of the intricacies involved in enacting a clear shift in our handling of prehistoric materials might be the difficulty which Jones appears to have in practice with distancing his own analytical approach from existing ones which he critiques. At times his arguments therefore seem contradictory. For instance Jones criticises Boast (1998; 2002) for highlighting the way in which Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age Beakers operate as polythetic, fuzzy categories, yet in doing so predetermining the category ‘Beaker’. Meanwhile throughout his own analysis Jones uses straightforwardly (and thus arguably predetermines) a whole spectrum of other archaeological categories – Grooved Ware pottery, passage graves, Migdale period axes and so on. Additionally, on several occasions during Jones’ analysis, I felt unsure as to where prehistoric peoples’ understandings of the artefacts and sites under discussion entered into the equation. It is debatably fine to advocate a more nuanced way of thinking about archaeological materials without also considering how this relates to evidence for prehistoric people’s own thoughts on the topic. If this is what Jones is aiming to do, however, it might have been clearer if he had followed the lead of researchers such as Tilley (eg, 2004), by adopting an explicitly presentist stance.

Beyond Jones’ broad approach, I sometimes have difficulty with the way in which he engages with archaeological evidence, the extent to which he references (or not) the work of other researchers dealing with similar issues and bodies of evidence, and also with his use of illustrations. Taking the first point, such is the range of material that he covers, it would have been very difficult for him to do the sites and artefacts he discusses full justice (one notable exception to this is his detailed treatment of the three ‘out of place’ artefacts and sites). However, I feel that the way in which Jones conducts his analysis compounds this issue. As is the case with the vast majority of university-based researchers he necessarily relies heavily on derived data - produced and previously analysed by others. However, the way in which Jones takes interpretations developed by previous analysts out of context, and then builds directly on these, means that sometimes the thread of the argument is lost. At times he also makes confident
interpretative statements based on quite limited sets of evidence. For instance he suggests that Migdale period axe users in northern Britain during the Early Bronze Age had a particular concern with repetition based primarily on the existence of only 10-12 hoards containing ‘sets’ (mostly only pairs) of similar yet subtly different axes, two of which also included a variety of other items. As a consequence I occasionally feel unsure as to whether or not I can wholly trust the patterning that Jones describes.

Additionally on several occasions I felt that the work of other researchers working with similar ideas and on similar bodies of evidence, did not feature significantly enough in Jones’ analysis. For instance, his discussions of barrow assemblages - both within specific monuments and at the barrow cemetery at Snail Down, Wessex - is conducted without reference to Brück’s (2004) important analysis of the relational qualities of materials gathered in Early Bronze Age barrow assemblages or indeed to other highly pertinent analyses (eg, Last 1998; Mizoguchi 1993). Since I know for a fact that Jones has cited these studies elsewhere, their omission from the analysis here is all the more puzzling. Finally, one way of making the evidence discussed in his case studies both more easily comprehensible and also verifiable by the reader might have been to include more illustrations. While Aaron Watson’s drawings are mostly useful and aesthetically fine there were several occasions on which I felt that more were needed –a distribution map of deposits of Migdale period axes might have been helpful, as might have plans of all rather than just one of the three Neolithic settlements in the Bay of Firth region, Orkney, whose specific architectural features Jones discusses in detail.

Connoisseurs of the British TV programme ‘Masterchef’ will recognise the scenario when an aspiring chef brings together bits of their favourite ingredients and recipes in an impressively complicated process and yet somehow the final result is a bit underwhelming. It was this situation which was brought to mind in my reading of Prehistoric Materialities. The book is full of fantastic evidence from the British later Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, introduces the reader to snippets of a spectrum of interesting social theories relating to materials, and incorporates some very interesting ideas. For this reason it is a colourful read, and a good introduction to recent discussions about materials and materiality in archaeology and the social sciences. Ultimately however, it left me unsure as to whether or not the theories discussed in the book had got me much further in terms of thinking about or understanding prehistoric materials, or for that matter, prehistoric people.

References


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