Review of:
Joanna Brück (2019) *Personifying Prehistory: Relational Ontologies in Bronze Age Britain and Ireland* (Oxford University Press | ISBN: 978-0-19-876801-2)

Reviewed by:
Dr Safet HadžiMuhamedović, University of Cambridge

Personifying Prehistory is an impressive new book by Joanna Brück, Professor of Archaeology at University College Dublin, and a prolific international authority on the study of the Bronze Age in Britain and Ireland. Brück turns the tables on our understanding of the Bronze Age as a relatively coherent 'proto-capitalist' stage marked by an increasing stratification of individuals according to wealth and social status. Countering this as a largely inaccurate and biased interpretation, she offers a compelling account of a multi-faceted period with changing attitudes towards human-nonhuman entanglements, and makes an ontological leap away from the entrenched post-Enlightenment conceptual constellation and the substance dualism therein. Anchoring her arguments in a variety of findings relating to Bronze Age life and death, Brück unpacks the categorical distinctions of self-other, human-nonhuman, nature-culture, and subject-object, suggesting that these binaries collapse upon an ontologically alert examination of existing evidence. Rather, she argues, the agency of what we might know as 'subjects' and 'objects' had been articulated as deeply *relational*.

The book is divided into six chapters, which are thematically intertwined in light of the author's central argument about the problem of applying contemporary hegemonic categorizations onto Bronze Age findings. Chapter 2 looks at the changing Bronze Age concepts of the self by considering various practices of fragmentation, manipulation and curation of the dead body. Re-reading the archaeological record, Brück points to the weaknesses in the literature insisting on the importance of individual burials. She argues that the concepts of the self were radically different and shifting throughout the period, as evidenced in multiple burials, complex interventions upon dead bodies, partial or 'token' cremation burials, the mixture of bones with other substances in depositions, or the circulation of remains outside of the mortuary contexts. Human bone appears in the form of belt hooks, pendants, whistles or other artefacts, and human remains were often used to mark out significant points in the landscape. Brück provides fascinating examples, like that from Cladh Hallan on South Uist, where the skeletal remains of three Late Bronze Age adults had been reconstituted as a single 'individual' in an inhumation burial, 400 years after their death (57). More generally, she points to the careful spatial, temporal and symbolic choreography of human remains.

Chapter 3 explores the intertwined lives of 'people' and 'objects', questioning the lingering evolutionary models which reduce Bronze Age objects to their functional and economic value. Brück considers a range of artefacts that clearly had powerful agentive qualities, and thus cannot simply be read as docile markers of individual status or ethnicity. More importantly, however, she shows that the categorical boundaries between persons and things cannot be maintained, as they appear to have been treated similarly. Both human remains and objects were subjected to assembly, dissolution and circulation. These "[a]rtefacts were bound up with personal, family, and community histories, so that they became core components of the self" (71). Brück also argues that new technologies, particularly metalworking, had deeply influenced the evolving Bronze Age notions of

personhood. She recognises the implications that the material properties and production processes of metal had for the Bronze Age conceptualisations of substance and the transformation of life.

In Chapter 4, Brück personifies the Bronze Age house, noticing a gradual change from its more fluid relationship with space to a creation of various, albeit relatively permeable, boundaries. She draws captivating parallels between the lifecycles of houses and their inhabitants. The construction, rebuilding and abandonment of homes was often accompanied by complex ritual acts. Important objects, as well as human and animal remains, were deposited with houses over the course of their life and abandonment. Whilst the Middle Bronze Age houses had been single-generational, they tended to be longer lived during the Late Bronze Age. Roundhouses were covered with mounds or burnt at the end of their lifecycles (just like human remains), and perhaps also given votive gifts, for they were likely understood as animate. Here, Brück dispels two further misconceptions. Firstly, there is no evidence that Bronze Age homes "facilitated the production of gender relationships in any way similar to those of the modern Western world" (159). Secondly, it would be highly problematic to apply to the Bronze Age an easy distinction between private and public or ritual and secular space, for the Bronze Age houses were also "foci for a range of productive, political, and ritual activities" (160).

In Chapter 5, Brück is concerned with the chronic explanation for the appearance of field systems, which locate in the Bronze Age a marking point of methodical and extensive exploitation of landscapes for human gain. She investigates the variety of relationships between people and their landscapes, for example the placing of important objects and votive gifts in different 'liminal' contexts, often to indicate the interdependence of humans and nonhumans in terms of life, fertility and death. Brück argues that Bronze Age landscapes should be read as kinds of cosmological maps in which particular significance was given to watery places, caves, sinkholes, hilltops, bridges, paths and other thresholds. Refuting the idea of increased landscape exploitation, she notes: "In such a context, it would not have been possible to *exploit* the natural world – for that implies the reduction of that world to the status of inanimate object" (223). This is part of her wider argument on power distributed through the various composite elements of Bronze Age landscapes, rather than harnessed by individuals.

In short, Brück makes a convincing case for the study of Bronze Age personhood as a shifting and changing assemblage in which 'humans' and 'nonhumans' circulate and conceptually interpenetrate. Her methodological choice of focusing on relation is decisive for the project, for it allows a critical disruption of the habitual scholarly interpretation of the period. A fault in this book is difficult to find. One might perhaps wonder whether the author's efforts to relax our understanding of the Bronze Age too easily contrast with an apparently comfortable image of the 'contemporary Western world'. Although such a world concerns Brück only as much as it distorts archaeological interpretation, contemporary Ireland and Britain are often far from being typical examples of unyielding, ever-dualistic modernity.

Whilst archaeologists might daydream about travelling through time and spending a day as a fly on the wall of a prehistoric settlement, *Personifying Prehistory* shows that an abundance of data might be meaningless if the researcher's conceptual constellations are not thoroughly unpacked beforehand. Otherwise, the archaeological findings may be (as they have been) subjected to what Brück calls the "tyranny of categorization" (9). In this sense, Brück's 'relational ontological perspective' sits remarkably well in the company of the recent work in social anthropology.

This is, without a doubt, a ground-breaking book. It redefines the study of the Bronze Age and offers an important methodological corrective to our engagement with the past more generally. As such, it should be a requisite reading for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in archaeology and history. Re-evaluating the Bronze Age, Brück successfully demonstrates the implications of the book for the conventional histories of the emergence of capitalism, land exploitation, power and substance dualism. It is also an eloquent case study in support of intimate ties between archaeology and anthropology (where this is not already traditional). I would certainly include it in an anthropological syllabus alongside Strathern's work on 'partible personhood'. As we are offered to a clear, accessible and fluent manuscript, *Personifying Prehistory* may be of interest to the general readership as well.