

# And Say the Animal Responded?

## Tracing Non-human Animal Agency in the Neolithic of Great Britain (4100–2300 BC)

### ABSTRACT

That explorations of human-animal relations have been dominated by examples focusing on wild species and the initial steps towards domestication has been noted by Honeychurch/Makarewicz (2016, 351; although see Reid's 2020 paper »Putting the Life Back into Livestock in Archaeology« for examples ranging from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present, including some gloriously agentive cattle). This paper seeks to go some small way to redress this balance. Building on the pioneering Social Zooarchaeology of Hamilakis/Overton (2013a; 2013b), Mannermaa (2013), and Russell (2012) it proposes an expressly Posthumanist approach, supported by examples drawn from the Neolithic of the British Isles, 4100–2300 BC – a fascinating period that saw the introduction of already fully domesticated animal species that would make demands of their human cohabitants.

### KEYWORDS

Posthuman / multi-species / Neolithic / cattle / agency

### But as for Us, Who Are We (Following)?

Derrida's late animal work, a radical, proto-post-humanist examination of the nature of relations between the human and non-human animal species and the existential implications these have (Derrida 2008), underscores this paper and indeed my research practice more broadly. He poses the question »But as for me, who am I following?« (Derrida 2008, 52). Derrida's thought experiment puts animals – and a real little cat in particular – first. We should follow him.

As the study of the human past, archaeology is an inherently anthropocentric endeavour. The questions we ask of the archaeological evidence are focused on what it can tell us about past human worlds. This is especially true of zooarchaeology, which has traditionally primarily concerned itself with tracing evidence for animal exploitation, with emphasis placed upon the dead animal body – the

ways in which death was brought about, its treatment post-mortem, and the uses to which it was put: »A key goal in animal bones studies is to understand how humans exploited animal carcasses, including the use of primary and derived products (e. g. skin, fur, meat, marrow, grease, sinews, glue, bone, horn and antler)« (Maltby 2014, 36).

Such animal bodies are units of value: calorific, social, capital. Animals as living entities thus find themselves framed in terms of their »secondary products«, as indicators of human economic models and, occasionally, as the foci of care (or lack thereof) (Hamilakis/Overton 2013a). Overwhelmingly, these animals are conceptualised as human prey, or in domestic contexts, as »livestock« – the latter in particular branded as inert, partible products lacking agency, and certainly lacking personhood (Russell 2012; Banfield 2018).

As historical product of the modern, industrial era in which the archaeological discipline and zooarchaeological sub-discipline emerged, non-human animals are othered, positioned at the bottom of an hierarchical framework that places white, Western, educated and moneyed Man (and the use of gendered language is here entirely intentional) at the apex, with all others, to include people of colour, women, the poor, and animals subordinated. Following the philosophical position articulated by Descartes (see Veitch 1901), such a world is cleaved into paired opposites: man/woman, human/animal, culture/nature, wild/domestic, etc. that ascribe value-laden attributes to each side, weighted in favour of the male, human, cultural. The wild/domestic dichotomy is an interesting outlier here, more complex and with shifting value weighting – the wild is often allied with the domain of the male as dangerous, difficult and challenging, and in need of the influence of Man to bring about domestication and order (see Boyd 2017 for a discussion of Hodder/Meskel 2011). As opposite, the domestic is thus the product of Man's influence – the realm of the female and animals brought under the control of Man – and in becoming controlled/ordered is framed as something weak and lacking autonomy, independence, and critically, respect. These historically-situated attitudes are deeply entrenched in modern Western thought and thereby, in the structure of modern Western academic practice, and, if unacknowledged, shape the ways in which we can approach our understandings of past worlds, from the questions we ask of the evidence, to the very act of gathering data in the first place: data are *never* objective, independent, and absolute values detached from us, but at every stage of their emergence and translation are shaped by our underlying experiences/assumptions, beliefs and approaches to their identification and collection, and are disciplined by the technologies deployed in their creation (Barad 2007; Hacıgüzeller 2012; Banfield 2018). In other words, such an approach will result in findings that simply reinforce underlying, untheorised assumptions, resulting in the production of Cartesian-infused pasts that may miss important evidence for ontological difference. For example, whilst the development of standardized zooarchaeological methodologies has undoubtedly improved the quality of zooarchaeological work and enables the meaningful comparison of datasets, the very act

of standardization has also entrenched limitations: if we adhere strictly to the standard methodologies, we will find ourselves limited by them; if we seek evidence of exploitation as standard, we surely find it.

As a response, recently emergent Social Zooarchaeological approaches that augment and extend traditional zooarchaeological practices argue that it is possible to trace a broad spectrum of agentive animal behaviour through the osteological evidence, when utilised in conjunction with contextual information, and, for example, environmental and ethnographic data (Russell 2012; Sykes 2014), although too often, a nagging anthropocentrism lurks, limiting animals to a role as mere tools for accessing the human. However, Hamilakis/Overton (2013a; 2013b) offer a way forward: characterised by multi-species interactions of multi-directional agency and responsiveness, they demonstrate the value of exploring more-than-human pasts in their reconsideration of human and swan osseous material from the Mesolithic sites of Aggersund and Vedbæk-Bøgebakken, Denmark (Hamilakis/Overton 2013a). By building on the traditional zooarchaeological analyses that informed the sites' original interpretations through incorporation of approaches originating in animal behavioural studies, ecology and animal geography, rich multi-species interactions situated within, and inseparable from, their particular environmental contexts are teased out to reveal the nature of human-swan interactions that span scales from the individual to species levels. Through a focus on seasonal movements, rhythms, and known behaviours of humans and swans, and the potential for interaction therein afforded, the depositional associations between swan bones and other species and material types represented enable intimate narratives of human-swan communion, of human encounter with agentive swan individuals. Critically, the evidence drawn upon extends far beyond faunal assemblages to incorporate analyses of multiple material types that are traditionally separated as a consequence of academic specialisms; also crucial are contextual assemblages and documentary archival material. Hamilakis and Overton thus demonstrate that it is possible to push Social Zooarchaeology to its limits and decentre the human: the human-animal relationship *itself* is the focus of enquiry – not the human – and it is for this reason that their approach is foundational for the Posthuman archaeology here advocated.

## Posthuman Archaeology

Like Hamilakis and Overton's Social Zooarchaeology, the Posthumanist approach entails a rejection of human exceptionalism, both explicit and implicit, which is bound up with the broader problematisation of dualistic thinking discussed above. However, it is important also to recognise where dualistic terms are necessary to communicate ideas effectively. Wild/domesticated is, for example, a reductive, over-simplification of relationships that are scalar (ranging from those that make no distinction between wild and domestic spheres at one end of the scale, to those that make explicit use of the concepts as a structural devices at the other) rather than oppositional, but each term also acts as useful shorthand for communicating ideas of acknowledged complexity within the context of a dominant ontology grounded in oppositional structures. Likewise, human/animal is the oppositional pairing that drives such Posthumanist responses as the present study, yet both terms are requisite for communicating effective critique of the status quo. All terms are therefore employed whilst fully acknowledging their shortcomings and inherent loadedness.

Decentering the human entails beginning enquiry from a point of ontological flatness; seeking to exclude hierarchies of dominance prior to engagement with the evidence through rigorous critique of the research process. Indeed, in order to produce authentic, theoretically sustainable Posthumanist pasts, it becomes critical to fully embrace and inhabit Posthumanist ontology in all aspects of research – a Posthumanist present. This withinness, or situatedness within the approach demands commitment at all levels of engagement, from the questions posed, to data collection, to analyses deployed and the conclusions drawn – all are inherently interpretative and theoretically laden.

In practice, this entails starting from a point at which all units of evidence (artefacts, ecofacts, etc.) are accorded equal weighting so that as different assemblages (zooarchaeological, contextual, spatial, etc.) are explored, difference, meaning and hierarchies – should they present themselves – have space to emerge. The human does not thus automatically assume a position of hierarchical primacy from the outset – although such a position may ultimately be

revealed by the evidence<sup>1</sup>. A Posthumanist approach demands dismantling established material categories, for example, collapsing/integrating specialist distinctions and practices that separate human bone, animal bone and worked bone. Indeed, building on Hamilakis/Overton's (2013a, 114) critique of speciesism that lumps all non-humans into an unproblematised, untheorised catch-all category of »animal«, redefining osteological assemblages such that all species, human and non-human, are analysed using a fully integrated approach has been shown to be a productive point of analytical departure, particularly when working with prehistoric, comingled remains (Banfield 2018).

Assemblage and multiplicity (Deleuze/Guattari 2004; DeLanda 2006) are core premises within Posthumanist discourse, and indeed, are critical components and outputs of Posthumanist archaeology with its focus on the intersection of different archaeological assemblages. Assemblage Theory understands assemblages to be gatherings of matter, both material and immaterial, identifiable as individuated phenomena, and yet variable in their constitution. The boundaries of assemblages are pervasive such that components may join and/or leave the assemblage, or may form parts of multiple different assemblages simultaneously, without necessarily impacting an assemblage's identity (DeLanda 2006, 10; Fowler/Harris 2015). Assemblages are affective and may form more than the sum of their parts, as demonstrated by Bennett (2010, 25) in her mesmerising narrative of the multiple causalities and impacts of an outage on the North American electrical grid. Assemblages form, grow, shrink, disperse, and encounter – and affect – other assemblages. It follows that this affective quality reveals a relationally contingent nature. Assemblage Theory finds that all entities are relationally-constituted assemblages of transient stability and thereby rejects definitive essences and/or essential qualities in phenomena. This means that all persons are themselves assemblages of changing relations that maintain an individual identity as such until such a point as the assemblage disperses (which may transcend corporeal death): the animal body is a swarming mass of carbon, water, skin, sweat, bodies ingested, viruses, thoughts,

<sup>1</sup> The hierarchical dominance of the Cartesian »Man« is a reality in Cartesian ontological terms, and this is one among a number of realities that posthumanism recognises on the basis of the evidence. Posthumanism is therefore not against humanism; rather, it stands in relation with humanism.

It is responsive and as a response, it follows the humanist position, but it is not fixed in a temporal relation in the sense that the stances it describes may precede the humanist.

responses, behaviours, etc. all of which are subject to change/modification/replacement over the course of life and death (Haraway 2008, 5–15).

It is through consideration of the relational nature of archaeological assemblages that past animal agency may be accessed. By starting from a point of ontological flatness, the relationships articulated by the particular configurations of the different as-

semblages may be drawn forth. In addition to the osteological assemblage, one may include the depositional assemblage – the more-than-zooarchaeological assemblage that comprises multiple material types, the multi-scalar geographic and temporal assemblages, and also behavioural information and ethnographic comparatives.

## Cattle in Neolithic Britain

That the introduction of fully-domesticated cattle to the British Isles in the Neolithic had a profound impact is well attested (Ray/Thomas 2003; 2018; Cummings/Morris 2022), with domestic cattle bone from features of this period frequently dominating osseous assemblages and to a degree that cannot be explained solely by taphonomic processes. Whilst human consumption of cattle bodies was undoubtedly important here, the depositional treatment of cattle bone marks out cattle, and domestic cattle in particular as different from other species, and although by no means homogenous, this difference emerges from the archaeological evidence across scales, from the sub-site to the regional and beyond. By unpicking the reasons for this difference in treatment through analyses of multiple different archaeological assemblages, cattle agency reveals itself.

Woodford G2 long barrow stood on Salisbury Plain, five kilometres south of Stonehenge (figs 1–2). Excavated in 1963 by Major and Mrs Vatcher in response to plough damage, publication was undertaken some twenty years later by Gingell (1986). The excavated structure included a flint cairn at the core of the barrow mound, the surviving body of the mound, two flanking ditches and associated pits. Gingell’s report records the presence of disarticulated human bone beneath the cairn, an inhumation in the east ditch, cremated bone in two of the pits, and a small volume of animal bone deemed insufficient for reporting upon. Recent reanalysis of the excavated assemblage undertaken by the author from the Posthumanist position here advocated found a bone assemblage comprising over 3000 bone and tooth specimens, 86 of which were the disarticulat-



Fig. 1 Location of Woodford G2 long barrow in England, UK. – (Map M. Bolte, LEIZA).

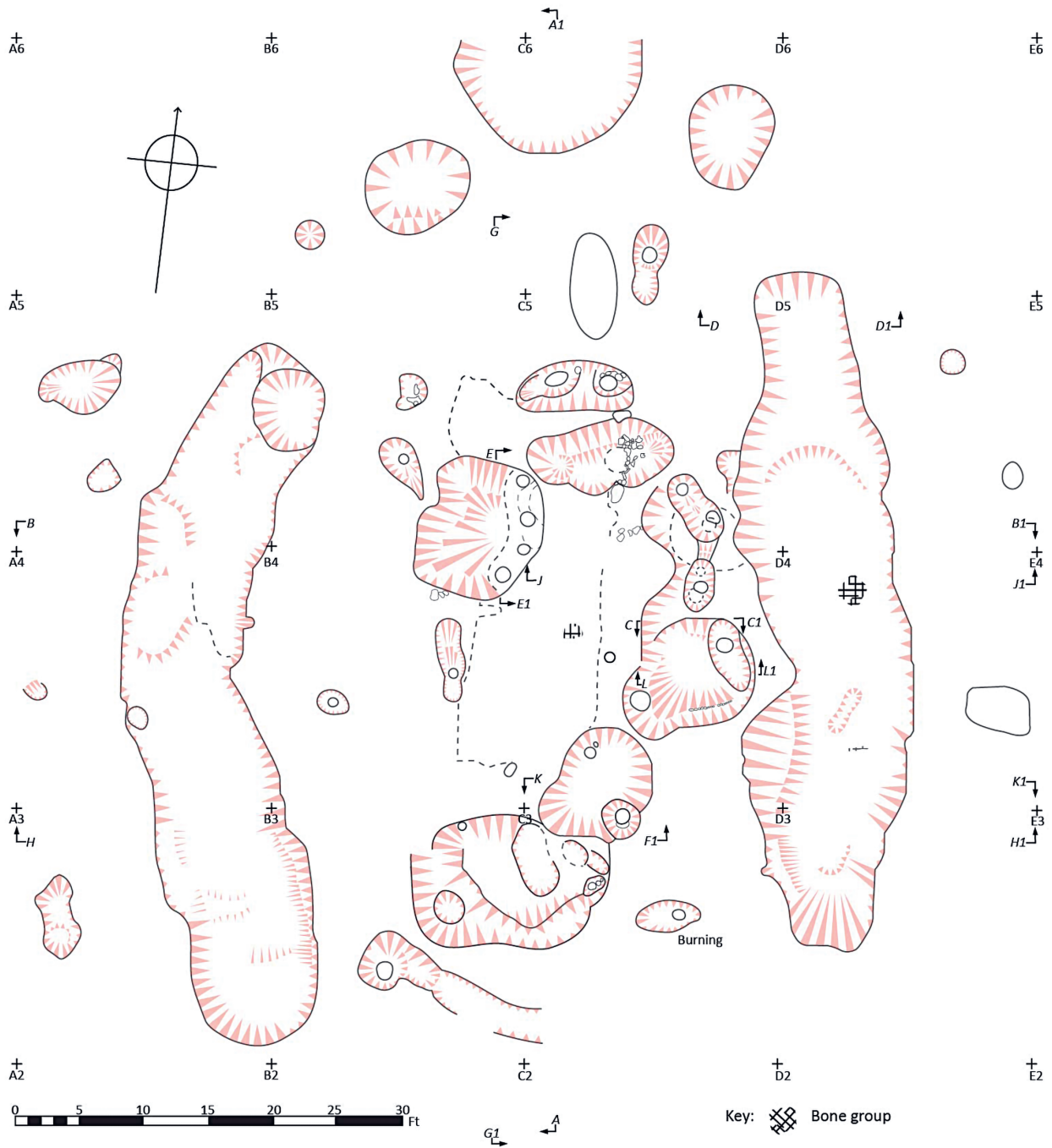


Fig. 2 Plan of Woodford G2 long barrow. – (Adapted from Gingell 1986, 17 fig. 7; with permission © Wiltshire Museum, Devizes).

ed human bones from beneath the flint cairn, with an MNI of three individuals. <sup>14</sup>C-dates revealed that this material dates to the Early Neolithic (3427–3370 cal BC at 68.2 % probability), whilst the ditch inhumation and the cremations all date to the Middle Bronze Age, the ditch inhumation returning a date range of 1244–1128 cal BC at 68.2 % probability.

The disarticulated human remains from beneath the cairn were deposited with a low number of fragments of seemingly residual sheep/goat remains and pottery sherds. The cairn covering this material comprised unstruck flint nodules, and cattle

teeth and pedal bones were recovered from primary mound contexts, close to the cairn. This structure is strikingly similar to that of the nearby and much better known Fussell’s Lodge long barrow, which was also formed around a flint cairn that overlay pits and post holes and sealed deposits of disarticulated human remains (Ashbee 1966), as well as two subadult »skeletons« that reanalysis of the assemblage found to be composites of multiple individuals (Wysocki et al. 2007, 67). At the proximal end of the Fussell’s Lodge cairn were a deliberately placed cattle skull and pedal bones. Caroline Grigson’s orig-

inal analysis of the faunal remains at Fussell's Lodge suggest that the organisation of these cattle remains might be indicative of a hide burial (Grigson 1966) – a form described by Stuart Piggott (1962) as having recurred across vast temporal and geographic expanses in which the head and hooves of usually a horse or cattle accompanied human remains. The presence of the bones of the head and hooves only suggests that they once formed part of a hide, the skin having long-since decomposed. The arrangement at Fussell's Lodge would have appeared as a sculptural human-cattle-flint composite: a multi-species chimera. At Woodford G2, a small assemblage of cattle teeth and bones were found close to the edge of the damaged flint cairn. Given the structural similarities between the two sites, it seems feasible that the cattle bones could have originally been organised in a form that echoes that seen at Fussell's Lodge.

The association between cattle remains, especially the skull and pedal bones, and human bones is one that is repeated across Early Neolithic contexts in the British Isles (Field 2006, 125–130; Banfield 2018), and one that is not encountered in comparable form, or with the same degree of frequency, in any other combination of species. The suggestion that there existed some form of kinship between cattle and humans has been explored by Ray/Thomas (2003), but the precise nature of the relationships articulated at Fussell's Lodge and Woodford G2 are revealed through attendance to the depositional detail. This enfolding of the human within the flint cairn, all of which was contained beneath the cattle hide suggests embrace or protection of the human and flint element by that of the cattle. Such a relationship of inter-species care is expressed through dairying, which has been shown to have been a well-attested practice from the outset of the British Neolithic, through the results of lipid residue analysis from pottery (Copley et al. 2005, 531; Cramp et al. 2014). Ongoing provision of sustenance by a living non-human to a human has more in common with human familial or close social relationships than with that between living hunter and soon-to-be-dead prey, the former relationship entailing commitment, care, mutual support and responsiveness, as the human is bound to provision fodder, water and protection for the cattle in exchange for access to milk. Further, milking demands regular, daily contact between cattle and humans, and the development of trust. Ethnographic evidence has found that humans must learn how to behave appropriately when interacting with animals – in this case, Mongolian sarlag (Fijn 2011, 134): »A calm, quiet person will extract more milk from a cow than a loud extrovert. Having a strange person present can also be inhibiting. Cows,

particularly sarlag, are sensitive to any new people during milking, because they are not part of the cow's recognition of the milker as part of her ›herd‹, which includes both cattle and human members.«

Described above is evidence of sarlag agency: active selection for docile humans. The dairying relationship is thus one of calm familiarity, a possibility brought about by domestication and maintained by ongoing social contact.

Drilling down further into the evidence, the cattle bone from the Woodford G2 mound reveals still more of the human-cattle relationships bound up with the structure. They derive from at least one old animal – one with a long biography that would have been known as an individual, its story bound up with those who incorporated its remains into the barrow structure. Further, at least one of the cattle bones pertains not to domestic cattle, but to aurochs, with metric data falling within the upper threshold for prehistoric aurochs: a large bull. The sheer physicality of such an animal would have commanded attention and elicited response.

Aurochs, the wild progenitor species of domestic cattle, were already present in Britain when domesticated cattle were introduced (Lynch et al. 2008), and are known to have been hunted by human populations (for examples, see Rogers et al. 2018). Occupying wetland/woodland edge habitats (Lynch et al. 2008) and typically standing between 140 and 190 cm at the shoulder (Degerbøl/Fredskild 1970), their presence would have heightened differences from, and similarities with, the novel domesticates, rendering the latter uncanny.

Envelopment of the human and flint cairn within an aurochs, or aurochs-cattle composite hide therefore holds potential to change the nature of human-cattle relationship expressed: notions of protection of the human by cattle may remain, but through reference to behavioural characteristics, the inclusion of aurochs bull remains introduces elements of power and ferocity – a heightened form of the kind of fierce protection often witnessed in domestic cows defending their young from perceived threats, for instance. In life, this aurochs bull may have been a known presence to those who incorporated its remains into the barrow structure, but it remains that the human-aurochs relationship would have stood in marked contrast to the close sociality that bound humans with the domestic cattle who shared their lives.

But it is not just cattle and human bone that comprise the Woodford G2 and Fussell's Lodge deposits, with flint cairns forming important element of both. Comprising unstruck nodules, the cairns are a concentrated mass of flint tools-in-waiting. Flint tools

and the waste resulting from their preparation/production are ubiquitous presences in Neolithic and Bronze Age assemblages, and enabled the processing of dead animal bodies. Caches of flint nodules, flakes and worked pieces are frequently encountered in barrow ditches (for example, as at Amesbury 42, Netheravon Bake, Cold Kitchen Hill, Horslip, all in Wiltshire) and sometimes placed in depositional sequence with deposits of butchered cattle bone, as is the case at Fussell's Lodge. Butchery and consumption of cattle bodies by humans provided nutrition but also skins, horn, bone, sinew, and social capital between humans. The centrality of cattle whose living needs shaped the rhythms of human lives and vice versa extended to their deaths and through incorporation of flint – an important means by which post-mortem human-cattle relations were enacted – the cattle hides that covered the barrow cairns enclosed and encapsulated entire human-cattle lifeways.

Also noted as present in the Woodford G2 cairn assemblage are low numbers of residual sheep/goat specimens. The introduction of sheep/goat to the British Isles contrasts with that of cattle (and pig) through the absence of wild antecedents. However, lipid residue analysis infers that sheep/goat were reared and kept for human consumption of their meat rather than dairying (Copley et al. 2005, 528). Whilst requiring care through provision of fodder and protection from predators, the human-sheep/goat relationship was one of greater social distance and much lesser intensity than that which bound humans and cattle through the processes

and rhythms associated with dairying. This social asymmetry may account for the kinds of sheep/goat deposits found in British Early Neolithic contexts: typically fragmentary, disarticulated portions of the body, broadly lacking convincing evidence for deliberate selection for deposition. Whilst taphonomy inevitably is a factor to consider, it cannot explain the contrast with the treatment of cattle bone. Cattle elicited a sufficiently strong response from those who lived with them that demanded extraordinary treatment post-mortem.

Further evidence supporting this interpretation of a close social relationship of cattle-human nurture is found at Windmill Hill causewayed enclosure, Wiltshire. Early Neolithic deposits from this site include both animal and low numbers of human remains, the former notably including »large numbers of complete, or nearly complete, skulls and horncores of cattle« (Grigson 1999, 204). Two multi-species deposits are of particular interest: from context [630] was recovered a human child's femur inserted into a distal cattle humerus (Whittle et al. 1999, 110. 108 fig. 97; Grigson 1999, 205 fig. 161; 206), and in context [117] a fragment of a human child's cranium was found nested within a skinned cattle frontal (Whittle et al. 1999, 89–90 fig. 82). The nesting, enveloping quality of the cattle and subadult human bone recalls the multi-species cairn composites at Fussell's Lodge and Woodford G2 that place human and cattle remains in intimate, structured arrangements, again, making reference to concepts of care and nurture (cf. Ray/Thomas 2003; Harris 2011, 368), in death as in life.

## Conclusions: But Which Animal Do You Mean (to Follow)?

Domesticated species are knowledgeable agents that act to shape the worlds we inhabit now and in the past. Outright denial of their agency, whether deliberate or an unquestioned assumption is a modern attitude that must be guarded against. We must start with the evidence from a position of ontological flatness and allow space for difference to emerge if we are to understand the true complexity of interconnected multi-species worlds.

In the British Early Neolithic contexts considered, the degree to which cattle elicited human response is arguably far more significant than the ways in which humans elicited cattle responses. The introduction of already domesticated cattle demanded fundamental shifts in human lifeways in order to effect their care and survival. Human lives had to be reoriented to accommodate access to pasture/fodder year-round, access to water sources with capacity

for sustaining large animals in addition to human groups would have been needed, as would ensuring the security of cattle to protect from predation/theft. Dairying would have demanded daily interactions and the development of trusting relationships between individual cattle and humans, whilst the processes associated with the storage and processing of dairy products would in turn have their own implications for human lives – the production and storage of pottery vessels that would have impact upon the practicalities of moving homesteads to accommodate requirements for pasture, etc. (Banfield 2018, 98). In short, the adoption of domestication in the British Isles was a complex process of mutual responsiveness articulated primarily through the interactions between humans and cattle, and it is by no means clear whether it was the human or non-human animal that was leading the dance.

Adoption of a Posthumanist approach to the evidence has enabled the tracing of entangled human-cattle relations, revealing agentic behaviour that transcends species. Through weaving together multiple strands of evidence – archaeological; behavioural; ecological – and exploring the complex relations emergent from the different assemblages

explored, and working across scales from that of the individual animal to species, from deposit to region, and crucially, by starting from a point of ontological flatness that gives space for the evidence to drive the emergent narrative, animal agency is revealed, enabling novel understandings of our shared past to unfold.

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