

Bjerck, Hein B. (2022) *Archaeology At Home: Notes on Things, Life, and Time*. Equinox. Sheffield and Bristol. 238pp. ISBN 9781800500723

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When does the past begin? Where does the “human” end and “nature” begin? These two questions form the basis of Hein Bjartmann Bjerck’s book *Archaeology At Home: Notes on Things, Life, and Time*, in which he blends personal narrative and intimate contemporary archaeologies with reflections on the practice of archaeology in relation to more traditional temporalities. Books that have “*Notes on...*” in the title may reasonably be expected to ruminate quite speculatively, drawing on conjecture and individual experience as well as empirically derived knowledge, and this book does all these things! Following Donna Haraway (1988), Bjerck advocates for what he terms “auto-archaeology”, oriented towards things and humans, in which the position of the archaeologist is intentionally exposed, rather than obscured through “the god-trick”. Bjerck posits that perhaps it is abandonment rather than archaism that is crucial for defining what “archaeology” is (p. 24).

The book comprises five chapters: an introduction; three portrait-style chapters, each dedicated to a home personal to the author; and a conclusion. A range of illustrations and photographs drawn from Bjerck’s personal archives and those of his family are interspersed throughout. For example, there are drawings that Bjerck made during his school days – a Stone Age man, a jungle scene, his childhood home, fighter jets – and wonderful photos of his family and their ‘things’ spanning the early 1920s to the very recent past. Relatives, friends, and colleagues feature as characters in the broader archaeological stories being told about three *homes* – not houses.

The introduction mixes theoretical perspectives with personal anecdote, dream narrative and imagining what it might be like to introduce a “Stoneager” to Bjerck’s twenty-

first century life in northern Norway. Bjerck defines Contemporary Archaeology as being an attempt to provide “deeper understanding of timeless human-thing entanglements – what things do to humans and vice versa” (p. 17). The book is located firmly within “thingly” theoretical frameworks, familiar to archaeological research groups of the European North: Symmetrical Archaeology, Actor Network Theory, Meshwork, Object-Oriented Ontology, Machine-Oriented-Ontology. Homes, according to Bjerck, are “thing-regimes that rule over and are ruled by humans, a very special and very common human-thing collective – ‘homes’ are ‘machines’” (p.28–29).

The next three chapters take each of the three “homes” in turn. The first is Bjerck’s father’s home, in which Bjerck grew up. The chapter is an equally joyful and mournful eulogy to the author’s father and the events and other *people and things* which co-constituted to transform a house into his family home. Reading the chapter felt almost voyeuristic in places, as Bjerck shares intimate details of his father’s passing and identifies how, in his father’s absence, “the home had changed to a constellation of things and material structures – an early phase of an archaeological site” (p. 35). Albeit without the intense personal memories which enrich Bjerck’s interpretations of his father’s things, the sense of the present becoming the past which he describes is familiar to me from recently “unpeopled” homeless encampments (Kiddey 2017, 85). The second home neighbours his father’s house and belonged to the author’s Uncle Faste (his mother’s brother). This chapter is the saddest, in my view, because the cosy home (which had belonged to Bjerck’s grandmother before his uncle) was destroyed by fire. Mercifully, Uncle Faste was not hurt in the blaze but the elderly man became “a man without things” (p. 109). As Lambros Malafouris (2019) has shown, our bodily engagement with things – our own material worlds – affects our minds, enabling or constraining our capacity to remember who – and where – we are. Although Uncle Faste was “re-furnished” with material things, he developed what Bjerck describes as a “growing

mistrust in his material surroundings” (p. 111). Uncle Faste experienced something akin to becoming a refugee – the obliteration of his known material home-environment left him partly unable to be fully himself. The final home is part of a Stone Age encampment, Åsgarden, situated on an island off the coast of northern Norway, which, together with colleagues, Bjerck rediscovered in the 1980s, and which has continued to shape the author’s career. This chapter is refreshing for the honesty with which Bjerck describes how archaeological sites are determined and researched and how such “archaeological treasure” (p. 131) features in the making of academic careers. The chapter draws on half a century of professional archaeological knowledge and experience to convey how rocks remember, likening lithic analysis to “studying past technical skills in a movie played backwards” (p. 136). Rather like how 9400-year-old projectile points and tiny charcoal embers excavated at Åsgarden found their way back into human hands in the late twentieth century, Bjerck’s charming, life-long fascination with archaeology bubbles up throughout the book, erupting in this chapter and enabling him to link deep past(s) with deep future(s), through things (p. 141).

The warmth, humour and personal reflexivity which pervade the book are very welcome. More “auto-archaeology”, I say! However, I was disappointed by the referencing. References provided are overwhelmingly (but not exclusively) to work undertaken by the Big Men (predominantly also, white) of archaeology and heritage studies (Olsen, González-Ruibal, Olivier, Harrison, Schofield) and human-environment-focused philosophy (Ingold, Macfarlane, Morton). Having read that Bjerck’s case studies were three homes, temporally separated by more than 9000 years, I anticipated their exploration in relation to a far greater variety of scholarship which deals with “home” and “time”. For example, Christine Finn’s long-running installation *Leave Home Stay* (Finn 2013), which involved excavating her childhood home after the death of her parents; Annelise Morris’ discussion of the materialities of homeplaces as “persistence” (Morris 2017); and Rachel Crellin’s recent work

on the nature of change in archaeology (Crellin 2020). Except for Harman, Harari and Bryant, Bjerck does not engage much with extensive relevant scholarship on “home” and materiality produced by non-Europeans. For example, Dante Angelo examined a burnt house in Chile (Angelo 2017), while Andrea Bowra and Angela Mashford-Pringle have shown that Indigenous homemaking practices are about “more than a structure” (Bowra and Mashford Pringle 2021). While I agree with Bjerck that “home” always necessarily involves “things”, I am troubled by his suggestion that “settlement” denotes “home” (p. 140). Home is made just as well through mobile “thing-regimes”. For example, many Aboriginal peoples did not traditionally use landscapes in the fragmentary way that developed from Eurocentric concepts of land ownership; rather, homelands were part of a more expansive whole (McCormack 2017). *Home on the move* lifeways of gypsies and travellers are increasingly criminalised through planning laws which enshrine exclusionary concepts of “home” (Garner 2019). Home, then, is a set of relationships *which includes* things. But to call a *place* home is a luxury afforded according to citizenship, personal finance, and cultural background.

I am fortunate to call a place home. It is a small house by the sea that *becomes home* when my children and dog share it with me. It is, just as Bjerck says, a “thing-regime” over which we – humans *and* dog – rule and which rules over us; the wind rattles the windows during storms such that, together, they wake us. The temperamental water pressure in the bathroom is an Overlord that soaks us whenever it feels so inclined. I cosied up to the wood-burner to read *Archaeology At Home* and Bjerck transported me to his part of the world, generously showing me all sorts of precious ordinary things, from antiquity to the recent past. He made me laugh and feel sad in equal measure. He made me think about things, life and time from new entanglements.

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