Too many ancestors

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Have ancestors replaces chiefs as the defining entity of prehistory? This provocative view from the Mediterranean world may provoke a little debate.

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My thesis is a simple one: there are too many ancestors in contemporary archaeological interpretation, and they are being asked to do too much. I begin with some quotations, taken more or less at random from a number of recent books and articles on British and European prehistory.

'It is in the common emphasis on the collective over the individual that we can trace a concern with ancestral forces' (Edmonds 1999p 61); 'The living will have visited Stonehenge . . . at certain moments to meet the ancestors, to communicate directly with them' (Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina 1998: 318); 'The megalithic monuments of Vastgöterland . . . must have encoded myths of origin. The bones of the ancestors of the population using the monuments were deposited in the chambers along a north–south axis which may well represent the propitious direction of the divine ancestral route.' (Tilley 1996: 210);'Ancestral powers and histories are sometimes vested in trees or stones, and spirits of the dead may be seen in their forms.' (Edmonds 1999: 21); 'the ancestors were invited to occupy stone houses, dark, quiet, and difficult of access, and cajoled to remain with the hospitality of gifts of food and stone' (Whittle 1996, 1); 'It is very likely that these sink holes . . . were conceived . . . as places where the ancestors entered and left the earth' (Tilley 1999: 238); 'The frequent presence of human remains is also significant: in a society where the dead seem to be of especial significance, the remains of the ancestral departed are overtly connected with the remains of fire and feasting' (Thomas 1991: 76); 'Often associated with human remains and sometimes built to incorporate existing long barrows, these enigmatic sites [cursuses] had a close association with ancestral rites' (Edmonds 1999: 104); 'The landscape simultaneously passes on and encodes information about the ancestral past' (Tilley 1994: 40); 'Not only does the Avebury–West Kennet evidence replicate the spatial segregation of the ancestors' stone-built space from the timber domain of the living, but it also provides a set of relationships similar to those for the Stonehenge–Durrington monuments' (Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina 1998: 319); 'Planting an axe signifying bone was an act of burying ancestral forces into the land ensuring fertility and regenerative powers' (Tilley 1996: 324); 'Inscribed with rich biographies, axes helped define relations between people and the ancestral world' (Edmonds 1999: 42).

A spectre is haunting British archaeology — the omnipresent ancestor. Ancestors were to the 1990s what chiefdoms (Yoffee 1993) were to the 1970s — the explanation of choice for a whole range of archaeological phenomena, from the siting of monuments within the landscape to the use of stone as opposed to wood in the construction of stone circles and henges. Like many recent developments in British prehistory, the universal ancestor has gone from being a suggestion to becoming an orthodoxy without ever having had to suffer the indignity of being treated as a mere hypothesis. Ancestors are everywhere, and everything is ancestral.

Unfortunately, those of us who work in other, more international fields of endeavour cannot afford to ignore this trend. British prehistory is influential. Masters and Ph.D. programmes offered by British universities remain popular with European students, students whose first introduction to theoretical archaeology is

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through the 'theoretical' interpretations currently popular in British prehistory. When students learn to 'apply' theory, what they actually 'apply' are these interpretations, especially to those classes of material which have the same romantic appeal. Like Stonehenge or Maes Howe, the palaces and tombs of Bronze Age Crete have a peculiar attraction to those seeking for an 'age of innocence' before capitalism or modernity. I can confidently predict that books with titles like 'Ancestral geographies of Minoan Crete' or 'A Cretan pheneomenology of landscape' will be published in the very near future. By 'apply', I mean exactly that — interpretations current in British prehistory will be stuck on to Cretan material. 'Ancestral rites' are to be performed at Mesara tholos tombs, rather as they might have been in the collective tombs of the Cotswold Severn variety; and Minoan palaces, as stone-built gathering places which bring people together for seasonal festivals, will soon come to resemble henges. The principal attraction of such all-purpose interpretations is that they circumvent the tedious business of undertaking contextual analysis, or testing specific models against the available evidence. This is what tends to happen with orthodoxies, and for this reason it becomes an urgent task to subject this orthodoxy to some kind of critique.

One form this critique might take would be ideological. Trigger (1984) makes a useful distinction between three kinds of archaeological practice (nationalist, imperialist, colonialist) that relate directly to the circumstances in which countries find themselves, and the ideological and political purposes to which archaeological evidence is put. British archaeology (and especially British prehistory) used to be imperialist, universal in scope and interested in the grand narrative of human history, a narrative which always somehow validate the imperial power's position as 'top nation'. In this light the particular prehistory of Britain provides a paradigm for events and processes observable elsewhere in the world. But with Britain's change of circumstances, British prehistory is becoming more particular, more nationalistic and more inclined to stress the uniqueness of the British sequence. The more unique the period appears(and nothing could be more unique than the British Neolithic), the more British it becomes. Nationalist archaeology is concerned with making people feel comfortable with their past. Interpretations which emphasize 'ancestors' are interpretations which help us to feel in touch with what survives from our Neolithic past, and interpretations too which will help to preserve these monuments, insofar as they help to convince the general public that they have a genuine connection to them. British archaeology, however, is not straightforwardly nationalist. A post- imperial archaeology with a strong dose of (sentimental) anthropological romanticism is necessarily different in subtle ways from the kind of nationalist archaeology we find in countries like Hungary or Bulgaria. It would take another paper to undertake such a critique.

My critique, then, will have to be empirical, theoretical and genealogical. By genealogical I mean — where has this ancestor hypothesis come from? There are two possible genealogies. One lies in the processual school of thought. The Saxe/Goldstein hypothesis (Goldstein 1981; Morris 1991) laid great emphasis on how funerals and burial places could be used to legitimate corporate, group rights by the continued use, over several generations, of the same 'formal, bounded disposal area'. Implicit in this idea is that such an area contained the remains of the corporate group's ancestors, to whom their descendants were indebted for the continued of the 'crucial, but limited' resource of land. Archaeologists quickly noted that monumental collective tombs (such as Western European megaliths) made the most magnificent bounded disposal areas (Renfrew 1976), and cast their eyes around for an appropriate ethnographic analogy. The Merina of Madagascar (Bloch 1971), agriculturalists who bury their dead collectively in monumental tombs located in ancestral villages, quickly became the ethnographic analogy of choice for a whole generation of Neolithic archaeologists, processual and post-processual alike. But, after the 1970s and early 1980s, this model was rarely invoked explicitly. Instead, it became a part of the 'theoretical unconscious' of Neolithic archaeology, omnipresent but rarely discussed.

There is, however, another possible genealogy. This too emphasizes the need for kinship-based agricultural groups to maintain links to ancestors in order to bolster claims to land that they themselves farm. Legitimation of titles to land through ancestral claims are not only an

integral part of the agricultural mode of production but are intrinsic to kinship-based relations of production. As the Marxist anthropologist Meillassoux (1972: 99) explains it:

> At all times the workers of one [agricultural] cycle are indebted for seed and food to the workers of the previous one and this cyclical renewal of the relations of production theoretically never ends. As time goes on, it amounts to a change in generation. But at any moment, one man, the oldest of the group, owes his subsistence to none of the living members of his community but only to the dead ancestors, while all the other members of the community are indebted to him.

For these reasons 'time and continuity become essential features of the economic and social organisation' (Meillassoux 1972: 99), which they had not been for hunter–gatherer societies, where the immediate returns on production provide no basis for a general sense of cultural 'indebtedness' to past generations. Agriculture is by contrast a peculiarly 'ancestral' mode of production precisely because current generations are indebted to the labour of previous generations. For Meillassoux, this sense of indebtedness provides the explanation for the frequency of 'ancestor worship' in small-scale, kinship-based agricultural societies. When the Neolithic was still considered to be primarily 'agricultural', such a sense of indebtedness helped to explain why Neolithic people felt an ideological need to mark out their 'ancestral lands' with monumental tombs (Bradley 1984: 15–21). It served to reinforce the 'processual' view that the veneration of ancestors is linked to maintaining claims to land.

The idea that ancestors are particularly important to agricultural, kinship-based societies is, then, one common to both processual and Marxist interpretative frameworks. It is also another one of those ideas that have come to archaeology from anthropology. Implicit in the current obsession with 'ancestors' is the notion that Neolithic Britain and northwest Europe are somehow analogous to those African, Asian and Malagasy agricultural societies where ancestors do indeed seem to be important. It is slightly odd then that the obsession with Neolithic 'ancestors' has increased in direct proportion to the degree that the 'agricultural' basis of these societies has been questioned (see Whittle 1996; Thomas 1991). No-one has yet come up with a theory that might explain why such hunter–fisher–gatherer-cum-horticulturalists might have been peculiarly prone to venerate their ancestors. The ethnographic and theoretical basis for the 'ancestor' idea has, then, become something of an embarassment. One would have to search long and hard to find any of these Neolithic scholars making explicit use of an ethnographic analogy. Only Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina (1998) invoke a particular relational analogy to justify their interpretation of Stonehenge and Avebury, and (unsurprisingly) their analogy comes from Madagascar (see also Parker Pearson 1999: 21–40).

It is difficult to find any theoretical grounds at all for holding on to ancestors in the British Neolithic. Indeed, if ancestors only come into the picture with the establishment of agriculture, then ancestors ought to be more prominent in interpretations of the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age than they should be for the Neolithic. One solution to this problem is to re-define an 'ancestor' in terms more suited to hunter–gatherer societies. Tilley (1994: 40–41; 1999: 235–8) seems to have such an ancestor in mind. His ancestors are the spirits of the Australian dreamtime, partly responsible for the creation and ordering of the world. But these animal spirits cannot accurately be described as ancestors. As the great African anthropologist, Meyer Fortes, pointed out (Fortes 1976: 4):

> It is clear that these [Australian] 'ancestors' — who are as often as not depicted as primordial animal species — are in no way comparable to the kind of ancestors who form a line of named, identifiable human progenitors such as we meet in Chinese or Tallensi lineage and clan systems. The Australian so-called ancestors are not conceptualized as procreators. They are not thought of as having been capable of begetting and bearing offspring as ancestors, strictly defined, must be deemed to have done.

No native Australian actually claims descent from these beings, and Tilley's careless use of the term 'ancestor' to describe them substantially weakens his argument.

But if these are not ancestors, then who is? A minimal definition of an ancestor is someone who has procreated, died but has descendants who remember him/her. 'Ancestors receive recognition insofar as their descendants exist and are designated as such' (Fortes 1976: 4).

Or, to quote another recent definition, 'the term ancestor is used in anthropology to designate those forebears who are remembered' (Bloch 1996: 43). Of course, ancestors need not be remembered as individuals, and called to mind through their names. They may be conceived in a generic sense, as part of a 'collective'. Still, most ethnographers have noted that ancestors are remembered first as individuals before sinking into a collective anonymity. And, being forebears, ancestors have to be linked to present generations through descent, through rituals that emphasize the idea of continuity, even if not always through a genealogy of named individuals. It follows, then, that not all the dead are ancestors, and not every fragment of human bone found in a barrow, cursus, causewayed enclosure or henge can be construed as evidence that these monuments were 'ancestral'. Indeed, ethnographic evidence (e.g. Goody 1962) suggests that human bodies buried in unusual places of subjected to unusual treatment are more likely to be those of social outcasts (that is, of the unquiet dead) than those of ancestors.

Second,'death by itself does not confer ancestorhood' (Fortes 1976: 7) — ancestorhood is an achieved status. In many African and East Asian societies the dead have to go through a series of 'rites of passage' before they can be considered 'ancestors' (Ooms 1976; Goody 1962). Ancestors are the elect of the dead, those whom later generations regard as important. Who counts as an ancestor in any particular society will vary according to patterns of kinship and property holding. Societies with strong patrilineal principles of descent will have different ancestors from those who have bilateral kinship patterns. In some African lineage-based societies, such as the Suku of the Congo, ancestors are simply the more elderly of the elders (Kopytoff 1971). In East Asian and other African societies, it is the relationship with identifiable, named ancestors that is important.

Third, rites of burial and rites of 'ancestor worship' are ritually and often spatially distinct. Ancestors are frequently revered in places which bear no obvious relation to the place of burial. Among the LoDagaba, ancestors are venerated in ancestral shrines located in byres (Goody 1962: 235–8 and 382–84); in Taiwan, ancestor shrines venerating named ancestors are located in a variety of places (in the home and in ancestral halls), but rarely at the place of burial (Wolf 1976; *cf.* Morris 1991: 152–4). When descent from a named individual ceases to be important, that individual ancestor is forgotten and ceases to be venerated (Goody 1962: 384–9).

Ancestors as described by ethnographers seem to bear little relation to the ancestors who haunt British prehistory. Neolithic ancestors seem to be more of the 'Malagasy' variety — collective and generic — not the named individuals from whom East Asian and African societies claim descent. These Neolithic ancestors are also, for the most part, benevolent. Only rarely is it acknowledged that there are circumstances in which one's ancestors can be anything but (Tilley 1996: 211; *cf.* Newell 1976a; Kerner 1976). With some honourable exceptions (e.g. Thomas 1991: 116; Whittle 1998), post-processual archaeologists are generally unwilling to distinguish between various kinds of ancestor. But this is a fatal oversight. If we cannot distinguish between different kinds of ancestor, we cannot make distinctions between the kinds of relationship that might have been established between the past and the present in the past, and we cannot arrive at interpretations that respect the specificity of the evidence we seek to understand. Furthermore, archaeologists often treat the burial of the dead and the veneration of ancestors as being much the same thing. Whilst there is some recognition that these rituals are distinct (e.g. Barrett *et al.* 1991: 47–51), it is still too often simply assumed that the place of burial will also be the place where ancestors are venerated. As ethnography shows, this assumption is unwarranted (Morris 1991).

Another area in which ancestors have been invoked of late is the re-use and re-interpretation of monuments. Despite Bradley's (1987; 1993: 117–21) cogent arguments against the old notion that any deliberate re-use of monuments requires 'continuity', still no-one seems to find it incongruous that it is ancestors who are, once again, called in to explain why tombs or other kinds of monument come to be re-used after a gap of several centuries (even when a monument is re-used for quite different purposes from its original function). It is only within a school of thought obsessed with ancestors that the destruction of giant Breton menhirs, and the incorporation of the fragments as capstones within the tombs of the Table des Marchands,

Er Vinglé and Gavrinis (Le Roux 1985), could be construed as being part of a new set of 'spatial and symbolic frameworks through which power/knowledge relations between ancestors, labour, kinship and human reproduction were reproduced' (Kirk 1993: 209). Such interpretations elide the crucial fact about the re-use of these menhirs — they involved the destruction of such monuments, followed by their radical re-interpretation.

Other interpretations of this type include Richard Hingley's view of the re-use of Neolithic chamber tombs for other purposes in the earlier Atlantic Iron Age of Scotland. Hingley (1996: 241) assembles an impressive body of stratigraphic, architectural and ceramic evidence against the view that such re-use is purely functional or 'accidental'. Such re-use cannot be mere happenstance, since the manner of the re-use seems to make explicit allusion to previous forms. Hingley suggests that 'ancestral memories' might be involved. Here Hingley privileges ethnography above folklore. For to anyone who knows anything of the stories that medieval and modern Scots and Irish weave around monuments of this type another hypothesis presents itself. In Ireland, ancient monuments are rarely associated with 'ancestors', but are commonly linked to previous (often alien) races, and to other, stranger creatures. In the tale of Seán na Bánóige, for example (O'Sullivan 1966: 192–203) a farmer finds treasure on an old fort on his land, which is connected in the story with the Norse. More commonly, however, modern Irish regard for ancient monuments takes a simpler form. The Irish simply avoid them. Other, more mischevious creatures live there.[1]

There is much to support the view that the folk beliefs of contemporary Scotland and Ireland have much in common with their Iron Age ancestors. Irish mythology frequently associates ancient monuments, not with ancestors, but with the earlier races, stories about which are known collectively as the 'Irish Book of Invasions'. So, for example, the stone-built forts of the Aran islands have been traditionally associated with the Fir Bolg (O'Rahilly 1946: 145–6). Beings more like modern fairies — the Tuatha Dé Danaan of Irish legend — were definitely associated with the Brú na Boínne, the three great Irish passage graves of Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth in early medieval times (O'Kelly 1982: 45–7; O'Rahilly 1946: 516). These were not originally conceived as ancestors.[2] Rather, they are alien, semi-divine beings, who are neither genetically nor genealogically connected to the present inhabitants (the Irish), but who still retain a powerful presence within the landscape and its monuments. They also inspired a degree of awe. When, in the 4th and 5th centuries AD, some Irish chose to deposit considerable quantities of bronze, silver and gold, together with a number of Roman coins, around the entrance to this great tomb (Carson & O'Kelly 1977), it is likely that it was the 'Tuatha Dé Danaan' who were the objects of veneration. Whether worshipping the Tuatha Dé Danaan or 'the old gods', one thing that these 4th-century Irish were not doing was appeasing or worshipping their ancestors.

Alien races of this type are much more common in folklore and archaeology than one might think. Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina (1998) mention one such race in their survey of Madagascan material (information mentioned only in passing, since it does not support their thesis). In 19th-century Northern Greece, the

1 This statement is based largely on my own observations and on conversations with Kieran O'Conor. The observations were made when walking around the ringforts and hillforts of Co. Sligo in the company of Kieran O'Conor and Rebecca Sweetman in 1995. I was particularly struck by the response to our visit to the hillfort and barrows on Cnoc na Sheagh ('hill of the fairies'), a small hill just outside the town of Tobercurry. The hill is no more than 15 minutes' walk from the town, but none of the locals we asked admitted to ever having visited the place. There is a great need for a general study of local attitudes to antiquities in modern Ireland.

2 This is not to say that the Brú na Boínne were never to become associated with important ancestors. In later centuries, the Uí Neíll, High Kings of Ireland, tried to associate themselves with these tombs by claiming descent from the Tuatha Dé Danaan (O'Kelly 1982: 46; O'Rahilly 1946: 516). But it seems clear that the association of these mounds with the Tuatha Dé Danaan came first, and the claim of the Uí Neíll second. As O'Kelly (1982: 46) points out, 'This [the association of the mounds with the High Kings of Tara] is an obvious re-writing of an old tradition by "historians" in Christian times and is probably an attempt to aggrandize the dynasty then living at Tara, the Uí Neíll, by associating them with the famous Brú'. Since there is a more general pattern of association of ancient mounds with the Tuatha Dé Danaan (O'Kelly 1982: 45–7), it seems that at Newgrange the association with this earlier race came first, and the ancestral claim of the High Kings of Tara second. In this light, the objects of veneration for those depositing the Roman coins, bronze and ironwork are unlikely to have been the 'ancestors' of the Uí Neíll.

folk tales collected by Kakridis (1978) record many instances where the 19th-century Orthodox Christian inhabitants (who referred to themselves as 'Romii' — Romans) associated Classical ruins with the lost, pagan race of the 'Hellenes' (this is before Greek nationalist propaganda convinced these 'Romii' that they were in fact 'Hellenes'). In earlier times, during the Archaic period, other stories circulated about previous races who had once peopled the land. We should not expect such stories to be entirely consistent with one another. Homer's heroes were not the only ancient race about whom tales were told in the 8th and 7th centuries BC. Hesiod (*Works and Days* 106–201) had an alternative story concerning the five races — Gold, Silver, Bronze, Heroes and Iron. Each of the three earlier race had been destroyed by Zeus; the heroes went to Elysium. Hesiod mentions however that the Gold and Silver races retained a presence in the land — the Silver '*hypochthonioi*', underground, and were still entitled to respect and even veneration (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 121–6).

What must be stressed about these Irish and Greek beliefs about previous races is that they emphasize discontinuity. These beings were not ancestors, but aliens; they had no genealogical or genetic relations with the present inhabitants. They nonetheless maintained a powerful presence in the land, and so became objects of respect and sometimes veneration. It is in this light, I have suggested, that we should interpret the offerings placed in earlier Bronze Age tombs, offerings which, for the most part, can be dated to the 8th and 7th centuries BC (Whitley 1995; see also West 1978: 181–3). Such offerings are generally modest, unlike contemporary offerings made to the gods. They are of short duration, lasting for no more than three generations and, unusually, are rarely accompanied by dedicatory inscriptions, such as we normally find in dedications to gods or Homeric heroes.[3]

It remains true, however, that these are cults which took place in and around tombs, and it is partly for this reason that Antonaccio (1995) invokes 'ancestors' as the likely objects of these modest cults. I myself find it hard to reconcile her observation that 'there is no continuity of burial (nor any sort of cult) in any single tomb from the Bronze Age through the end of the Iron Age (Antonaccio 1995: 245)' with her insistence that such cults represent an 'interest in ancestors' (Antonaccio 1995: 250). Veneration of ancestors — real, identifiable ones that is — requires continuity, at least of memory if not of cult. Everything that we know about Greece in the Early Iron Age suggests otherwise — that there was no continuity of memory connecting families in the Bronze Age with those in the 8th and 7th centuries BC. The only ancestors who could have been the recipients of such cults would be imaginary ones. There is, moreover, little to suggest that ancestors played a major role in the imagination of Archaic Greeks — whereas there is much to suggest that gods, heroes and other races did. The ruined landscape of Archaic and Classical Greece was not peopled by ancestors, but by other races and other powerful presences (it was the Cyclopes, after all, who were thought responsible for building the walls of Tiryns), whose remains required a degree of respect that sometimes manifested itself in cult.

Though it was a country richly peopled with imaginary beings, there is nothing 'ancestral' about the phenemenology of the landscape of Archaic Greece. Indeed, to invoke 'ancestors' in this way is to level the hills, mountains and springs of Greece to the flat plain of ethnographic, cross-cultural generalization — to make Parnassus resemble the Fens. One of the great claims made by 'interpretative' or 'post-processual' archaeologists was that their interpretations, being contextual, respected the particularity of the time, people and period they were trying to examine, and were thus a humane alternative to the processual insistence on cross-cultural laws, or the processual habit of classifying societies into types in some grand evolutionary scheme. It is surely one of the ironies of modern archaeology that it is these same 'interpretative' or 'post-processual' archaeologists, who are now so keen on ancestors, ancestors who are omnipresent and omnicompetent. For these ancestors really can do anything — a spot of legitimation here; a touch of phenemonological meaning there. And they are everywhere: in cursuses, any barrow (whether or not it contains human bone); in the ditches of henges and causewayed enclosures; and in

3 For the Menidi tomb, see Wolters 1899; Antonaccio 1995: 104–9. For a variety of views on tomb cults and hero cults, see Snodgrass 2000; Antonaccio 1995; Whitley 1995. The most recent overview on this popular subject is Mazarakis Ainian 1999.

any Atlantic Iron Age house that may have used some stone from nearby chambered tomb.

All this suggests to me that the 'ancestor hypothesis' is 'over determined'. That is, it is determined by outside factors that have little to do with its merits as an academic argument; determined perhaps by a desire for roots on the part of people whose own kinship networks must be amongst the most truncated in Europe. We have fewer and fewer concrete links with our own identifiable ancestors, so we look for generic ancestors in the distant past. The search for ancestors is then part of the continuing Romance of British prehistory, a romance which the current interest in 'phenomenological' approaches has, if anything, reinforced. Such proprietary romanticism can make British prehistory less than critical, as Hodder (2000) has pointed out.

British prehistory needs to regain its critical edge. If we really want interpretations that respect the particularity of the evidence we are seeking to explain, we will have to treat ancestors with greater circumspection than archaeologists are wont to do at present. Ancestors should cease to be the interpretation of first resort, and more distinctions should be made between different kinds of ancestor. British prehistorians should also look at alternative hypotheses for the re-use and re-interpretation of monuments, and I would like to suggest that alien and previous races should form one of these (though I also hope it will remain a heterodox, not an orthodox, opinion).

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