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# Past Bodies

*Body-Centered Research in Archaeology*

edited by

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# Body theory in archaeology

*Dušan Borić and John Robb*

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## **Context: A Nascent Archaeology of the Body**

The body in archaeology is both omnipresent and invisible. Bodily matters are tangible in the archaeological record in a way most other theoretical centralities never appear to be. Ancient bodies surround us, in representations, in burials, in the nourished senses behind foodways, in hands holding tools, in the responsive presences centred within architecture and monuments. This omnipresence reflects both the position of the body in the centre ground of social theory and its materiality and concreteness.

Yet, invisibility: in spite of this, there is surprisingly little published work on the body in archaeology. Three traditions of study have raised this theme. The oldest is the art-historical study of how the body has been represented in the arts, particularly in Classical art. Secondly, critical discussion of the body is implicit in the tradition, now over two decades old, of gender and feminist archaeology, which problematises the relationship between the physical body and ascribed or performed genders. A decade more recently, the introduction of phenomenological thought to archaeology raised the issue of how experience is an embodied process and launched diverse lines of inquiry into the archaeology of the sensing body. Each of these has made important contributions, but they have remained bounded enclaves within archaeological theory, at odds with one another theoretically, and limited by their own purview. For example, prehistorians have generally repudiated the canonical study of body representations; approaches to the body deriving from feminism have rarely been extended even to questions of other dimensions of identity such as age (but see Gilchrist 2000; Moore and

Scott 1997), and the phenomenological 'archaeology of the senses' remains focused upon a narrow range of prehistoric topics.

The 'body's career in archaeology' (to paraphrase Csordas 1999) remains shadowy and understated. There is increasing interest and a smattering of journal articles on the topic, but they tend to be disparate rather than integrated. Among book-length treatments, Rautman's edited *Reading the Body* (1999) and Montserrat's edited *Changing Bodies, Changing Meanings. Studies on the Human Body in Antiquity* (1998) are principally works on gender, and works such as Bailey's *Prehistoric Figurines* (2005) and Sofaer's *The Body as Material Culture* (2005) focus upon particular topics. Hamilakis, Pluciennik and Tarlow's *Thinking through the Body* (2001) provided a key introductory work, but one which has been undeservedly poorly circulated. Meskell and Joyce's co-authored *Embodied Lives* (2003) is the most prominent book-length treatment. It provides essential reading; yet it presents one of a number of possible theoretical viewpoints, and deals principally with questions of death and representation in high civilisations. Aside from this, there is remarkably little literature available upon what is increasingly widely acknowledged to be a key topic in current archaeological theory.

Different books serve our needs in different ways. To take an example, Gero and Conkey's *Engendering Archaeology* (1991) was a collection of disparate essays, some of which have stood the test of time better than others, and in many ways it has been superseded by more theoretically nuanced and in-depth studies. Yet, as the first widely read introduction to gender archaeology, it stimulated archaeological thought much more effectively than any monographic treatment

presenting a single perspective with meticulous documentation and hair-splitting theoretical acuteness. Ten or fifteen years from now, the archaeology of the body will need the latter. What it needs now is something more broad, varied and synthetic, to provoke the imagination and map out new territories: something bringing together the diverse strands of an emerging perspective to provide a guide to the range of possibilities, both in terms of theoretical approach and methods. This is the purpose of this volume.<sup>1</sup>

### Theorising Past Bodies

One may ask the following question: are physical bodies simply shells for the hidden true nature within, where the configuration of one's features masks the true person inside? Contrary to such a view, one of the great American novelists, Saul Bellow, argued for a refreshed phrenology, focusing, for instance, on the human head as characterological map. He describes the features of the body in a belief that human flesh has no secrets: the decay of one's body reads the decay of one's soul for Bellow. Marilyn Strathern once remarked that the body is a museum of one's life. And, one may add, bodies are also museums of long-term historical processes that continue to structure the conditions of social existence in every corner of the globe. It is true that the mere difference in facial features or the colour of one's skin or eyes in a very physical way structure the reality of social interactions. We may safely assume that in the past, social conditions of existence relied on the appearance and form of the corporeal body and meanings that gave rise to or rules and control that they were subject to.

Despite its apparent relevance, it is only in the last couple of decades that the body became one of the central theoretical topics of current sociological, philosophical and anthropological debates, strongly influencing certain strands of research in other related disciplines, including archaeology or the Classics. In this way, these fields of study through the newly chosen focal point – the body, serving as a sort of theoretical proxy – readdressed and recharged much older themes and debates, such as materialism, essentialism, subjectivity and self-identity, social basis of behaviour, ideology, social inequalities, sex/gender differences, etc. Yet, this peculiar discovery of the body by social theory in particular can closely be related to the wider cultural and political context of the present-day, described by some authors as late capitalist consumer society (Featherstone 1990, 1991) or high modernity (Giddens 1990). The increasing individualism of the present-day culture is centred around the body, as a

primary signifier, with its resultant commodification through the capitalist mode of production. The legitimate question hence is whether all this 'fuss about the body' (Bynum 1995) is a mere reflection of our current social and historical condition?

Two main strands of thought in body theory were previously identified as naturalistic and social constructionist views of the body. Both have been found guilty of either undermining the social reality in which the bodies are immersed as the case is with naturalistic approaches or by subjugating the physical body to the inescapable rule of discursive formations as with social constructionist approaches. Consequently, there have been attempts to transcend and overcome these naturalist and discursive essentialisms by stressing unfinishedness of the body at birth (Turner 1992), phenomenology of embodiment and lived experience (Csordas 1999; cf. Merleau-Ponty 1962; Turner 1984), processes of subjectification (Giddens 1991) and the need to take the corporeality of the body seriously (Shilling 1993: *passim*).

We envision that the way this collection of works on past bodies may enrich the field of body theory is by looking at how the attitudes toward the body changed historically, focusing on both important differences and similarities in the ways embodied individuals lived their lives in particular historical and social contexts (e.g., Bynum 1995; Elias 1994; Meskell 2002).

Here, we would like to try identifying main trends for intellectual inspiration of archaeologists in their difficult task of tacking between, on the one hand, sophisticated theoretical nuances that various bodies of social theory and anthropology provide, and, on the other hand, the plenitude of not easily decipherable material and textual data that are the core edifice of our discipline. In this way, it becomes instructive to see the patterning of association between a particular type of theory and the quality of data for particular chronological periods at archaeologists' disposal. We will try to list specific bodies of theory that archaeologists working with particular chronological periods have found relevant and have utilised to date. We will also try to indicate briefly some possible shortcomings of certain approaches and to suggest what perspectives might have remained under-explored.

1) One social theorist that has appealed widely to archaeologists is Pierre Bourdieu (1990; see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). His concepts of *habitus*, i.e., ingrained practices that constitute a particular life-way on an infra-conscious level, and *doxa* for many archaeologists have had the immediacy of the familiar. After all, in an attempt to recognise particular patterns in the accumulative nature of the archaeological record, often

without elaborate mortuary or representational data, it is these ingrained daily practices that archaeologists remain hopeful in identifying as evidence for the existence of people's specific daily routines. The use of the notion of routinised, repeated bodily practices has had its application in diverse archaeological accounts that ranged from micromorphological analyses of building floors in the Near Eastern tells (e.g., Mathews *et al.* 1997) to discussions on the formation of self-identity among Bronze Age warriors (e.g., Treherne 1995). Yet, a critique of Bourdieu's notion of *doxa* as the main principle structuring the societies of the Ancients has been raised. It has been argued that it limits the understanding of pre-modern societies to the sets of highly scripted routines instead of exploring an active intention and agency (cf. Smith 2001). In Adam Smith's words, 'we must actively resist the construction of rigid boundaries that set the ancient apart from the modern as an ontologically distinct "other"' (Smith 2001: 157).

An additional aspect of Bourdieu's theory that remains attractive for archaeologists relates to the question of subjectification in the past as a historical trajectory of an ever-increasing emphasis on the bounded individual. Sociologists, such as Bourdieu and Giddens (1991), in their accounts build on the assumed differences between pre-modern, traditional societies and what Giddens calls 'high modernity'. In European Prehistory, Julian Thomas (1991: 142) and Paul Treherne (1995: 122) capitalise on this argument when postulating the change from identities more anchored in a social group than within an individual as characteristic of the Neolithic period, while arguing for a greater awareness about the bounded entity of an individual self in the Copper and Bronze Ages of European Prehistory. Without denying important diachronic changes in the processes of subjectification, Giddens's sharply postulated difference between moderns and pre-moderns regarding the notions of body, individuality and self-identity can again be subject to criticism for its rather essentialist and deterministic dichotomy of separating 'native' and 'modern' bodies. One might need to abandon altogether the search for the origins of individuation and subjectification, seeing no essential differences between moderns and pre-moderns (Berger 1990; Shilling 1993: 180). Even the typically rehearsed point about the Western idea of the boundedness of self is a rhetorically exaggerated, more apparent than real difference. Thus, in a Western society, similarly to various groups of 'pre-moderns,' one can identify figurations of mutually interdependent individuals (Elias 1994, 1983: 209). At the same time, to claim this is not to deny varying regimes of different cultural contexts in imposing boundaries to the constitution of

self and politics of individuation (e.g., Bynum 2001; papers in Lambek and Strathern 1998; Meskell 1996: 13).

Most recently, agency theory has strongly influenced a lot of archaeological writing about the conduct of past bodies (e.g., Dobres and Robb 2000). These discussions of agency in archaeology can again be traced back to the writings of Bourdieu (1990) but also Giddens (1979) and previous philosophical writings on intentionality and free-will subject. The predicament of cause-effect in agency theory has important moral implications for the accountability of the agent. Yet, in archaeology, the agenda of agency theory has been appropriated in emphasising the importance of acting individuals and their relations to dominant structures, which individuals are shaped by and which they create at the same time. Agency theory has helped archaeologists in discussing practical engagements in the world as well as in the analytical dissection of the scale on which agency of subjects may operate: from an individual to the agency of social groups and the material world that surrounds us. And, it is exactly the question of materiality that has most recently been discussed in relation to the body and material things, while one anthropological work has played an especially important role: *Art and Agency* by Alfred Gell (1998). Although Gell was concerned primarily with art objects and the idea of their agency, his discussion became a seminal work for discussing the agency of objects and material culture in general. Can material things have agency (and intentionality) or only second-class agency via a mediating subject as argued by Gell? Should the term be confined strictly to the acting (human?) subject? Can animals be said to have human-equivalent agency? All these questions depend on a particular ontological perspective. Very often, recent discussions of agency theory in archaeology have conflated two quite separate ideas of agency and intentionality: our own Western ontology of intentionality and agency, on the one hand, and quite diverse ontologies of the non-Western peoples and possibly also those human groups who inhabited the past, on the other hand. In order to understand what might have harmed, cured, affected, pleased or killed bodies in the past we need to search for and reconstruct specific ontologies of intentionality and agency in our case-studies. Only in this way will we understand in what ways were bodies in the past lived and died.

2) Another critical influence for the way in which (mainly) prehistoric archaeologists discuss the body in the past are ethnographic and anthropological studies. The most influential in this respect has been the work of Marilyn Strathern in Melanesia, to the point that the warnings have been raised that the

personhood in European Prehistory, and Neolithic in particular, acquired 'a Melanesian flavour' (Jones 2005: 195)! Several recent accounts probe various bodies of archaeological data with Strathern's (1988) and Roy Wagner's (1991) concepts of *dividual* and *fractal* persons (e.g., Fowler 2004; Chapman 2000). This is certainly the most useful way to defamiliarise characteristically Western conception of the bounded individual. Yet, here as well one may raise the critique that the difference between the West and its 'others' is frequently overemphasised. Both individuality and dividuality are properties of humans and, as LiPuma argues, '*persons emerge precisely from that tension between individual and dividual aspects/relations*' (LiPuma 1998: 57).

3) The next significant influence for many archaeologists in discussing past bodies is of course Michael Foucault. In his earlier writings, Foucault envisions past bodies as mere social constructions of a historically dominant *episteme* that strongly governs individual lives (Foucault 1970). In those accounts that adopted this kind of social constructionist position in archaeology, the body is seen as a passive tool of control over the society. It is merely a means for the playing out of larger structures that deliver fixed meanings: 'the *body as artefact*' and 'the *body as the scene of display*' as Lynn Meskell argues (1996: 6–7, 1998). In such accounts of past bodies all one encounters are 'faceless blobs' to use Ruth Tringham's catchphrase (1991). And social constructionist accounts of past bodies in archaeology have been presented frequently along with a Marxian conception of ideology as false consciousness.

It is only fair to remember that in his later writings, Foucault himself turned to the question of subject by discussing techniques of the self and care for the self (Foucault 1985, 1986, 1988). It is the appropriate conduct in terms of the techniques of the self that he identified as critical for moral existence. Body is central in this context as well as individual and social agency. This concept of the techniques of self is based on the ancient Greek conception of *paraskeuē*, i.e., equipment that aids one when 'confronting and coping with external events and internal passions' (cf. Rabinow 2005: 10). For instance, in his discussion of the constitution of Bronze Age warriors' identity through specific practices, the use of particular types of artefacts for the care of the body, and in the development of a particular ethos, Paul Treherne (1995) identifies such practices of the care for self within the European Bronze Age. And such an approach may have a great applicability across various archaeological case studies.

4) The perspective that dominates more recent accounts about the body in the past and tries to rectify the inadequacies of the social constructionist

perspectives focuses on *embodiment*, i.e., the way people lived their lives in the past (see Csordas 1999). Such paradigm belongs to the phenomenological tradition of thought and can be traced to the writings of Merleau-Ponty (1962). The paradigm of embodiment in the discussion of lived bodies in archaeology has most explicitly been applied recently by Lynn Meskell in the context of dynastic Egypt and by Rosemary Joyce in the Mesoamerican context (Joyce 1996; Meskell 1999, 2002; Meskell and Joyce 2003). These authors combine both archaeological and textual data in their analyses, something not always easily done in prehistoric case studies. This approach also evokes aspects of performative and gender theory as discussed by Judith Butler (1990, 1993) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994). The embodiment paradigm in archaeology certainly helps put faces on those previously mentioned 'faceless blobs' from the past and it importantly resonates with the concerns of third wave feminism for underprivileged sites of inquiry, be it the lives of children, disabled and other 'etceteras' of ordinary life (e.g., Gilchrist 2000; Moore and Scott 1997), trading grand narratives for microhistories (cf. Ginzburg 1993; Lyotard 1984). Yet, it could be that the paradigm of embodiment also suffers from its share of methodological problems. For instance, one could say that through the paradigm of embodiment, the *stability* is preferred to the *processuality* of bodily configurations. The individual frequently remains constituted in advance with a given set of parameters.

5) Voices of Americanists that work with Amazonian ethnography, for instance, warn against 'human exceptionalism' that predominates in the paradigm of embodiment. What Amazonian ethnography evokes is the idea of instability of bodies that are constructed as 'relational configurations', where the self-image is reshaped through constant processuality that characterises social reality (Taylor 1996; Viveiros de Casto 1998, 2004). The defining feature between different classes of animate and inanimate beings is, then, the capacity for metamorphosis (Vilaça 2005; cf. Ingold 2000a, 2000b). Such perspective acknowledges an unstable reality of perpetual change that affects both the bodies of humans, animals, and other-than human beings.

This conceptualisation of unstable and shifting physical bodies that are perpetually threatened and prone to change may not be only the feature of Amazonian ethnography. Several archaeological discussions that focus on the mutability of the body form and its relation to social identity have primarily come from the scholars working on prehistoric societies (Borić 2005; Conneller 2004; Miracle and Borić this volume; Yates 1990) or those working on social contexts

rich in iconography, added by written sources (e.g., Meskell and Joyce 2003). The theme runs in many other cultural and chronological contexts. For instance, the fear of metamorphosis and instability of the body form has been explored by Caroline Walker Bynum in the context of medieval Europe, the topic present in popular fables about werewolves around the year AD 1300 as well as in the theological discussions of St. Augustine whose teachings strongly denied the existence of such transformations (Bynum 2001). The same theme also appears in the modernist age, in the work of Franz Kafka, who calls the emergent cough that led to his death, the 'animal' inside (Benjamin 1968: 132). Kafka remains obsessed with the transformation from human form into the state of animality, i.e., death.

It is not here the place to explore this subject further, but we use it to emphasise the point that instead of drawing only on differences between specific periods of the past in conceptualising and theorising bodies, one may also change the perspective and explore what themes and ways of conceptualising the body remain the same across social, cultural and temporally distinct contexts. Furthermore, for specific regional traditions, or 'culture areas', we may also explore the long-term persistence of specific ways of living and caring about one's body, similar to the parallels that Michael Rowlands (1998) makes between the traditional focus on the body through metaphors of protection and feeding and bodily practices in legitimising power of current political leaders in sub-Saharan Africa.

In sum, a number of accounts that focus on the past bodies by both social theorists and those archaeologists who make the use of existing aspects of specific sociological and anthropological bodies of theory have been focusing on drawing differences in the construction of bodies between different periods in the past, and between the past and the present. And, there is no doubt about the importance of such studies to understand the variability of bodily practices for the construction of specific identities in the past and the present. However, too frequently these accounts have drawn sharp demarcation lines between what is considered the conditions of 'modern' social reality and those of pre-modern, traditional, pre-industrial societies, arguing for radically different ways of being a person on different ends of this rather arbitrary temporal barrier. We would suggest that we perhaps also need to focus on those aspects of body, identity and processes of subjectification that represent a common tread between different epochs. Thus, can we suggest some joint themes and provide a fruitful comparative perspective? Furthermore, can we follow specific trajectories of attitudes toward the body in specific regional contexts, focusing both on changes

and similarities that become apparent in the treatment of one's body in life and death over the long-term?

### **The purpose and organisation of the book**

The articles in this volume span the entire range of human societies from the hunter-gatherers of the Upper Palaeolithic through modern British populations. The bulk of them refer to the European sequence, but there are important discussions of Near Eastern, North American and Mesoamerican cases as well. The variety of the volume has three important theoretical implications. First, it underscores the productive richness of the concept of the body in archaeology. Secondly, it shows that the archaeology of the body is not the monopoly of a single province of archaeology, particularly the data-rich neighbourhoods. A major barrier to every theoretical advance in the last twenty-five years has been the prejudice, still widely current, that 'theory (or symbols, or gender, or agency, or social relations, or ritual experience...) are all very well, but you can only do them where you have texts (or pyramids, or figurines, or megaliths...) – not in my field'. By introducing the archaeology of the body with case studies spanning the range of human societies and archaeological situations, we make it more likely that an interested seeking analytical strategies will find something useful to her/his particular situation. Finally, it means that papers articulate with, and juxtapose, a range of theoretical approaches within archaeology and cognate disciplines which have been associated with particular topics such as the Aegean Bronze Age, Classical sculpture or Mesoamerican political iconography.

The volume is organised into four sections, which group papers by general themes or approach in order to draw attention to cross-disciplinary linkages. The first section presents introductory or general perspectives; the goal is to mark out the landscape for readers new to the topic. It includes this general introduction to social theories of the body and an overview of relevant archaeological methodologies. The second section presents studies of the represented body and the third studies of the body in death; it is hoped that such groupings will help readers see both commonalities and divergences in how the body has been approached in different traditions of archaeology, history and art history. The final section contains studies which cut across traditional domains of study such as representation and burial and focus upon the socially contextualised body at particular historical moments. In the end, critical notes on the field are provided by Chris Shilling.

## Note

- 1 This volume is a collection of essays resulting from two symposia. Both were held under the auspices of the Leverhulme Research Programme 'Changing Beliefs of the Human Body.' This research programme, based at Cambridge University, brings together researchers in Archaeology, Anthropology, Classics and History to compare studies of how beliefs and practices involving the human body changed at key points in human history from the Palaeolithic through the present. Both symposia involved a stimulating mixture of programme participants and outside speakers. The first, 'Past Bodies,' was held in Cambridge on January 13, 2006. The second, 'Acting and Believing: An Archaeology of Bodily Practices', was held at the Society for American Archaeology meetings at San Juan, Puerto Rico, on April 4, 2006. Not all of the oral presentations reached this volume. Yet, we are grateful to the participants of both symposia for their active and stimulating discussions, which are to some degree represented on the pages that follow.

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