



## Book Reviews

### **PAST BODIES: BODY CENTRED RESEARCH IN ARCHAEOLOGY, EDS DUŠAN BORIĆ AND JOHN ROBB**

Oxford, Oxbow Books: 2008. 151 pages; 59 figures; ISBN 978-184217-341-1 (£30.00)

This book tackles a very specific area of current theoretical development whilst taking in an extremely wide range of periods, world regions and areas of study. The human body stands at the interface between all other subjects of study in archaeology. As the editors state in their introduction: 'the body is both omnipresent and invisible'. One way or another, all areas of archaeological investigation and interpretation start with and at some point return to the place or status of the human body in relation to the evidence being considered whether these involve landscapes, dwellings, food remains, burials, artefacts or artistic representation. However, many past archaeologies can be argued to have suffered from 'body-shaped holes' where the human body has been present by implication but out of reach in terms of direct theory. This book proposes to bring together and hopefully draw attention to a range of possibilities in the way such holes might be filled in different contexts and perspectives and should therefore hold a degree of interest for a wide range of readers from diverse specialisms within archaeology.

The book comes on the heels of some important publications regarding the way the body is approached by archaeologists including Sofaer's (2005) *The body as material culture* and Hamilakis *et al.* (2001) *Thinking through the body*. However, despite its format as a collection of papers, this is not a book that seeks simply to point out variations, essentially saying 'hey –isn't it funny how different people think about the body differently?' but rather seeks to highlight common threads and themes that have wider currency and relevance beyond the immediate context in which they are explored in their individual chapters. The book is methodically organised into four sections, the first of which serves as a general introduction to the subject matter and the kinds of approaches recently applied to considering ways the body may have been understood by past societies. The second section deals with representations of the body, whilst the third focuses on treatments and attitudes surrounding the body in death. The book is rounded off with a section that considers the social contexts which have shaped and defined differing ways of regarding the body at particular points in time and space.

In the first section Douglas Bailey's chapter *the corporeal politics of being human in the Neolithic* concerns itself with the interpretation of the ceramic figurines characteristic of the Neolithic of the Danube region. Taking an approach rooted in psychological theory this chapter makes a number of interesting points about the nature of simplification and stereotyping and also about the psychological effects of conceptualising things (and experiences) in miniature. Ultimately however this chapter succeeds more in producing a set of questions than in arriving at any specific conclusions, beyond generalising points about the increasing corporeality of Neolithic conceptual life. This may in fact have been the author's intention although the chapter does beg the question of whether awareness of the body was really felt more acutely in the Neolithic as opposed to simply finding expression in a more archaeologically visible medium in the form of figurines. Simon Stoddart and Caroline Malone's chapter on prehistoric Malta is clearly written and makes the subject easily accessible to those unfamiliar with the topic. In considering funerary practices in particular this piece amply demonstrates how a range of inferences can be drawn about a given society's attitudes to the body and by extension to the nature of persons (living and dead). The chapter also serves to underline how changes in funerary treatments and artistic representations of the body and increasing social complexity may be closely interlinked, acting as mutual signifiers that may be read by taking a sufficiently holistic approach. The chapter serves as a concise demonstration of the way careful observation of such changes can offer the possibility of producing narratives somewhere close to broad 'histories' of long-scale change in a given society where written sources are lacking. Although, in places a more measured approach to some of the data would have been preferred, for example in illustrating body part representation within prehistoric tombs it is not made clear whether the numbers given represent numbers of individuals, numbers of bones or even simply numbers of fragments. This is important as these are quite different propositions.

Robin Osbourne's chapter tackles a subject area more familiar to classical archaeologists and art history based scholars of the differing representation of the body in classical Greek statuary. This chapter presents an encapsulated and succinct essay on both the constraints imposed on representation by the functions a piece is intended to fulfil and also the pitfalls of interpreting such works from too narrow a viewpoint. Rosemary Joyce's piece on Mesoamerican figurines finds parallels with both Bailey's and Osbourne's chapters in exploring the choices faced by the makers of body imagery. This chapter makes interesting points regarding the way anthropomorphic ceramic vessels with their hard exteriors and fluid contents may provide insight into the way living human bodies were perceived. The text of this piece is engaging, although the chapter suffers from a marked lack of illustration where images of the vessel types discussed would seem an obvious inclusion.

The following chapter by Chris Fowler covers 'fractal' theory and discusses a mode of thinking that views both whole bodies and body parts as microcosmic reflections of the workings of the wider environment/ universe. Whilst such

concepts have been well explored elsewhere, the main contribution of this piece is in showing that such thinking is not confined to tribal societies in regions such as Melanesia but can also be observed in less obvious contexts such as classical civilization and by extension Medieval Europe. He then goes on to apply this theme specifically to the example of earlier Neolithic funerary practice providing a framework which sits very well with the evidence whilst also building on the thoughts of earlier commentators. This chapter is succeeded by a discussion of changing funerary treatments in Bronze Age central Europe by Marie Louise Stig Sørensen and Katharina Rebay. This forms a useful case study in the way changes in funerary practices may be interpreted in relation to the underlying beliefs associated with them, although I suspect these authors might have more to say on the subject given longer to work on their data.

A particular favourite of mine is Sarah Tarlow's chapter on *the extraordinary history of Oliver Cromwell's head*. Embalmed, displayed, buried, exhumed, 'executed', displayed again, lost, found, lost again and finally investigated by anthropologists in the 1930s before its ultimate reburial in 1960, Cromwell's head had a 'life' and a history of its own that rivals that of its owner in terms of what it can illustrate about the changing face of society since the early modern period. Tarlow is quite correct in identifying the way the treatment of a single item, in this case a body, part can act as a microcosm of attitudes and beliefs in wider society which may be neither fixed nor static over time.

In contrast to other entries Slobodan Mirovic's chapter *Fresh scars on the body of archaeology* which covers the excavation of recent mass graves in Serbia, is both stark and immediate and serves to underline the fact that the last word is far from being written on the cultural significance of the body. Unlike other pieces in the book the bodies encountered by the archaeologist here are neither distant nor abstract but raw, personal and in fact, still decomposing. This piece is a sobering read amongst an otherwise often light-hearted and optimistic collection of academic writing and I would recommend it to anyone not already familiar with the contribution that continues to be made by archaeologists to the investigation of human rights violations.

Partly because of its distance from the present but also due to the quality of the writing John Robb's chapter on 'meaningless' violence among the 17th century Huron is as entertaining as it is enlightening. Arguably the most visceral chapter in the book this piece will appeal both to novice's and experts in the archaeology of violence as a well explained and cogently argued example of the extent to which acts of physical aggression cannot be understood in purely behavioural terms and will only ever make sense when considered in their specific cultural context. The remainder of this section concentrates similarly on cultural settings, continuing the variation seen elsewhere in the book with chapters on human and animal body images in the Natufian, the sword as an embodiment of activity in Mycenaean Greece and the depiction of the bodies of Maya kings. In the penultimate chapter Nan Rothschild's work finds parallels with Sarah Tarlow's in contrasting the physical with the social body, although in this case considering the impacts of colonisation on the bodies of both colonisers and the colonised. Here the effects of colonisation on the body are considered in terms of disease and biological stress, violence, body modification, clothing and personal adornment. The text also emphasises the extent to which such effects are often mutual rather than simply being unidirectional from coloniser to colonised. This chapter proposes only to scratch the surface of a complex and varied set of phenomena but does so very successfully in a thoughtful and well informed manner. The discussion also touches upon current debates regarding the ethics of research on human remains. However, this section was slightly frustrating as whilst some of the principal issues and viewpoints are outlined the author's position remains unclear.

The final chapter by Chris Shilling draws the volume together and underlines the point that not one but many 'archaeologies of embodiment' are now emerging. In some areas such approaches are more developed than others, for example the admittedly still relatively new discipline of human osteoarchaeology remains in a process of transition from a point of being seriously theoretically underpowered just a few years ago to a position of considerably greater maturity. In fact I would have liked to see more chapters dealing directly with human remains and their status as embodied 'records' of lived experiences and interactions, but this is purely personal preference. Arguably this is a volume that is greater than the sum of its parts, with the works presented offering something for practically everyone. Overall, this book represents a useful and stimulating contribution towards publicising and widening current debates in this area to audiences both within and beyond archaeology and I have no hesitation in recommending it. The study of British rock art is flourishing as never before, and these two books are both outstanding contributions to the field, although markedly different in content and approach.

#### **References**

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