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978-0-521-19528-7 - The Body in History: Europe from the Palaeolithic to the Future

Edited by John Robb and Oliver J. T. Harris

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The Body in History: Europe from the Palaeolithic to the Future

This book is a long-term history of how the human body has been understood in Europe from the Palaeolithic to the present day, focusing on specific moments of change. Developing a multi-scalar approach to the past, and drawing on the work of an interdisciplinary team of experts, the authors examine how the body has been treated in life, art and death for the last 40,000 years. Key case-study chapters examine Palaeolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age, Classical, Medieval, Early Modern and Modern bodies. What emerges is not merely a history of different understandings of the body, but a history of the different human bodies that have existed. Furthermore, the book argues, these bodies are not merely the product of historical circumstance, but are themselves key elements in shaping the changes that have swept across Europe since the arrival of modern humans.

John Robb is Reader in European Prehistory at Cambridge University. He has worked extensively in Central Mediterranean prehistory, archaeological theory and human skeletal studies, and is the author of *The Early Mediterranean Village* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). He edits the *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* and is currently researching prehistoric art in Europe.

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John Robb

University of Cambridge

Oliver J. T. Harris

University of Leicester



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Preface

Every book has a story behind it. This book originated in a five-year (2005–2009) research project coordinated at Cambridge University by John Robb and involving all the contributors; Oliver J. T. Harris joined the project in 2007 to work with John on synthesizing and contextualizing the research, and to co-edit this monograph.¹ This project, a research programme funded by the Leverhulme Trust and titled ‘Changing Beliefs of the Human Body’, was intended to answer a deceptively simple question: Why and how did bodily understandings and practices change through history? As case studies we had five parallel projects, situated within the general trajectory of the European past. Each one examined change in how humans understood and experienced their body at a particular moment in European history: from the Late Upper Palaeolithic through the beginnings of farming, from the Copper Age through the Late Bronze Age, during the Classical period, between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries AD, and in the contemporary world of medical practice. The idea was to coordinate substantial original research on each of these to come up with a genuine cross-cultural answer to the question of changing beliefs. We felt a very broad comparative study would allow us to see how the process of change reflects social conditions better than a study focusing upon a single time and place. The body forms an excellent ground for such a comparative study: on the one hand, it provides a certain set of existential challenges such as birth, growth, identity and death which all societies have to deal with; on the other hand, there is huge variation ethnographically, historically and archaeologically in how people in different groups have understood their bodies. It is also the subject of some of the most important theoretical work in the humanities and social sciences.

Although this book began as an answer to the question of why beliefs change, it took on a life of its own. Our five studies grew into six as we added a discussion of the Medieval period. Although we still insist we are not trying to write a universal history of the body in Europe – surely an impossible goal if ever there was one – we have tried to trace the historical connections between the moments upon which we focus. It probably goes without saying that we have had to be extremely selective in our coverage; one could fill a volume this size entirely with just the bibliography of works on the body alone! We should also emphasize that, although the body looks more and more alien the further back in time we go, our story should not

be understood as a simple, unidirectional evolutionary sequence in which one starts from an elemental or universal humanity, a Palaeolithic Everyperson, and gradually layers on the civilised graces of Us. Every culture, every historical moment is different and has its own particularity. In some ways twenty-first-century bodies may be more like Palaeolithic ones than they are like Classical or medieval ones. Appreciating and understanding these particularities is our goal.

There is an old joke that defines a camel as a horse designed by a committee. Given the original structure of our research programme, we faced important choices in designing this book. Given how widely the individual research projects varied in what they studied and especially in their disciplinary traditions for studying it, an edited volume in which each project reported its own results separately would not have provided a coherent answer to questions of historical process and change. Yet simply writing the book on our own would neither acknowledge fairly how much we have learned from our colleagues nor provide specialist control over accuracy and a guarantee that we treat each period reasonably. Hence we have taken a middle route. The original specialist research carried out within the project forms part of each chapter, but we write freely around it to provide a larger framework and to cover other material. The text, with the exception of the epilogue, has been written almost entirely by the two authors, but we do so with guidance from our specialist colleagues, who hopefully have kept us within the limits of the thinkable for each of their own fields as well as providing valuable discussion of the overall opus. Yet, because we are asking questions which are often never posed within each discipline, we reach interpretations our colleagues might not have come to on their own (and, occasionally, with which they may disagree). The unusual form of authorship we have devised (and for which we apologize in advance to bibliographers) is intended to recognize this *modus operandi*. We hope the result is a horse rather than a camel.

John Robb and Oliver J. T. Harris, Cambridge and Leicester, July 2012

NOTE

1. All chapters were collaboratively written; the order of authors listed for each chapter is alphabetical.