The Body as Material Culture

Bodies intrigue us. They promise windows into the past that other archaeological finds cannot by bringing us literally face to face with history. Yet 'the body' is also highly contested. Archaeological bodies are studied through two contrasting perspectives that sit on different sides of a disciplinary divide. On one hand lie science-based osteoarchaeological approaches. On the other lie understandings derived from recent developments in social theory that increasingly view the body as a social construction. Through a close examination of disciplinary practice, Joanna Sofaer highlights the tensions and possibilities offered by one particular kind of archaeological body, the human skeleton, with particular regard to the study of gender and age. Using a range of examples, she argues for reassessment of the role of the skeletal body in archaeological practice, and develops a theoretical framework for bioarchaeology based on the materiality and historicity of human remains.

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The Body as Material Culture

A Theoretical Osteoarchaeology

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This book is for Jaco and Noah

Contents

List of illustrations *page* x
List of tables xi
Preface xiii
Acknowledgements xvii

1 Bodies and boundaries 1
2 The body as an archaeological resource 12
3 The body and convention in archaeological practice 31
4 Material bodies 62
5 Sex and gender 89
6 Age 117

References 144
Index 181

Illustrations

2.1 Binford's model of drop and toss zones around the Nunamiut men's hearth *page* 16

4.1 The relationship between gestures and objects 81

4.2 Different methods of carrying 82

5.1 Recording categories used to estimate sex in adult innominates and sexually dimorphic cranial features 93

5.2 Angle of the greater sciatic notch (degrees) plotted against the ischium-pubis index (per cent) illustrating sexual dimorphism in the human pelvis 94

5.3 Woman carrying a creel 107

5.4 Distribution of activity-related osseous changes in the spine at Ensay 111

6.1 The times of epiphyseal union 122

6.2 General sequence of human dental development 123

6.3 Squatting posture 136

6.4 Progressive accelerated degenerative joint changes in the vertebrae of Ensay females in the second, third and fourth decades of life 141

Tables

5.1 The prevalence of osseous change in the regions of the spine and their statistical significance in men and women from Ensay *page* 108

6.1 The average height of eighteenth-century British army recruits 130

6.2 The prevalence of squatting facets in cultural groups with different sitting habits 137

Preface

Human remains are compelling in their materiality. The tangibility and physicality of human remains first attracted me to study them, and inspired this book. Yet it is more than just the bodies themselves that I find engaging. It is the ways that bodies change over a lifetime and, in doing so, express the histories and lives of people. In other words, how the bodies of people come to be how they are, and how they are understood.

The human body is material and historical. Together, these two aspects lend it to archaeological investigation. Yet within the discipline, with regard to the study of human remains, these two aspects rarely seem to meet. Archaeological bodies are studied through two contrasting approaches that sit on different sides of a disciplinary divide. On one side lie science-based osteological approaches that focus on the skeleton as the material remains of the body. While these approaches recognise variation between individual bodies, osteological conceptualisations are necessarily fixed, universal and transhistorical in order that the body may be subject to scientific analysis and comparisons between bodies made. On the other side lie approaches to the body situated in recent developments in social theory. These increasingly view the body as a social construction that is contextually and historically produced, but hardly touch on the human remains themselves.

These two contrasting understandings of the body are often seen as incompatible. However, as an osteoarchaeologist who is also interested in social theory, I have felt for some time that it would be both useful and interesting to bring them together. My first attempt to do this was in the mid-1990s when I wrote my PhD on the tensions between method and theory in the archaeology of gender. In it I used three distinct case studies to suggest different ways of approaching a single theoretical problem, identifying tensions as being differently located in archaeological approaches to bodies, objects and contexts. But at that time I felt confined by disciplinary conventions and so not only did I maintain the distinction between bodies, objects and contexts in my thesis, but in accordance with convention, published my case studies in a series of articles divided

between journals dealing with human osteology, and those dealing with more traditional forms of material culture. There was a degree of dissatisfaction in seeing my work broken up in this way, but there appeared to be few, if any, venues for expressing the theoretical linkages that had informed it. More generally, archaeology was missing a theoretical framework within which bioarchaeological insights into social relations could be described.

This book takes on the materiality and historicity of the body by developing a relationship between the study of the human skeleton and archaeological approaches that rely on the investigation of objects. I want to explore theoretical and practical strategies for linking them, by addressing some of the tensions and possibilities offered by the study of archaeological bodies and their particular qualities, grounded specifically within archaeological practice. The perspective of this volume is practice based. I want to examine the ways that archaeological bodies can be reconceptualised in terms of a methodological framework that joins osteoarchaeology and object-based archaeology, and to explore the implications of that framework for archaeological understandings of the body. In seeking to do this, the bodies that form the focus of this volume are skeletons rather than iconographic representations. More specifically, they are the skeletons of anatomically modern humans (*Homo sapiens*), skeletal remains being common forms of archaeological bodies.

I begin my analysis in Chapter 1 by exploring the disciplinary divide between osteoarchaeology and material-culture-based archaeology. My description of this divide is largely situated in the British and American archaeological experience as these represent two different and contrasting models of disciplinary construction. In Britain the dichotomy between osteoarchaeology and interpretative archaeology may be particularly strong compared to other national settings such as the United States where the Boasian fourfold perspective lends it a slightly different complexion. Nonetheless, this split may be considered a general feature of both models, and of a range of different national practices in general.

Following on from this, Chapter 2 outlines the way that the body has been appropriated as an archaeological resource and the subsequent fractures that have emerged within the modern discipline. Current archaeological practice with regard to the body is based on a series of deep-rooted underlying binary oppositions that have had a profound influence in defining conventional divisions in the archaeological allocation of the study of the body.

Chapter 3 unpicks these oppositions to yield a number of conceptual, theoretical and methodological tensions. Many of these tensions revolve around traditional archaeological distinctions between bodies and

objects. They can also be related to a distinction between the biological and the material. In Chapter 4 I argue, however, that the skeletal body is fundamentally material possessing its own material qualities. These qualities are related to the biological processes that form and renew the matter of which it is made. The materiality of specific bodies emerges from material qualities which permit or constrain their development. The materiality of the body forms a common axis between the body and objects, placing the body within the sphere of archaeological investigation. While archaeologists are familiar with the idea that objects are created by bodies and that ideas and attitudes, rather than occupying a separated domain from the material, may be inscribed in objects (Knappett 2005; Tilley 1999a), they are perhaps less routinely aware that the body is itself created in relation to a material world that includes objects as well as other people. Throughout the life course the human skeleton may be modified through intentional or unintentional human action. During the human 'career' (Goffman 1959, 1968) bodies are literally created through social practices. The body can be regarded as a form of material culture.

The implications of the body as material culture are explored in Chapters 5 and 6 through discussions of gender and age, two areas in which the body takes a central and contested role in archaeology. For gender and age, the tensions between osteoarchaeology and traditional material-culture-based interpretative archaeology are particularly acute, arising from the practice of associating artefacts with osteologically sexed and aged individuals. As a result, reconceptualising the methodological relationship between the two may be particularly productive. These chapters are not conventional case studies in the sense of taking a single body of material and working through it. Rather they act as conceptual figures that aim to stimulate considerations of the potentials, as well as limitations, of working with the body as material culture. They aim to offer new ways of thinking about gender and age in archaeological practice, situated in terms of notions of material expression and process, and the hybridity of the body.

I have deliberately chosen not to deal with taphonomic processes although there are strong arguments that can be made to view post-mortem processes in terms of material culture (Parker Pearson 1999a). Nor have I dealt with the ways in which dead bodies can be manipulated as material statements or deliberately made into objects (e.g. Baby 1961; Solís *et al.* 2002). Equally, this is not a book that deals with detailed osteological methods. For this readers should look elsewhere (e.g. Bass 1995; Brickley and McKinley 2004; Buikstra and Ubelaker 1994). My focus is on a theoretical framework for understanding the living body from the skeleton with regard to specific difficulties that sit within current

archaeological method and practice, and suggesting a theoretical location for bioarchaeology within the discipline. The illustrative examples that I use are necessarily selective.

Throughout this book I use the term 'interpretative archaeology' following historical convention to designate a particular archaeological tradition based on the study of objects (cf. Hodder 1991; Hodder *et al.* 1995), although I do not believe that this form of archaeology is inherently more interpretative. The term 'osteoarchaeology', while in use elsewhere in relation to both human and animal remains, is employed here to refer to the study of human bones alone and should be taken to include biological and physical anthropology.

This book has seen many iterations and changes since it was first conceived in the late 1990s although central themes and theoretical axes have remained constant. While writing it many new publications have appeared and literature on the body has exploded exponentially. I am aware that some of what I say may prove controversial. Perhaps that is inevitable in a book that is transdisciplinary and that deals with a topic about which people have taken up positions. What is here is necessarily a personal view of the body, though it is one with which I hope some readers will sympathise. At least it may provoke some thought not just about how we talk about the body, but about how we *do* archaeology.

JOANNA SOFAER

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