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PROLEGOMENA TO A SOCIAL ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE HUMAN BODY

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INTRODUCTION

Much of archaeology takes the human body into account when it comes to recording, analysing and interpreting graves. Human remains are encountered as dead matter, and often scrutinized with osteological and bioarchaeological methods and approaches. Bioarchaeological methods enable us to obtain a wide range of data on diet, ancestry, mobility and so on; yet bodily remains thus tend to be understood primarily as a repository of data and such a view of the human body is rather positivistic. Here, I want to sketch an approach that goes beyond the notion of the human body as a container and focuses not only on the body in relation to death and dying. The starting point is the idea that the human body is central to all spheres of human society and activity, as all social interaction is body-based. My objective is to go beyond the representational character of bodies and to include their phenomenology into the study of human remains.

The aim is also to find ways to achieve a much more comprehensive understanding of the human body than is traditionally the case in archaeology. In the following, I will therefore present social – or socio-archaeological – perspectives on the body and offer preliminary thoughts on how a concept can be developed that understands the body as something both material and socially constructed, as well as something spatiotemporal that moves and interacts, that is part of the communication between individuals and groups, and that the group must deal with. Such a concept should also allow us to detach ourselves from archaeological contexts, i.e. to consider the body not only as a component of burial contexts, but rather start from the body itself as an object of research. Such a research field would necessarily be transdisciplinary, uniting numerous natural, cultural and humanities disciplines under common research questions.

The osteological and anthropological analysis of human bones, particularly the determination of the biological age and sex of the remains of the deceased, has been an integral part of archaeological investigations of cemeteries for many decades. Today, this is supplemented – and in some cases replaced – by isotope and aDNA analysis helping to address issues such as the mobility of social or ethnic groups or social and regional differences in diet. A socio-archaeological approach should broaden the scope by making it possible to focus on the physical, bodily history of individuals in relation to the communities or societies to which they belong and on the social role of the body in these collectives.

Human remains from historical or archaeological contexts are materialised and personified traces of individual life and death. They make life and death literally tangible, comprehensible and analysable using a variety of methods. But the human body, or what remains of it, is not only tangible and haptic: the physical is also comprehensible for us because we know it from ourselves, and we recognise human bodies, regardless of the context, as a part of ourselves. These bodies are essentially ourselves.

Hence, I suggest that we take a phenomenological and sociological look at human bodies in order to understand the body as something material, spatial, and "here-and-now" that has its own history and also has many individual histories. The body takes up space and moves in space in relation to other bodies; it is a physical thing that is perceived by the collective and imbued with meaning. The body requires decisions by the collective: how do we deal with this automotive thing? In life and in death?

BODY IDEALS

While osteobiography attempts to reconstruct the physical, corporeal biography of individuals (see e.g. Hosek, Robb, 2019), the social archaeology of the body as it is understood here suggests going beyond the individual to include perspectives of the collective, i.e. the community's view and in particular its concepts of the body – aesthetic ideals, symbolic connotations, power relations expressed or acted out through the body etc. Combining osteological analysis with a consideration of the archaeological and wider cultural context, integrating sources like representations and architecture, and focusing on body-related practices, should enable an exploration not only of individual life-courses and mortuary treatments, but also place them in relation to social ideals.

Every society has conceptions and images of the ideal human body and its appearance, i.e. body ideals. Body ideals are social self-interpretations and self-portrayals – expressing desire rather than reality. These ideals are of course historically constituted, they have a history, a development, and continue to change. They can have a very specific influence on how individuals and groups deal with their bodies and therefore on the body-related data that we collect.

The connection between body ideal and medical findings is illustrated by a recently published example from the High Middle Ages (Dittmar et al., 2021). The pathological investigation of a socially diverse Cambridgeshire population – 117 individuals from four cemeteries of the 11th to 15th centuries CE – reveals that *hallux valgus* occurred significantly more frequently in the 14th to 15th centuries than in the 11th to 13th centuries, and that the risk of injuries from falls also increased during this period, as there are more traces of injuries, such as healed fractures on long bones. The authors link this to the fashion of wearing pointed shoes that emerged in the 14th century. Even monks from an Augustinian monastery apparently followed this fashion, as individuals from the Augustinian Friary cemetery in Cambridge were also significantly affected, despite this contradicting ecclesiastical or monastic regulations. In contrast, there were hardly any findings of *hallux valgus* in the nearby village cemetery of Cherry Hinton, which on the one hand points to social differences in the adoption of the fashion, but on the other hand may also result from the fact that the cemetery of Cherry Hinton does not extend far into the 14th century.

From this example, we can conclude that even in pre-modern periods:

a) body ideals existed
b) and that these were subject to changes over time;
c) that there were probably also social differences in the intensity with which attempts were made to fulfil these body ideals;
d) and that these body ideals resulted in accepting a higher risk of pathologies, whether as a direct consequence such as *hallux valgus* or as an indirect consequence such as fractures.
e) It follows that it was not only in the modern age that social ideals of beauty were more powerful than reason, enlightenment or even norms and regulations.

We can perceive these pathologies not only as medical data, but as traces of body-related practices. While in our example these traces are non-intentional, other traces result from intentional body-modifying practices, such as artificial skull deformations (e.g.

Fig. 1: Wooden toe prosthesis attached to the disarticulated right foot of a mummy from a shaft grave in Theban Tomb No 95, Sheikh ʻAbd el-Qurna at Western Thebes (Luxor, Egypt). Great attention was paid to an aesthetic and realistic appearance of the foot, but also to the comfort and mobility of its female wearer. *Photo: Matjaž Kačičnik, © Universität Basel (Projekt Life Histories of Theban Tombs).*

1 pav. Medinis kojos piršto protezas, pritvirtintas vietoje prarasto dešinės kojos piršto, rastas mumijos kape TT95, šeicho Abd el-Qurna kapavietėje Vakarų Tėbuose (Luksoras, Egiptas). Matyti, kad daug dėmesio buvo skirta ne tik estetinei ar tikroviškai pėdos išvaizdai, bet ir jos nešiotojos patogumui bei mobilumui. Nuotrauka: *Matjaž Kačičnik, © Universität Basel (Projekt Life Histories of Theban Tombs*).

Hakenbeck, 2009; Toplak, 2019). Moreover, body ideals can be inferred not only from changes in the bone itself, but also from body-related objects. A rather rare example is a toe prosthesis from a 9th to 6th century BCE (Third Intermediate Period) tomb in Western Thebes, Egypt (Fig. 1)[1]. This artificial toe was discovered attached to the right foot of a female mummy buried in the cemetery of Sheikh ʻAbd el-Qurna at Western Thebes (Loprieno-Gnirs, 2020). The production of this highly aesthetic prosthesis and its wearing beyond death reveal body-related practices that were not only intended to facilitate the mobility of its wearer, but also to fulfil aesthetic ideals in life and beyond (on aesthetics as a social construct cf. Matić, 2022).

It therefore follows that traces of changes to the body – intentional or not, directly on the body or in connection with body-related objects – can be associated with the attempt to follow bodily ideals. However, they can also be a sign of resistance to this. In a society where filing your teeth (e. g. Garve 2015) or decorating them with gemstones (for a recent

[1] https://lhtt.philhist.unibas.ch/research/toe-prosthesis-from-tt95/ (last access 19 January 2025).

study s. Hernández-Bolio et al. 2022) is part of the body ideal, to refrain from just doing that can be not only a sign of social class, but an insubordinate act.

For example, in Western societies, the concept of a 'balanced, healthy diet' is an important part of the self-image of certain social classes – keywords are 'organic', 'vegetarian' or 'vegan', 'regional' and 'seasonal' etc. However, other parts of society seem to view these practices with scepticism and as an expression of a social 'elite' against which they distance themselves, e. g. through the comparatively high consumption of meat and beer. Going against body ideals can be a subversive act directed against a dominant social class. A proudly displayed beer belly can be understood as a deliberate provocation that opposes social ideals of beauty. The opposite of the beer belly, the attempt to optimise one's own body through supposedly healthy eating, calorie counting, fitness, and self-tracking, is also part of a body biography resulting from body-related actions caused by sociocultural body ideals. Whether we follow normative beauty ideals or we choose not to do so, we are doing this with and through our bodies (Matić 2022, 2).

THE AMBIGUOUS BODY

Body-related practices, body-related objects, and bodily transformations are central for expressing social body ideals, but they can be ambiguous – resulting either from following these ideals or rejecting them. This is facilitated by the fact that the body itself is ambiguous.

The individual human body is a 'hybrid being' in many respects. It is the material, physical side of an individual – although it is debatable whether all societies have a concept of the individual that is comparable to ours – and it is also part of a collective – a society made up of bodies. The body is consuming space and mobile at the same time. It is something tangible and present that the individual and the collective have to deal with, and it is something socially constructed and changeable. The body is that which is perceived by the collective or by other individuals and which gets imbued with meaning and at the same time it is that through which the individual expresses her-/himself and communicates with the world around. It can express something general such as class or gender or age group, but also an individual biography.

The body can therefore be conceptualised as a 'thing', as an object that occupies space and therefore needs to be dealt with – especially, but not only, the dead body on which practices are carried out. However, as physical part of the individual it is also a subject that is active and granted rights. Moreover, it can be conceptualised as a means of mobility and of communication and interaction with the world around.

THE BODY AS 'SOCIAL FACT'

Thus, due to this 'hybrid status', the body is more than just a data repository from which data can be obtained on dietary habits, mobility, illnesses, etc. The body is itself a historical, social, economic and cultural fact. It thus can be understood as a '*fait social*' in the sense of Durkheim, a social fact which influences all social practices, areas of life, social expressions, etc. That is why I believe that an archaeology of the body can be more than just an archaeology of graves extended by the natural sciences.

Emile Durkheim (1919; 1982) defines a *fait social* as something that is capable of exerting an external constraint on the individual; or else, which is general throughout a given society while having an existence of its own, independent of its various manifestations at the individual level. A social fact is thus endowed with coercive power. While Durkheim referred to social institutions such as kinship, religion, or political organisation which members of a society

must account for in their interactions, I suggest this should include human bodies as well. The body as a physical but mobile thing, invested with meaning and the necessity to deal with it, as both a living or a dead thing, indeed is coercive and exerts constraints on others.

The body enables interaction with the world and thus consciousness and knowledge. All communicative expressions are bound to the body, be it through the organs of mouth and ear, be it through feeling and understanding, be it through action. With its specific sensory and locomotory possibilities, the body opens up what we call 'our world' in the first place. The diagnosis of bodily alterations, e.g. due to malnutrition or illness or body-modifying practices, means more than just an indication of objective economic or social processes, such as scarcity of or differential access to resources, etc. It also means a change – possibly a handicap – for the person concerned in relation to their environment and their fellow human beings, an impairment of mobility and of relationships with other bodies, other things and other individuals. Thus, all body-related practices from nutrition over daily routines to body manipulations not only change the physicality of the individual body, but also the perception of the world, i.e. how the wearer perceives the world and how the community perceives the wearer of the body and interacts with him or her. Body-related practices can lead to greater conformity or non-conformity with collective body ideals, relating to disabilities and restrictions as well as abilities, and thus to an increase or decrease in social differentiation etc. – and they can be interpreted by us in this direction. In this way, body-related practices can change the collectives themselves over time and change the relationships between groups and individuals. Thus, the sociological archaeology of the body can, e.g., be approached as a history of impairments and abilities or as a history of the physicality of social relations and their transformations.

THE GENERALITY OF THE BODY

With such a view of the body – the dead as well as the living – we arrive at the concept of the generality of the body in the sense of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (s. Kastl, 2020). Merleau-Ponty conceptualises the body as *généralité*, because it is an essential medium of engagement with the social, cultural, political, and physical world. The body is more than just a repository where life data are stored, the body is the access to our world: its sensory and locomotive abilities open up the world to the individual. It is the operative centre of exchange between individuals and groups and between individual and environment. The body is the 'carrier' of social and cultural structures.

However, generality does not mean something static, not just a state or place or carrier. Due to the dual character of the body as a physical, extended thing and as a living, sensing and perceived body, as a construction and a phenomenon of attribution as well as a subject with its own mobility and own rights, the idea of *généralité* also includes the active role of the body in communication and interaction in all spheres of life.

The generality of the body means that the body and the world – physical and social – are interconnected in all areas. Bodies are not natural givens, but socially constructed, not a static and absolute, but a relational and discursive entity (cf. Butler 1993). This dynamic understanding of the body therefore also refers to the temporal dimension. The body is open to time, it moves and is receptive to movements. Its possibilities of movement set the parameters for opening up and structuring the world and vice versa: these in turn structure the body. The body is not only physically extended, it also carries all temporally organised processes – movements, communications, social negotiations and identity constructions and all other activities. It is a spatiotemporal subject.

Fig. 2: This miniature from a 14th century chronicle is one of several late medieval depictions of the Christian lay movement of the Flagellants who mutilated themselves in a public penitential ritual in response to threats and crises – here during Assumption Day at Tournai (Belgium) in 1349. Image: public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_flagellants_at_Doornik_in_1349.jpg.
2 pav. Šioje XIV a. kronikos miniatiūroje vaizduojami krikščionys pasauliečiai flagelantai, kurie, reaguodami į grėsmes ir krizes, žalodavo save per viešą atgailos ritualą. Ši miniatiūra yra vienas iš keletos vėlyvųjų viduramžių atvaizdų, kuriame flagelantai vaizduojami Turnė mieste (Belgija) 1349 metais Švenčiausiosios Mergelės Marijos Ėmimo į dangų dieną. Pav.: vieša prieiga. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_flagellants_at_Doornik_in_1349.jpg.

A structuralist dialectic breakdown of these notions may look like this: bodies are

physically extended : sensing and sensed
carriers of structures :
carriers of temporal processes
prerequisite for interaction :
medium of interaction
part of practices : changeable through practices.

The body-bound engagement with the world, both through the individual's activities and through the group's perception and interaction with the body and the person, can leave traces in the body. Archaeology, bioarchaeology, thanatoarchaeology etc. have a wide array of opportunities to document and scrutinise traces of body-related practices (Gramsch, Grosskopf, 2023, in particular 98–101). These include:

- pathologies, e. g. caused by diseases or physical stress;
- traumata, e. g. caused by accidents or physical violence;
- entheses, caused by heavy physical strain, especially on joints;
- intentional modifications, e. g. of the skull, feet, or teeth;
- malnutrition, e. g. visible in cribra orbitalia;

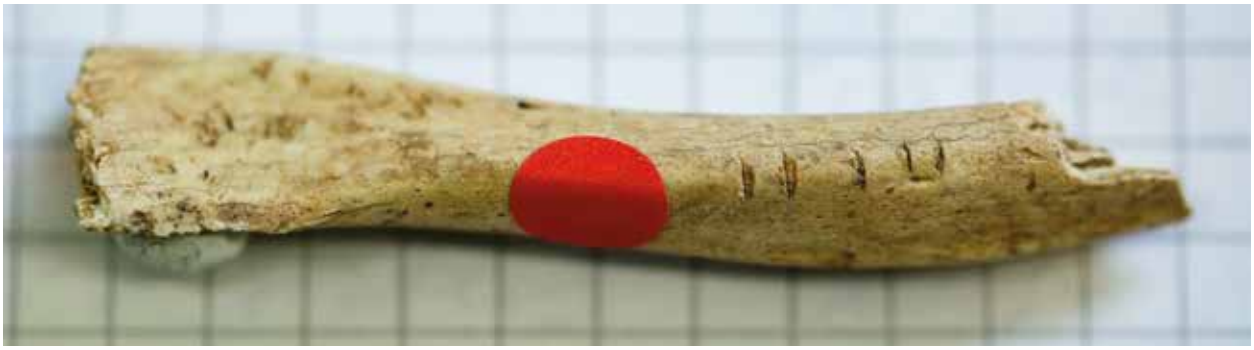

Fig. 3: On the collarbone (clavicle) of a child from the LBK settlement of Herxheim (Germany), five parallel cut marks of different depths can be seen. These can be interpreted as result of the deliberate fragmentation of the body and as a sign of intensive engagement with its fragments (but not as cannibalism, as has been suggested for this site). *Photo: A. Gramsch (RGK).*
3 pav. Penkios lygiagrečios skirtingo gylio pjūvio žymės, matomos ant vaiko raktikaulio, kuris buvo rastas Herxheim (Vokietija) juostinės keramikos kultūros gyvenvietėje. Šias žymes galima interpretuoti kaip sąmoningo mirusiojo kūno smulkinimo padarinį ir intensyvaus kontakto su kūno dalimis įrodymą (bet ne kaip kanibalizmą, kaip teigiama interpretuojant radinius iš šios vietovės). *A. Gramrsch nuotr.*

- peri- and post-mortem treatments of the body such as measures to preserve or mummify the body or the removal of body parts or a continued interaction with bodily remains leading to their dismemberment and commingling etc.

These traces allow us to draw conclusions about the biography of the body in life and death. But body-related items, too, such as dress and jewellery, tools and other "enhancements" (Fig. 1) contribute to the creation of and the accession to the world and can be included in the investigation.

We have seen above that diet-related traces on the body are not only rooted in economic or social-hierarchical differences, but are also the result of socialisation mechanisms and part of the negotiation of identities between social groups. The archaeology of the body can therefore also investigate how the body not only reflects social interactions, but is also consciously used in them and can influence them. Traumas are also traces of such practices of social interaction. While many clearly result from violent confrontations, the body is also subjected to self-mutilation, for example as an act of protest or reaction to a crisis, such as, e. g., late Medieval flagellantism (Fig. 2). Again, social issues are tackled with and through the body.

The understanding of the living body as a social fact with coercive power that creates and shapes the world and is shaped by it also contributes to understanding the dead body's potential to become a means of continued interaction – e.g. a means of commemoration or to play out social relations and power. And the divisibility of the body, the post-mortem fragmentation and dispersal and re-assembling of body parts is also rooted in the all-encompassing generality of the body in all spheres of human interaction, not just after death (Fig. 3; for a recent discussion of the meaning of body fragmentation s. Chapman et al. 2023 with commentaries). We often only become aware of the structuring role of the body when it no longer functions, i.e. especially in the case of illness and death – precisely these offer an opportunity (or an affordance) to take care of (temporal) changes in social relationships through the body, to reflect on them and depict them and to want to preserve or to change them.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

A social archaeology of the human body requires us to shift perspective from features such as graves, settlement pits or ditches including bodily remains to the body itself. If we understand the body as something general that affects all areas of life, we can start from the body itself as a research question rather than from the archaeological contexts from which the human remains originate, and can approach it through the (very broadly defined) body-related practices (for a more detailed discussion s. Gramsch, Grosskopf 2023). Such a concept of the body offers the opportunity to understand human remains themselves as a fundamental, general object of investigation. Of course, human bodies are mostly handed down to us rather incompletely; they usually lack flesh and blood. And even the bones are often incomplete. But this is no different with artefacts, architecture and landscapes. This is why an archaeology of the body does not require a limit definition – no minimum preservation quantity or representativeness. Every single bone represents a former human body and can be part of an archaeology of the body, just as we do not refrain from incorporating single individual finds into archaeological investigations.

With these preliminary considerations, I have tried to show that the body is an instrument of cognition in every society and in every human-world interaction. And I have tried to outline the body as a social archaeological research object and as a theoretical category. This also takes up the 'somatic turn' or 'body turn', which has led to new research questions and approaches in the humanities and sociology (e. g. Gugutzer 2006; Turner 2012). Practice theory and New Materialism in archaeology also take a fresh look at the human body (e. g. Harris 2021). Archaeology with its long-term perspective and its long-established experience in interdisciplinary collaboration can make a significant contribution to a wider humanist and sociological understanding of the human body as a research topic on its own, beyond its usability as a data provider. And archaeology can fall back on something that the vast majority of sociological and cultural-theoretical approaches still lack today: experience in linking studies of the body and studies of death.

POSTSCRIPT

I cannot end this text without referring to the world as it is today. The body in general and the female body in particular is still a projection screen for systematic and institutionalised control, domination, pressure, and mental and physical violence. This is very obvious in authoritarian political systems like Iran, where violent incidents connected to names like Mahsa Amini in 2022 or Ahoo Daryayi in November 2024 stand for many more incidents of which we do not know or where we don't know the names of the individual women. But the female body is also objectified and a matter of male control in Western states like the USA, where on June 24, 2022, the Supreme Court eliminated the federal constitutional law that had protected the right to abortion[2]. The (female) body as generality is political and a means to express ideology. Asserting self-determination over the individual body, e.g. by exposing it, can be just as much an act of resistance as wearing a burkini in a European swimming pool (for archaeological considerations on the display or concealment of bodies as performative practices s. Gramsch, 2013). Bodies are always integral to maintaining or transforming relations of power and control, of domination and resistance, of hegemonial or minority identity constructions, as much as they are part of the physical and mental world and open up the world to each individual.

[2] s. e. g. https://www.kff.org/womens-health-policy/dashboard/abortion-in-the-u-s-dashboard/ (last access 19 January 2025).

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