Body Parts and Bodies Whole: Changing Relations and Meanings

Katharina Rebay-Salisbury, Marie Louise Stig Sørensen, and Jessica Hughes
Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010, 148 pp. (hardback), $60.00.
ISBN-13: 9781842174029.

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Body Parts and Bodies Whole builds on the idea that bodily fragmentation (the norm in many archaeological contexts) can be anthropogenic, intentional, and culturally meaningful. The book has two aims. The editors state first that they wish to indicate "both the *consistent importance and the varied perception* of body parts in the archaeological record of Europe and the Near East," and, second, that they hope to show that "this fundamental practice [of bodily fragmentation] might be explored with the aim of discovering changing beliefs about the relationship between body parts and bodies whole" (p. 3, authors' emphasis). To do this, they have assembled a collection of papers presenting case studies from different periods and places, and deploying different perspectives and types of evidence. The result is an extremely wide-ranging book. There are examinations of the physical remains of bodies, of objects directly associated with them (during life or after death), of representations of bodies in art, building and artifacts, and even of *concepts* of fragmentation and individuality versus dividuality in the past, with every chapter presenting a unique combination of perspective and evidence. Chapman (Chapter Four), for instance, considers 'deviant' burials where the addition, removal, substitution, re-combination and re-integration of parts is apparent to consider ideas of object- and personal enchainment in the community, while Sørensen (Chapter Six) focuses on body maps as delineated by clothing, possessions, and inhumation practices. Other topics include the cultural significance of autopsy and dissection in the 18th/19th centuries (Chapter Thirteen), bodily configurations as represented by ceramic vessels in the late Bronze Age (Chapter Eight) and the discourse on human-animal relationships shown in depictions of hybrids in the Classical world (Chapter Ten).

This scope is simultaneously one of the volume's strengths and weaknesses. There can be little doubt that it widens the potential audience for what could have been a fairly niche title—particularly when considered in combination with a price that would be within the reach of most students, as well as professionals—but it also creates some challenges for those readers. The introductory section describes several ways of classifying papers (into those emphasizing 'real' and 'represented' bodies, for example, or those focusing on specific themes like enchainment theory, relationships between humans and animals or objects, and the role of perspective in interpreting the archaeological evidence, pp. 3–4). This diversity of potential reading pathways demonstrates one of the fundamental challenges in presenting such a wide range of material—ensuring coherence in the reading experience. Unfortunately, for those whose aim is not to pick out specific papers but to develop an understanding of the theme in general, reading from cover to cover is sometimes difficult. Transitioning from the first three case studies on mortuary practice to a more philosophical application of the idea of fragmentation as a component of aging and then to a discussion of body maps and ornamentation, for instance, was tricky. There is also some variation in the amount of background provided for readers in different chapters—in some cases, I found I needed to look up unfamiliar paradigms and terms independently to understand the key ideas, while in others a lot of this detail was provided. A brief overview section covering the basics of the different perspectives would have helped.

Meeting the editors' aims seems upon reflection to have been more complex than simply collecting a broad set of papers covering a single topic. *Body Parts and Bodies Whole* focuses on an idea whose time has come; for instance, 'jigsaw' mummies—made up of parts from several individuals—have just been identified through DNA testing of burials from Cladh Hallan and are suggested to be both deliberate composites and potentially culturally 'meaningful' in that the bodies may have played a role in society even after death (BBC News, 22 August 2011). The same kind of direct, deliberate manipulation of human remains is the focus of several papers in the book, particularly Chapters Two to Four, Seven, Twelve and Thirteen, which form the core of the volume's primary focus on "the actual, physical partibility of the body" (p. 64). Chapters Two-Four focus on the Neolithic and Chalcolithic cemeteries of various regions, and are primarily summaries of the direct evidence for body fragmentation—disarticulation, cut marks, 'deviant' burials, the mixing of remains from several individuals, or the intermingling of animal, human and artifact to represent the body. In each case, local artifactual traditions and *representations* of the body also are discussed, with a recurrence of quite similar aims—specifically, to provide insight into "continued relationships between the living and the dead, between people, animals and material culture" (Chapter Two, p. 15) or to demonstrate "very particular associations of *depicted* bodies, and certain body parts, with both the actual, living body, as well as the body of the deceased" (Chapter Three, p. 23). Chapter Four perhaps expresses this most simply—the author proposes that a single process, fragment enchainment, is a cause of fragmentation among both human remains and objects, and that the simi-

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doi:10.4207/PA.2011.REV112

larities and differences in the two datasets might provide nuanced information about the social processes behind them.

Chapters Twelve and Thirteen are fairly similar, but focus on a much more recent period (medieval and early post-medieval Europe, and the 18th and 19th centuries in Britain, respectively). For the former, the focus is primarily on artifactual remains and written records—including gravestones—but both these are used as direct evidence of the practice of heart burial (for which bodily remains would not preserve) *and* as a source of information about the social meaning of the practice. Chapter Thirteen, on autopsy and dissection, cites an extensive set of skeletal data demonstrating peri- or post-mortem medical treatment, and places this in the context of current views of the body as 'commodity' and 'anatomical object,' as opposed to the prevailing social views of the body as the seat of the soul and the corporeal remains of the individual concerned. In Chapter Seven, a similar interpretative procedure is followed for Bronze and Iron Age cremation burials, although the lack of contemporary written evidence forces the author to be more creative in the bases for interpreting the evidence available. Nonetheless, in all of these chapters, the focus on the physical body is at the center of interpretation.

In the remaining chapters—Five, Six and Eight-Eleven—in contrast, there seems to be more emphasis on the way bodies are represented and conceptualized, although this is necessarily a subjective impression as the majority still show some use of physical remains; these are chapters which are not wholly abstract, but instead deploy human remains as support for a conceptual model (a top-down approach) rather than sources of objective data to be interpreted (a bottom-up approach). They varied in the extent of their connection to the physical evidence. Chapter Five, for instance, used summaries of age-sex distributions of fragmented burials and descriptions of individual cases directly as evidence for the central thesis that ageing *was* a form of bodily fragmentation to certain past societies, while Chapter Six on Bronze Age body maps did discuss human remains, but seemed to focus more on the presentation and accompanying articles than the bones/cremations themselves. Interestingly, the editors' division into 'real' and 'represented' bodies maps onto my perceived division into 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' approaches except in the case of Chapter Five—which uses 'real' physical human remains, but in a different way.

Chapters Eight-Eleven were the most detached from actual human remains, focusing on a range of representations instead. In Chapter Eight, the subjects were figurines and vessels from the Late Bronze Age of the Lower Danube. Many of these are identified as representing "bodies of which *some parts are human while others are animal*" (p. 75, author's emphasis). These are interpreted in light of current knowledge of the cosmology of the people and the perceived relationships between humans, animals, and artifacts—proposed as being mediated by cremation and the fragmentation of both body and relationships. In Chapter Nine, the focus is on the Iron Age 'cult of the head' and how that specific body part is represented in artwork, buildings (particularly those designed to accommodate heads or their representations), and sculpture, while Chapter Ten focuses on the nature of the Classical hybrid and the way these might represent partible bodies, capable of disarticulation as well as functioning as a single entity. In Chapter Eleven, we are introduced to more hybrids—this time from the Late Iron Age and Viking Age of Scandinavia—which are interpreted in light of written evidence as suggesting moving boundaries between categories like 'animal', 'human,' and 'god' and a world-view in which the body was not simply a single entity but part of something larger.

These chapters on body representations and concepts are of particular interest—especially as they are able to go beyond simple descriptions of cultural practice to attempts to explain these practices as part of their context—but are also perhaps somewhat less convincing in their arguments. This is primarily because a basic understanding of physical anthropology or osteoarchaeology makes reading and checking the interpretations of the evidence-based chapters straightforward, while the same 'background knowledge' for those discussing representations of bodies is more restricted, in some cases to just a small group of specialists. Despite this, however, I feel that the *combination* of bottom-up and top-down approaches presented in *Body Parts and Bodies Whole* is a great strength, while recognizing that for some readers, there may be uncertainty over whether the volume reaches its second aim of demonstrating how interpretation of concepts of the body proceeds from studying the archaeological record of fragmentation.

Overall, this book is a valuable source of ideas for anyone interested in concepts of the body. If you also have the patience to re-read around the transitions from evidence to interpretation and speculation, or have sufficient background knowledge to create your own pathway through the chapters, it will provide food for thought on subsequent readings too.

REFERENCES

BBC News (22 August 2011). *Scottish prehistoric mummies made from jigsaw of body parts*. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-14575729 [Last accessed 22.08.2011].