Personifying Objects/Objectifying People: Handling Questions of Mortality and Materiality through the Archaeological Body

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ABSTRACT *Death and the bodies of the dead are managed and handled in contemporary Western society by various professions that include archaeology. The bodies of the dead exist in a variety of material forms, and generate conflicting responses from the archaeologists who work with them. Positioning archaeologists as professionals within a wider society, this article explores the relationship between the physicality of the body, the (de)construction of personhood and the problem of mortality in contemporary Western (British) society.*

There is something both fascinating and disturbing about the bodies of the human dead as they are encountered and studied within archaeology. As objects that are both highly popular with western museumgoers, and strongly contested by indigenous peoples seeking repatriation, human remains occupy an uneasy position as neither entirely objectifable nor easily equated with a living person. Lock's (2001) study of human organ donation describes the liminal existence of body parts separated from the normal life course, kept alive to be reincorporated into another body. But the archaeological body remains distinctively liminal despite being entirely devoid of biological life. Rather than being reincorporated into other living bodies, the physical parts of the archaeological body – sometimes preserved skin and hair, but more commonly only bone – remain in the open, handled and circulated in contexts that bear no relation to their previous existence enclosed in a living, animate human being. The archaeological body occupies

an unusual space: its original biological and social lives are over, but it continues to have a (sometimes contentious) social and physical existence.

Unravelling the complexities that surround the relationships archaeologists have with these bodies can inspire us to think in new ways about the human body as a category of *thing*. In a general sense we can agree that the archaeological body has both a material presence and a social role in the contemporary world, as do living bodies. But drawing a direct comparison between living bodies and archaeological bodies is far from simple. As I will describe in this paper, archaeologists are capable of – and sometimes insist upon – seeing the bodies of the dead that they encounter as 'people' who are directly comparable with living people. Looking at archaeologists as a group of professionals who work with bodies that are in a variety of physical states allows us to think about the relationship between the physicality of bodies, the (de)construction of personhood and the identity of the dead in contemporary Western (British) society.

The contemporary Western approach to death is to remove it from the public sphere and into the hands of professionals (Blauner 1966; Giddens 1991; Mellor 1993; Mellor & Shilling 1993). Those responsible for the physical and cultural work involved in handling the bodies of the dead commonly include members of the medical professions, funeral directors, the police and forensic scientists, but archaeologists also work with the bodies of the dead under specific circumstances. Professions derive their coherence and authority not only from institutions and the monopoly of expert knowledge/skills, but also from the performance of a particular persona (Jackall 1988; Abbott 1991; Bosk 2003). The ability of a professional to embody an appropriate persona, sometimes discussed as a form of professional morality, has been described as an essential component of the maintenance of professions within the wider society. For example, members of the medical profession are expected to embody an appropriate mixture of compassion and rationality, sympathy with authority (Bosk 2003). Those who work regularly with the bodies of the dead may have difficulty in maintaining a professional detachment (Littlewood 1993; Howarth 1993). But in general, it is assumed that the processes through which students are initiated into a profession serve to inculcate a sense of appropriate performativity and morality.

Unlike the situation regarding the medical profession, however, there does not appear to be a consensus among archaeologists on what the appropriate demeanour or response to human remains should be. As I will discuss, drawing on interviews with practising archaeologists from the UK, the bodies

of the dead elicit a variety of responses and reactions that generate conflicting definitions of appropriate professionalism. While these are due in part to theoretical debates within the discipline of archaeology, I argue that they are highly dependent on both the physicality of the body itself, and the individual archaeologist's understanding of their *own* body in relation to the body being studied.

To touch another body is to initiate an intimacy. Hirschauer (1991) has described how the inappropriateness of intimate touch is transgressable in operating theatres only when the bodies of both patient and surgeon are actively objectified. Like the patient's body and the bodies that medical students use to learn anatomy (Segal 1988), touching and manipulating an archaeological body can be an uncomfortable or disturbing experience. Particularly in the case of recently dead bodies which still have skin, hair and moisture, the necessity of touching intimate substances stimulates feelings of disgust and discomfort which are often barely masked in macabre humour. And yet in other contexts, archaeological bodies are far from disturbing, as the popularity of mummies in museums and popular archaeology media demonstrates. There is, then, no single archaeological body, nor a single response. In their multiple states of dryness/wetness, articulation/fragmentation, age and recognition, archaeological bodies elicit emotions of curiosity or disgust, desires to create biographies or objectification, and different degrees of empathy.

British Archaeology and Archaeological Bodies

Archaeology is not restricted to the distant past, but increasingly involves the study of historical periods up to and including the present day. Moreover, there is a growing involvement of archaeologists in forensic work, either in national criminal cases or with international war crimes and mass grave investigation (Hunter & Cox 2005). The type of material that archaeologists encounter is therefore very diverse: while older material is likely to be dry bones in various stages of disintegration, recent forensic bodies may still have soft tissue (the flesh and hair that decompose more rapidly). Other forms of preservation, such as desiccation and intentional mummification, can also result in the presence of soft tissue on ancient bodies. Most traditional archaeology is likely, however, to involve only skeletal material, and work with contemporary remains is more commonly undertaken only by those who have a specialist qualification or interest.

An untrained observer will have difficulty recognising human bone without the presence of soft tissue. Except in the case of the skull and perhaps the femur, single human bones would not be easily distinguishable from animal bone.

Human remains are found in diverse contexts – as a single scrap of bone in a ditch, as an articulated skeleton laid out in a grave or coffin, as the shrunken fragments of a cremation sealed in a vessel or mixed up in a scatter of lithics and ceramic shards under a monument. Archaeologists encounter human remains in many different places – a reflection of the variety of ways people in the past deposited bodies into the ground. As a result, bodies are not automatically recognisable as such from either their materiality or their context. Instead the archaeologist learns to recognise that certain 'things' are human remains as part of their professional training – in the same way they recognise other 'things' are ancient pottery.

In this project I specifically seek to understand the conceptualisation of the body by those who work with it regularly, and without the framework of ethical consideration that arises in the context of excavating the ancestors of a contemporary minority population. I therefore focus on archaeologists who work in the UK. Since the introduction of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1994, excavating human remains in the US is rare. In Europe, however, it remains an unproblematic feature of archaeological work. Debates around the world concerning the ethical and social context in which human remains are excavated have been dominated by the important questions of NAGPRA, repatriation and the inclusion of minority indigenous descendents in decision-making processes. These issues, however, are not as immediate in the non-settler colonial context of most European countries, and particularly in the UK (although see Blain & Wallis 2007, for a neopagan perspective).

This article describes interviews with 27 practising archaeologists on their attitudes towards burial archaeology, death and archaeological bodies, conducted between August and December 2002. The interviews were grounded in my own experience working as an archaeologist in Britain from 1998 to 2003, and my current position as an ethnographer of archaeological practice. The archaeologists interviewed came from a cross-section of the profession, including students, field specialists, osteoarchaeologists, museum curators and artefact specialists. They had a wide range of experience: some hardly ever encountered human remains, while others did so on a daily basis. I also interviewed researchers who were not primarily archaeologists, and a funeral director. The group's experiences covered all kinds of remains – from contemporary forensic cases to early humans, fully fleshed mummies to fragmentary scraps of bone. The first 14 archaeologists were based in the city of Cambridge and worked for a commercial archaeology company, a local museum or a

university archaeology department. These archaeologists were at least provisionally known to me beforehand. To interview a larger number of archaeologists who worked primarily with human remains in different forms, I also conducted 13 interviews at the British Association of Biological Anthropologists and Osteoarchaeologists conference in Sheffield on the 14th and 15th of September 2002. These interviewees were volunteers who were all unknown to me.

Field specialist	5
Student/field specialist	2
Student (little or no field experience)	3
Osteoarchaeologist/field specialist	3
Osteoarchaeologist/researcher	6
Researcher (not an osteoarchaeologist)	1
Researcher (not primarily an archaeologist)	1 (radiographer)
	1 (anatomist)
Museum curator/artefact processor	3
Archaeological graphics specialist	1
Forensic archaeologist/anthropologist	3 (including one with a strong nursing background)
Funeral director	1
Total	30

The above table shows the primary occupation of the interviewees. All professional titles for archaeological specialists in human remain analysis are included in the category 'Osteoarchaeologist', but those who primarily work with forensic cases are counted separately. 'Field specialist' refers to an archaeologist who works primarily in a excavation setting, in all these cases in a commercial company. 'Researcher' refers to archaeologists who work primarily in a non-field setting, for instance in a university department or a lab-based institution.

Most archaeological research in the UK is undertaken by commercial archaeology companies who are either privately funded, attached to universities or run by the local government. This work takes place ahead of development, and is frequently described as 'Rescue Archaeology'. As a result of this situation, there was a noticeable sense throughout the interviews that the UK is crowded with archaeological sites that are constantly under threat, and that burials are being disturbed and uprooted on a regular basis. Although UK law, unlike in other European countries, does not stipulate that a burial plot

is only rented for a few decades, there was a common belief that bodies are constantly moved due to lack of space and the pressures of commercial development. In some cases, this was linked to an understanding that since the Medieval period Christian burial traditions have only occasionally presumed the non-disturbance of the dead and the necessity of the body's integrity for resurrection. There was considered to be a strong justification for the excavation of human remains in the UK therefore, with the bulldozer always just a short distance away. Interestingly, this led to three field archaeologists criticising excavations driven by individual academic research rather than 'rescue', describing them as unethically disturbing archaeology (and the dead) for professional gain and personal curiosity.

There are rare objections to the excavation of human remains in the UK, normally on behalf of Christian burials. Archaeologists frequently encounter the Church of England as the owner of not only the majority of historical cemeteries but also of a considerable number of non-sacred landholdings. The Church is still an influential moral authority in contemporary Britain, although the number of practising Christians continues to decline.[1] Archaeologists interact with the Church as both a contractor and a party seeking involvement in moral decisions over the excavation or reburial of remains. While the vast majority of archaeologists interviewed saw the reburial and non-disturbance of remains in foreign countries with minority indigenous populations as entirely ethical, their stance towards the Church in the UK was more conflictual, and on occasion, bordered on open hostility and accusations of hypocrisy. One example involved the case of an excavation in a cathedral cemetery where the archaeologists believed that the Cathedral authorities had insisted on 'reburial' for the skeletons after excavation only because they were unwilling to pay for post-excavation analysis. The archaeologists described how the cathedral authorities ordered the excavated and cleaned remains to be returned, after which they were taken out of the boxes and bags they had been individually stored in and 'thrown' into a collective charnel pit, over which a toilet building was later built. The archaeologists who described this case were angry at what they perceived to be the Church's 'hypocrisy'. Their own careful and meticulous study was considered more respectful treatment of the remains than the Cathedral's 'reburial'. It is worth noting that while the Christian authorities were criticised for similar practices on several occasions, the well-known case of Jewbury in York (that involved objections to the excavation of medieval Jewish burials and resulted in reburial; Lilley *et al*. 1994) was never described in the same way.

At the time of the interviews, there was an additional concern about the status of research on human remains. In 1999, revelations about the routine unauthorised retention of organs from infants who had died between 1988 and 1995 at the Alder Hey Children's Hospital caused a national scandal. At the end of an enquiry in January 2001, new legislation regulating research conducted on the bodies of the dead was proposed. In 2002, as the Human Tissue Act was being written, it was still uncertain whether the very broad definition of 'human tissue' being proposed would cover archaeological material or not. Against this background, and with the ongoing influence of NAGPRA on research and efforts to repatriate research collections in UK museums, there was a sense that material was under threat, particularly among the osteoarchaeologists. These fears did not, however, diminish the sense of moral obligation to negotiate and compromise with the broader publics who were calling upon the profession to justify the legitemacy of its work.

The Ambiguous Nature of Human Remains

Human remains are ambiguous entities, perceived to be somehow liminal: not quite people in the way we usually think of them, but not quite objects either. Archaeologists who have no qualms about taking apart a house, handling possessions or dismantling an offering, can feel a sense of unease in excavating a burial. Human remains will rarely be defined as either *artefacts* or *material culture*, terms that refer to 'culture' as the object of human manufacture. But neither do they count as *ecofacts* alongside of 'natural' objects like seeds and soils. The archaeologist Gavin Lucas has described how the division of objects into separate categories of ceramics, bone, lithics and botanics has its own institutional history and logic. Objects are grouped according to material, as opposed to form or use. This means, for instance, that a metal specialist will study metal bowls, and a ceramic specialist will study ceramic bowls, each writing separate appendices that are collected at the end of an excavation report (Lucas 2001:64–106). The only exception is the division of animal and human bone into zooarchaeology and osteoarchaeology. The logic by which objects are classed according to material does not hold for bone: a profound difference is perceived to exist between human and animal remains that is not reliant on the physical materiality of the object.

The archaeologists interviewed had difficulty articulating their conceptualis-ation of human remains as people or objects, but retained a strong sense that the two terms were mutually exclusive. At first they insisted on either one or the

other, but subsequently admitted that human remains are handled at different stages in ways that challenged this insistence. I frequently had the sense that the difficulty in expressing their views in part rested on a frustration that I did not already agree with them, particularly as I presented myself as a fellow archaeologist (albeit an undergraduate conducting an unusual project). *Of course* human remains were 'only objects', I was told. But in the next interview I would be just as forcibly informed that *of course* human remains were 'always people'. In working through the complexities of the interviews both within themselves and in comparison with each other, it was clear that the definition of human remains in relation to other ecofacts and artefacts was symbolic of much larger questions of acceptable behaviour towards other people both living and dead, but specifically the living, embodied self of the speaker.

The relationship an archaeologist has with the biological body is not the same as that a living person has with their own body. As living people, the experience of our bones is not normally based on being able to see or feel them, unless something has gone wrong. As one field archaeologist, whose unusual comments I will return to throughout this article, proposed:

> Human bones should be treated the same as pottery I think. But that doesn't mean we should denigrate the human remains, we should elevate how we treat the artefacts. We should see them as material identities, in the sense that the pottery is as much about the person as the bone. And you could probably say that they were more familiar with the pottery than they ever were with their right fibula for example.

The sense that archaeologists encounter "people" when they hold physical bodies in their hands emanates from an idea of personhood that appears to privilege the biological over the social (something this particular archaeologist was unusual in questioning during the interviews). Yet a simple dualism of (social) mind and (physical) body is challenged by the ambiguous reaction to the absence of the mind and the persistence of the inanimate body after death. Something non-physical still lingers, making the archaeological body more than its physical properties. Of course, no archaeological objects, nor any 'thing', can be reduced to only its physical properties. But the interviews were revealing of the extent to which British archaeologists, as individuals working in a (arguably) scientific profession within a modernist tradition, perceived human remains in comparison with other objects found in archaeology not as *indexical* of personhood, but as personhood itself.

A Mirror of the Self-Empathy As a Product of Materiality

Although the interviews covered a broad range of topics to do with human remains and death, in each interview I asked a direct question: 'Are human remains objects or people?'. The response was more likely to be given without hesitation or qualification if the answer was 'people'. Only two of the seven who answered that they saw human remains as primarily 'objects' answered immediately and without ambiguity. Of those, some stated that they felt they *ought* to see them as people, but in the course of study they inevitably were treated as objects. Few felt that archaeologists do not treat human remains any differently from other finds, whether or not this was considered a good practice. Most commonly, an attitude of 'respectfulness' resulting in differential handling was the way this sense of otherness was thought to be manifested.

Concerning the physical treatment of human remains, archaeologists from very different backgrounds emphasised the more delicate or rare nature of this material as a reason for handling it more carefully. For instance, a museum-based archaeologist whose work mainly involved statistical analysis of remains from previously excavated collections answered immediately that remains were objects, and stated that human remains should be treated differently:

> But for more reasons of preservation and analysis than for other reasons... Things should be handled a bit more carefully, especially if you are doing things like ancient DNA work, it can become quite frustrating [that field archaeologists don't always handle them carefully].

Similarly an osteoarchaeologist and forensic scientist, when answering if human bone should be treated differently, replied, 'No. Only in terms of their conservation and condition. They can be very fragile'. When asked whether they *were* treated differently in terms other than handling, her response was that they are but, 'I think it is inappropriate. In practical terms it is just attitude because they get washed and put in boxes like any other find'. Three of those who answered that they saw them primarily as objects also thought that they should not be treated any differently, but acknowledged that they often were.

Some specifically addressed the indeterminate status of human remains as a type of archaeological find, and found it difficult to give a definite answer. 'Bodies to an extent aren't things... and even though they don't look like a corpse on a slab, they are not inanimate objects either. They are this weird limbo in between'. These archaeologists seemed less definite on whether or

not they should treat human remains differently from other finds, sometimes questioning whether the desire to be 'respectful' or to have an alternative frame of mind when dealing with them actually translated into different working practices. If human remains are still excavated, bagged, washed and catalogued in the same way as other finds, are they in practice still seen as just another artefact?

The majority of the archaeologists interviewed, including those with a specialism in osteoarchaeology, had never dealt with recent remains and many said that they would be highly uncomfortable or unable to do so. One man who had done a significant amount of work in war crime investigations in Europe, and was at the time of the interview also working for a traditional archaeological company in the UK, described the active process through which he objectified the material he encountered. When discussing the ethics of excavating graves he stressed the importance of seeking permission from relatives, but was also concerned about the disturbance of ancient remains. In this respect, it was clear that his work on recent remains had actively shaped his understanding of ancient remains, and that his attitude towards the older remains was different from that of the archaeologists who had only worked with more 'traditional' archaeological material. But he felt that in some ways his concerns about the ancient dead were out of place and unrealisable.

> I don't think it should be any less important. I think it's kind of theory versus practice. In theory it shouldn't mean any less, that their culture is dead shouldn't mean that we shouldn't respect it. But practically that seems a bit silly. To me, I feel bad saying that.

While his perspective was shaped by his experience with recent forensic remains, he wanted to see all human bodies as the same but was ultimately unable to – there was still something different about ancient remains that made the sanction against disturbing them seem 'silly'. The ability as well as the desire to conceptualise them as people or as objects was shaped, therefore, by the type of material the archaeologist encountered. Specifically, the more the material resembled a living human being, and the closer it was to the self of the archaeologist, the more it was conceptualised as a person. Remains more likely to be recognised as 'people' were recent, articulated, with soft tissue, and similar to the archaeologist in terms of categories like age, gender and stature. A woman with particularly long hair who worked primarily with ancient, post-excavation, skeletal material said that:

I think they are primarily people, definitely. I mean you're very conscious of the fact –
especially if you get – I always get a sort of tingle down my spine when I come across
a skeleton of a woman who's about the same build and the same age as me. And I sort
of [think], 'Ah I wonder what she looked like!'.
(You identify with them?)
Yes, I sort of think did she have long hair!

The most significant factor in terms of identification was the age of the remains.
Although it was frequently mentioned that not offending living relatives was the
most important reason for not excavating recent remains, the definition of a
relative varied significantly from the immediate family to anyone who would
possibly be able to trace biological/genetic descent over a considerable
length of time. I suggest that the reason for distinguishing between recent/unac-
ceptable remains and ancient/acceptable remains is not entirely due to the
danger of offending those who might be related to the dead. At a 16th to 19th
century crypt excavation of Spitalfields Church in London, living descendants
were contacted prior to excavation but there were no objections (Reeve &
Adams 1993). If offending relatives was the only or even the primary reason
for not excavating remains it would mean that it would be acceptable to
unearth those who had no surviving relatives, even if they had only just been
buried. This is clearly not the case. Instead, it is the perceived nature of
recent remains as being too recognisable and too closely connected to the
archaeologist's own sense of self that is disturbing. The offence would be not
just to relatives, but to everyone/anyone, and specifically oneself. A field
archaeologist described how she could never do forensic work:

They find them with jeans, they've got the same clothes you wear, they've got the
same things that you deal with and the same kinds of music. I think all the skeletons
from a hundred years ago – they'd be OK because I know their experiences are so
totally different from mine. I think, people who've experienced similar lifestyles and
music and stuff like that, I don't think I could cope with that.

Closely related to the recentness of the remains is the degree of preservation.
The majority of archaeologists who had not already worked with soft tissue
claimed that they would find it difficult or distasteful to do so. Bones take a
period of training in the field or in a lab to recognise. Once, however, the exter-
nal parts of the body that are visible in life are added – hair, teeth and flesh –
the body becomes far more recognisable. Notions of privacy and the inappro-
priateness of touch and nakedness return when the body is fleshed and has

hair, particularly body hair that is usually covered with clothing. An archaeologist whose job involved washing artefacts said that she had no problem working with human remains, except for teeth which she found 'weird', especially when they had to be scrubbed using the standard cleaning tool – a toothbrush. Uncomfortableness with remains can be more profound than a feeling of weirdness. The first large-scale excavation of recent remains in the UK was of the extensive catacombs of Spitalfields church in London between 1984 and 1989, mentioned earlier. The site became infamous among archaeologists for the high rate of 'generally poor health and extended periods of depression suffered by members of the team' (Adams & Reeve 1987:250). Post-traumatic stress among archaeologists has been discussed by Cox (1994), but this issue has not yet been systematically explored by the profession at large.

Not all well-preserved remains are recent. An experienced osteoarchaeologist who usually worked only with skeletal material in the UK described the experience of excavating ancient desiccated remains.

> I know working in Egypt I had quite a different reaction to excavating mummies and – well they weren't really mummies they were desiccated and had skin and eyelashes and fingernails and hair. And I was quite intrigued by my own reaction and [the other excavator's] reaction to that, because they look more like people than bones. And I think that goes back to what we were talking about with the skeletons and us seeing it as old and something that happened a long time ago. Whereas with a mummy, even though it's 2000 years old just like we were excavating a Roman skeleton, as soon as you get desiccated flesh and hair it brings it more into the present. That is your mum or your sister or your friend. I think [the other excavator] and I, we both found, and it wasn't a deliberate thing, we only noticed at the end of the day, how our whole language as we were excavating altered. For instance if you were excavating bones on site putting something into a bag saying 'left femur' or 'skull', soon as you are dealing with something that looks more life-like or alive, or recently dead, we were talking about a 'hand' or a 'head'. And you could straight away tell without taking any measurements whether it was male or female. And language did change, it was very sort of subtle. It wasn't a deliberate thing. . . . But they looked really quite beautiful. Whereas bones can look beautiful, but most of the time, especially with the skeletons we get, they are all broken in the ground. Whereas with these things – there, I've just said things – they were really quite beautiful.

Though both provoke recognition, old and dry Egyptian mummies are 'beautiful', while recent and still moist Victorian coffins are disturbing.

Articulated remains were also seen as being more recognisable as a person than fragmentary pieces of bone:

> I think when you see a full skeleton you are very aware that it was a person. When you see an individual bone that is very different, and you think about it in a different way. So if you are handling just the bones, an arm, a humorous, an ulna, whatever, you think about it in a different way.
> (So that's more of an object?)
> Yes. But when you've got a whole skeleton laid out you know you've got a person.

The materiality of the remains dictates the degree to which personhood is *inferred from* or *recognised in* the remains, through allowing self-recognition and an ability to see something as sharing a common humanity. In his discussion of idols as an objectification of the agency of a divinity, Alfred Gell argues that idolatry 'emanates, not from stupidity or superstition, but from the same fund of sympathy which allows us to understand the human, non-artefactual, "other" as a copresent being, endowed with awareness, intentions and passions akin to our own' (Gell 1998:96). Gell's other is alive, but in this case the sympathy he describes is *empathy*, the ability to see oneself in another person (or another object in the case of the idol). The degree to which archaeologists are able to experience the empathy that recognises the Other as human is conditioned by the object itself: the object's ability to physically and visually remind the viewer of their own body, and through their own body, of their own humanity.

Yet it is this reminder of the self that makes human remains potentially disturbing and unsettling. The bodies that archaeologists work with are all bodies of the dead. Although one museum curator emphasised that *everything* archaeologists deal with is dead, the direct encounter with human mortality through an empathic connection to the dead body has the potential to be disturbing in the way a dead house, a dead agricultural system or a dead vessel cannot be (c.f. other professions that work with the dead, such as nurses, Littlewood 1993, and funeral directors, Howarth 1993). While some archaeologists claimed that working with the dead had given them a 'healthy' and less taboo attitude towards death in their own world, my attempts during the interviews to discuss the archaeological dead in the same context as contemporary death – particularly discussing their own death or of someone close to them – was frequently seen as distasteful.

Acts of Distancing and Connection

Discussion in the interviews of death in modern society and of human remains as dead people brought to the fore the acts of distancing that

archaeologists undertake in order to break down an overly empathetic, and hence disturbing, connection between themselves and human remains. Simultaneously, however, archaeology is a matter of creating connections between the past and the present, and of actively seeking a connection that reanimates the body in the present as a social entity. Again, this distinction is dependent on the particular materiality of the body.

A physical thing does not exist in isolation with an inherent meaning that can be unproblematically 'read' from it in any context by every observer. Instead, things provoke and acquire meanings while losing others throughout their life history. The materiality of human remains involves archaeologists in an oscillating act of distancing and connection, through which they are required to either construct or deconstruct empathetic personhood onto/from physical objects. While most archaeologists described working with human remains as interesting and exciting, one man who worked primarily in an academic rather than a field context described being unable to overcome the 'horror' and the 'sadness' of the dead body.

> But… no, you can't get beyond – forgive the terminology – the 'personness' of the bones. That always means there is some sort of connection. It's very, very difficult to make that skeleton, particularly a skeleton, just an object.

Despite having only encountered traditional remains, he had an unusual feeling of connection to *all* remains that made them all disturbing. This, however, was not the experience of most archaeologists who clearly perceived a difference in their ability to empathise with different remains. While this perceived difference did not always challenge an assertion that *all* remains were 'people', the distinction between some remains as disturbing and others as not suggests that there is indeed a difference in 'personhood'. Some remains are just an object, but an object onto which personhood can be consciously constructed and an empathetic connection actively created without arousing horror or distaste.

When human remains are studied, the first task is to ascribe an age and a gender. Each additional piece of information that can be gleaned from the body acts as another layer of identity laid back onto it. Isotope analysis indicates where someone was born or lived during their life; dental decay suggests diet; broken bones point to possible occupations; while the marks of diseases like arthritis provoke images of bent backs and dodgy hips. Although naming skeletons was usually described as childish and/or an anxious joking mechanism, at least two archaeologists said they liked working with remains that had known names. An osteoarchaeologist, describing how prison depersonalises living

people by taking away their name and making them a number, said that when names are known they should be used 'to restore something of the person'. Through such small pieces of information archaeologists build an identity for the remains.

In contrast, work with recent remains involves an active depersonalisation process through which the archaeologist is required to strip the body of its too obvious personhood. This process was described by one archaeologist who frequently worked with both war graves and traditional remains as a matter of having 'two faces' – a personal face and a professional face. He created a very clear and actively maintained division between the social person and the biological body. Rather than wanting to make connections and construct personhood onto the remains, as the archaeologists who worked with traditional remains described, he actively broke connections through excavation:

> But in Kosovo, it was very soon after the war, and when we started families were right there, and sometimes grieving. Very seriously. And that's hard. Because then I have trouble objectifying the remains. It's less remains, you know, bones and material, goods, and more [the] son of this grieving woman. So I prefer not to have people around, just because I don't like making that connection. I find it more difficult to work.
> . . .
>
> When I work on remains. . . I don't want to know the sort of identity of this person, or the family they had, or any of the details of their death. I just want to deal with what I have in front of me. And it's less – it's less 'a gun shot wound', and more 'trauma'. Look at what happened to the bone here. But when I'm outside of that and I see a program on television on the story behind the people, then it's certainly much more emotional and much harder to deal with. [Note: 'trauma' is used in this context as a technical term].

He described how it was important to disconnect, but while acknowledging it was personally desirable, he primarily referred to is as scientifically important.

> . . .you slip into scientific mode, if one can do that. And once permission has been granted and culturally, religiously, whatever, it's ok, then you have to slip into a mode where – I think it's important for the integrity of the work you are doing. Because if you draw all kinds of cultural or psychological or social assumptions into your work, that that's really hurting the science of it. It will inevitably hurt the science of it.

(Is it important for you as well?)
Yes. I think it's a defensive response, certainly. I think it's just a natural response, and I think its important.

The stripping of the body to a biological entity instead of a social person is framed as 'scientific', and it is not hard to understand why this is seen as necessary in the context of a criminal investigation. John Hunter and Margaret Cox have drawn attention to the paradox of archaeologists being involved in criminal work, while Zoë Crossland has described archaeologists' sometimes unwelcome involvement in finding The Disappeared in Argentina (Crossland 2000, 2002; Hunter & Cox 2005). These authors describe a conflict between the archaeologist as a scientist looking for objective 'truth' in the name of legal justice, and the archaeologist as an anthropologist aware of the cultural contingency of such truths and notions of justice. In the case of criminal work, the emphasis on objectivity must surely come to the fore, as Hunter and Cox concede. An experienced field archaeologist I interviewed, however, believed that working with recent remains made someone unable to return to traditional archaeology. Forensic archaeologists were, he explained, too distanced and no longer able to think about remains as people. Archaeologists who had not worked with recent material were still able to make the personal connection essential to humanising and understanding the past.

An archaeologist who had only worked with traditional remains but who, as the daughter of a clergyman, felt she had an unusual amount of personal experience with modern funerals, also described the necessity of depersonalising the recent dead. In other parts of the interview, however, she sought to personalise the archaeological dead that she worked with. Depending on the context of the conversation, she switched between contrasting beliefs in the body as an 'empty shell', and of the body as itself still a person. The interview was characterised by her strongly expressed views on the 'unhealthy' attitude her society has towards death, and what she saw as the inappropriate attachment of relatives to the physical body of their loved one.

> I think [the idea that the grave is a permanent resting place] needs to be challenged, otherwise how are you going to let go and move on, if you are so tied to this patch of earth, or whatever, where your relatives are? I mean, people's bones decay. I mean, there's slippage when a grave yard is on a hill, the grave stone you are visiting is not going to be marking your relative's grave for very long. The bones will slip down the hill and I think people need to realise that it's not their relative there, it's their relative's bones, and that's not what made them a person.

But she also expressed a pleasure in the connection to other people separated in time and space that archaeology enabled, a sense of the excitement of *recognition* when she discovered a woman similar in stature to herself or with whom she could sympathise in having back pain.

> When I come across archaeological remains I can almost see people's finger prints in the past or their actually physical remains. All these questions start popping up. Archaeology is about people and not objects, so if you have the skeleton of a person it is a person, it's what its all about.
> . . .
>
> They are still a person, even though they're dead. I think for me personally it helps if I remember that they were a person, because that's what archaeology is all about.

Later she said that she would not be able to work with recent remains because she would not be able to suppress her emotional reactions enough to do the work properly. She was looking for a connection with the past and with other people, but the people she created from the archaeological material and the historical sources she read were disassociated from grieving. They were, through her empathy, projections of her own experience of embodiment and personhood. Her depersonalisation of the bodies of the dead in the case of modern funerals is similar to the active distancing described by those working with forensic cases. The body that is too similar, too close to the self and too easily recognised, must be actively made into an object. But the contrast in her approach to the dissimilar remains suggests that, in fact, most human remains are very far from being 'people' in the moment of encounter. Which raises the question of how, and for what reasons, archaeologists seek to make human remains as material objects into 'people'.

The Significance of Remembering, and the Humanity of the Site

When the clergyman's daughter described archaeology as being 'about people and not objects', she voiced an oft-cited tenet of post-processualism, the dominant theoretical paradigm in British archaeology. In my experience working with and talking to British archaeologists, post-processualism is almost always held up by them as a more humanistic approach to studying the past than the positivist ecological functionalism of US processualism. It is frequently mentioned in conversations and in written texts that processualism is the counter-narrative to a processualist past filled with 'faceless blobs' acting out rational economic interests (Tringham 1991). While the classic

processualism of the 1960s was concerned with large-scale social processes and generating universal laws of human nature, post-processualism has most recently been focused on questions of agency and individual biographies, as epitomised by Ian Hodder's narrative account of two prehistoric individuals – the 'Ice Man' found in the Alps and a headless male buried at Çatalhöyük – that he proposed as an example of 'an archaeology that accepts roles for intentionality, uncertainty and individual creativity in human behavior'. (Hodder 2000:32). Further, post-processualism has been seen as actively concerned with deconstructing andro- and ethnocentric interpretations that populate the past with rational, white, middle-class, male westerners.

Post-processual British archaeology therefore sees itself as involved in the project of, on the one hand, returning people to the past, and on the other, as overcoming ethnocentric projections of the past into the present. The British archaeologist Julian Thomas has argued, however, that the post-processual concern with the 'individual' in opposition to 'society' in itself furthers modernist dichotomies.

> [S]tressing the individual and subjectivity as against the social and objectivity merely reinforces the modernist dichotomies that these terms imply. . . . '[T]he individual' refers to a very particular understanding of what it is to be a human being, which is specific to Western modernity and is both anachronistic and ethnocentric when applied to the distant past. In other words, the assumption is that there is only one legitimate way to be human, and it is *ours*. This viewpoint originates in a philosophical humanism, which posits a fixed and universal human nature as the basis for the dignity and natural rights of all human beings (Thomas 2004:119).

We should not, he argues, assume that the past is filled with bounded individuals who are the same as us. This, however, appears to be what many archaeologists do in their practice, and it is something that makes their work meaningful on both a personal and professional level. The field archaeologist who described pottery as a closer materialisation of past people's identities than bone was distinctly unusual. In his interview he drew on the idea of the body as it has been theorised for the European Neolithic and Bronze Age, where body parts were actively objectified through practices of disarticulation, transformation and reincorporation with other materials (e.g. Jones 2005).

> Especially in prehistory [human remains] become objects. They get incorporated into a structure, they are fragmented, and often skull fragments can look like pottery

fragments and they can have the same contexts. I think they are constantly in flux and being transformed. Especially once they are dead they are objects, they are taboo, pieces of material culture. For instance you can get pieces of prehistoric pot which instead of having flint or shell temper can have human bone as a temper into its construction. Maybe that's the joy of it, what makes archaeology so interesting – the possibility of transformation.

He was not specifically interested in human remains as things in themselves, expressing the unusual view (for these interviews) that he did not have a preference either for or against working with human remains. In contrast, other archaeologists frequently described the important role of human remains in 'peopling the past'. The role of archaeology in these examples is primarily *finding everything* – creating a complete world of houses, possessions and people:

> I like finding them. For me, it completes the site, because you find the buildings, you find the rubbish, you find the animals, and then you find the people. And that just completes the site for me. Because a site without any graves is like an empty site without any people. Its very... barren. You get a feeling a bit more for the past because there are people there.

The idea that an archaeological site, as another world temporally separated from our own, was only completed through the inclusion of physical people, appeared explicitly in seven interviews – but particularly among field archaeologists. In some cases this was expressed as a matter of the non-archaeological public's ability to relate to the past:

> And what I truly believe is that the past without people isn't a past, it is just a thing. So if you object to actually looking at the people then you are left with the inanimate objects and you don't know who made them, why they made them. ... Yeah you have to put a face on the past and that's what interests the public. ... Whereas if you said 'here is the giant pot room in the British Museum', [the public] would be, like, [in a dismissive tone] 'more pots!'. They all look the same! So I think they can't relate to it without people.

But there was also a personal sense of being able to relate to the past as an archaeologist – 'that's what archaeology is about, it's about people, not things. All the things that we find, people used'. In an unwitting pun a student described how 'they help me to really start fleshing out a site, probably more than fleshing out the person'. In these examples, finding human remains is equated with finding the people of the past themselves.

At first this seems unproblematic, but consider again the observation that the people who lived and died in the structures and used the objects that archaeologists excavate would have been more familiar with their houses and pottery than with their own skeletons. Objects like pots and houses, however, are seen as incomprehensible and distant to the experiences of contemporary people. In contrast, the body that the archaeologist encounters is comparable with their own body, and their own experience of embodiment. The archaeologists who said they saw human remains as 'people' were able to make an immediate empathetic connection between the object and themselves, for instance by expressing the view that 'I think people just want to understand more about themselves. And we can do that by skeletons and burial'. Human remains are easier to 'recognise', to connect with, than an inanimate object. Another body is understood as being easily related to the self because of the perceived universality of the human experience of the body, but a pot remains foreign to the contemporary person's experience. It is beyond the scope of this paper to critique Thomas's argument and survey the extent to which the universalised body remains an analytical concept within academic texts, but it is clear that in their *practice*, the archaeologists work with a concept of 'The Body'. This universalised body enables them to empathise with others, but also to make the work of archaeology meaningful.

The process of creating empathetic social identities and a sense of shared humanity is intimately linked to the concept of archaeological work as memory. Human bodies become the most explicit site where archaeology is conceptualised as an act of re-remembering and re-animating a past: 'I think in a way by digging them up we are remembering'. Discussing ethics brought up the topic of living relatives who might object to, or give permission for, excavation. Asked to define a relative, answers grouped around either a concept of genetic/biological descent that could be traced indefinitely, or of 'living memory'. The latter meant that the potential relative was able to prove 'That this person is a real person for them', known through photographs, family stories or from having been alive contemporaneously. The concept of memory and personhood appeared in the context of discussing relatives' 'rights' as stakeholders (a discussion heavily influenced by an awareness of NAGPRA). But archaeologists also described *themselves* as holding the dead in memory:

> But maybe that's the point of history, these are forgotten, and therefore I see archaeology as a way of memory. But I see it not just as a point of science but actually we

bring these people back to life again. But if they did have contemporary ancestors then maybe they haven't been forgotten anyway, so maybe archaeology is not required.

The act of remembering (re)creates a person in the present. Making the physical body visible in the present and (re)creating a social identity from it becomes an act of (re)animating the dead. The physical body acts as an embodiment of a social person, created through 'memories' that circulate in the present. The body 'gets located in history', as one archaeologist described it, 'even if they are not aware of it'. But the *who* that is being remembered is a universalised person, understood through the archaeologist's own experience of their own embodied personhood. The physical body inscribed with a social identity through an act of empathy 'embodies' the concept of a universal human experience, and the past becomes a universal memory.

Returning to the daughter of the clergyman described earlier, the 'people' she encountered in archaeology were, unlike the dead relatives in funerals, stripped of emotions associated with death, grief and suffering. The humanity that she recognised in the bones she cleaned, measured and put in boxes was an amorphous experience of social person-ness, not an experienced biography that would, by necessity, require an experience of death. Bringing the body into the collective memory that is 'History' does not require the biographical person complete with their death. The tensions with recent remains that must be counteracted through objectification are not present. Goodman (1999) notes that the further back in time the archaeological body is situated, the more bodies lose an individual biological existence and are incorporated into a homogeneous group, becoming not *our* ancestors but *the* ancestors. I suggest, however, that the dead never were 'ours' for British archaeologists, but instead are recognised as 'us', a shared memory of a common experience of being human – of having a body and a personhood. The disturbing body that must be objectified before it can be handled has its 'us-ness' removed, while the body that is personified is that for which the archaeologist seeks to create a sense of 'us-ness'.

> A person and a person's mind are not confined to particular spatio-temporal coordinates, but consist of a spread of biographical events and memories of events, and a dispersed category of material objects, traces, and leavings, which can be attributed to a person and which, in aggregate, testify to agency and patienthood during a biographical career which may, indeed, prolong itself after biological death. The person is thus understood as the sum total of the indexes which testify, in life and subsequently, to the biographical existence of this or that individual (Gell 1998:222–223).

To what extent can we see the human remains that archaeologists encounter as indexes, and if so, who are they indexical of? Not of the dead person who will never be known (although perhaps of Death), but of the living archaeologist as a person who sees their own body reflected back at them. Or not of an individual, but of humanity in general, or a concept of the past as another world complete with pots, trash pits and houses.

As a cultural practice in the present, archaeology serves many purposes, the most obvious being that of providing authoritative narratives about the past. Although its authority is not always unchallenged, even in the UK, archaeology is as much a response to contemporary industrial society's need to make sense of what it means to be human, as other authoritative narratives about the past are for other societies, past and present. That as individuals, archaeologists understand the world through their own experience of it, and that their work is meaningful and satisfying because it speaks to their own existential curiosity, is not surprising. Archaeologists will probably not, at least in their practice, overcome their own modernity to the that extent Julian Thomas would wish. Perhaps what it more curious is that there is even the suggestion of creating a narrative of the past filled with people to whom contemporary society can feel no empathetic connection.

As a profession whose role in society (like many other academic disciplines) is to grapple with the questions of life and death, the existence of archaeology and the treatment of archaeological bodies tells us something of the way wider society handles the 'problem' of mortality. Remaining distant from the starkest emotions of grief and suffering allows a space for detached thought, as befits contemporary concepts of appropriate scientific rationality among professionals, authorities and experts. Yet the conflicted responses archaeologists have to the bodies they work with also reflects a desire to remember, to individualise, and to connect with the past through an act of identification that is, I would suggest, indicative of wider societal anxieties about the body and its mortality.

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Note

1. Sixteen of the archaeologists described themselves as Christian, with seven stipulating they were practising and five that they were not. Two identified as Druid/Pagan, with the remaining 12 describing themselves as having no religious affiliation.

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