

BODY PARTS

Personhood and materiality in the earlier Manx Neolithic

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INTRODUCTION

What do archaeologists mean by the body? The body is most often discussed as a neutral template through which all people live, and have lived¹. This template is an agglomeration of a number of assumptions (social and cultural – which includes biological) as to what the body involves (cf. Yates 1993). Bodies are bounded, integral and solid; they can be ‘written on’ culturally, but remain a biological fundament of being. The body is also treated as distinct from the rest of the material world. Here I will suggest an alternative understanding of bodies in a British prehistoric context.

Ethnographers have long been aware that the person and the body need not be the same thing, but can overlap and diverge from each other in culturally-specific ways (cf. Fowler 2000, 2001). But to many prehistorians persons must have bodies, and these bodies are presumed to be ‘like ours’. These united socio-biological entities provide us with the bounded locus of “the individual”. Here the body is the passive carriage of the mind, soul or agency (cf. Thomas 1996:17–19, and Dobres and Robb 2000 for recent attempts to address these problems starting with questioning the role of agency). It is the origin of feeling, emotion and experience. Designating the body in this way at first glance appears innocuous enough, and may seem to provide a ‘tool’ for the translation of experience throughout time. However, such a tool is little more than a romantic fantasy². The body – and the *individual* who somehow ‘possesses’ the body – can function as an abstract template for sameness rather than the location of difference, and this template is often used to sketch prehistoric lives (cf. Fowler 2000).

How does agency fit into this archaeological schematisation of self, person and body combined? For me, agency is a field of activity, consisting of acts which reiterate and subvert previous acts. Each person is generated

through a field of relationships. Selves, persons and bodies are only formed through active practice. But no person is free to perform themselves. The socio-cultural currents which produce selves are relations of power. Judith Butler theorises the relationship between power and agency by emphasising their combined existence and production:

The performative dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms. In this sense, then, it is not only that there are constraints to performativity; rather, constraint calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity. Performativity is neither free will nor theatrical self-representation; nor can it be simply equated with performance. Moreover, constraint is not necessarily that which sets a limit to performativity; constraint is, rather, that which impels and sustains performativity. (Butler 1993: 94–5).

People can only emerge from discourse because they are enabled by the constraints which produce them, and which they also act into being through social relationships. Nothing pre-exists discourse, nothing is outside of discourse, although there are elements of discourse which it tries hard to dematerialise, to expel and conceal from critical enquiry. Power relationships are only possible, then, because performative acts take place in relation to their constraints. In the case of a normative masculinity, for example, power is achieved by playing the constraint, emulating the norm. However, this norm ultimately constrains the agent in other ways (though this may not be of concern to the agent) and constrains other agents and fields of agency, cross-cutting them. In this reading of agency what we are is produced through what we do, but this is reliant on our location within a cultural field. Agency is never a simple reflection of a pre-existing cultural field, nor ‘free will’ aside of that field – rather it is the mimesis of previous activities. In effect, *activities always reference previous activity, though not always as favourable repetition; parody and subversion are also forms of mimesis*. In this reading of discourse meaning is deferred to the past (past practices), and it is impossible to enquire after the ‘origins’ of a phenomenon. Put simply, agency is the process of generating social relations which sediment into persons, selves and bodies. Agency is therefore a vital element in interpreting past bodies, things and people.

Selves are then the enactment of social relationships by fields of agency expressed through material practice. The material is both the context for and the medium of agency. Selves exist as material relations. Selves have no identity other than what they perform through powered relationships. It is through such relations that selves’ subjectivities are emergent. These selves need not be understood in terms of fixed categories of identity (cf. Butler

1997:198). They can also be understood as the manifestation of different types of entity (see below).

The body, the individual and agency are all very different things. In this paper I want to question the relationships between these aspects of being in our accounts of prehistory. In so doing I will examine material remains from the Neolithic of the Isle of Man. I argue that this was a context where social/material relations and practices (agency) generated rather different experiences of embodiment (subjectivity) to those prevalent anywhere in the world today. I will postulate a field of discourse which may have dominated citations of personhood in the earlier Neolithic, and then briefly consider how later Neolithic activities may have altered, reiterated or subverted that field. Here I will treat bodily deposits as citations of personal *experience* (here meaning experience as a *generative field* or force through which materiality is produced) in an intentionally experimental and speculative approach.



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| 1: Ballafayle | 7: Killeaha |
| 2: Ballaharra | 8: King Orry's Grave northeast |
| 3: Ballateare | 9: King Orry's Grave southwest |
| 4: Ballavarry | 10: Knocksharry |
| 5: Billown Quarry | 11: Mull Hill |
| 6: Cashtal yn ard | 12: Ronaldsway |

Figure 3. Map of the Isle of Man including locations of Neolithic sites

MATERIALITY AND DISCOURSE

The discourse of prehistory is generated in the present, and is therefore involved in modern politics and negotiations of our social lives (e.g. Shanks and Tilley 1987, 1992, Barrett 1988, Tilley 1989a and b, 1990, 1993, Trigger 1989, Conkey 1991, Tringham 1991, Spector 1991, 1993, Bender 1993, Thomas 1993). This discourse cannot be abstracted from its context in modernity. But, dominant or not, such discourses do not completely suppress all others. In the case study presented here, the Manx material displays an ambiguity which lends itself to a commentary on some dominant assumptions concerning bodies and practice. It is important to stress the range of difference which exists in the present, in relation to the archaeological past. In order to struggle against universalising normative readings of “the body”, I employ a theory of “performativity” (as broadly outlined above with regards to agency) formulated by Judith Butler (Butler 1990, 1993, 1994). Butler’s theories concerning performativity focus on the political effects of repeated practices, and how these cite and iterate (e.g. Butler 1993:15) specific social activities, allegiances and subversions.

Theories of performativity stress that the body is not a passive social product, nor a neutral template. Rather, repeated meaningful activity materialises (e.g. Butler 1993:15, 69, 113–4) the world into existence. Crucially, the body is not separated from the rest of the material world. The relationships between agency, personhood, bodies and a wider materiality are open to question; the kinds of bodies and worlds produced depend on (but do not directly ‘reflect’) the kinds of agency in play. This immersion of body and materiality is of crucial importance for archaeologists, because it means that we can study material culture, animal remains and human remains as part of the same cultural universe rather than treating them as separated phenomena. This does not mean that we should objectify people, or personify things. Instead we should question the specific processes of objectification and personification which we predominantly practice. Animals, artefacts and people can share social characteristics which cross these boundaries (e.g., Kopytoff 1986, Battaglia 1990, Weiner 1992, Bird-David 1993, Ingold 1996). I argue that people’s bodies in some prehistoric contexts may have involved non-human elements, and that this is relevant to the interpretation of human (and non-human) burials.

The individual body is, however, a commonly assumed form for prehistoric bodies. This may be, in part, due to the dominant role of the individual in modern Western society (Fowler 2000, Thomas this volume). The individual stands as a metonymic signified, which archaeologists often link to the signifier ‘human bone’. In Neolithic archaeology disarticulated or

cremated bone is often accorded the status of the individual or the ancestral³. Objects still retain the status of 'grave goods' or 'offerings'. These objects are also used as metonymic signifiers, for particular cultural groups (e.g. the 'Ronaldsway' culture signified by pottery and flint tools), while architectural remains are taken to signify social groups (e.g. wooden structures as 'houses' for family groups, megalithic structures as 'tombs' for clans or lineages).

The specific social relations which can be interpreted from Manx Neolithic burial practices – and their generation and enactment – can be used as a critique of studies of the body. Rather than deciding what a body is, and then finding things in prehistory which are like those bodies (be they pots, collection of axes etc), we can also reflect on the different possibilities of being which metaphorical associations of particular materials may convey at the very horizons (Irigaray 1993 [1984]:151–84) of our language. In short, it is possible to break the metonymic link between human bone and 'the individual' in many prehistoric contexts, should we be more interested in exploring the possibility for wider forms of social relations and a greater variety of personhood. Combinations of human, animal and other material remains in Neolithic deposits may suggest other types of metaphorical association between different elements of the social world. Were these expressions of different kinds of experience, embodied in ways which are alien to us?

EARLIER NEOLITHIC ACTIVITY ON THE ISLE OF MAN

Earlier Neolithic activity on the Isle of Man is characterised by the deposition of a range of materials at sites which are composed of stone slabs, networks of ditches, cairns, earthen mounds, or combinations of these. Generally speaking, none of these sites can be ascribed a single or unitary purpose. No type of material culture, including human bone, is exclusive to any one type of site, or excluded from any type of site. However, there is still a wide degree of variation in depositional practice. Here I will focus on two sites constructed and used primarily in the earlier part of the Manx Neolithic (Figure 3); Mull Hill (Jeffcott 1866, Kermode and Herdman 1914, Piggott 1935, 1954, Darvill 1997), Cashtal-yn-ard (Fleure and Neely 1936) and a third site, Ballaharra, also in use in the later Neolithic (Cregeen 1978).

Ballaharra has been interpreted as a chambered cairn (Figure 4), but the deposits which interest me were outside of this structure, or incorporated into the cairn construction. The first of these deposits