

vessels agree on what elements could be associated, as Bourget argues they would?

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*The Body as Material Culture: a Theoretical Osteoarchaeology*, by Joanna R. Sofaer, 2006.  
 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press;  
 ISBN-13 978-0-521-81822-3 hardback, £40;  
 ISBN-13 978-0-521-52146-8 paperback, £15.99;  
 xvii+188 pp., 11 figs., 3 tables

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*The Body as Material Culture* is one of the first books to bring osteoarchaeology (or bioarchaeology for those in the USA) into the depths of interpretive archaeology, building on such texts as *Archaeologies of Social Life* (Meskell 1999), *Thinking Through the Body* (Hamilakis *et al.* 2002) and several writings by Tim Ingold (1986; 1990; 1998). The book challenges the intellectual divide between interpretive archaeology (humanism) and osteoarchaeology (science), a separation that has continued for much too long, often inhibiting the development of penetrating insights into the lived experience of past peoples.

Sofaer seeks to unite the two approaches by using the archaeological body. She views the body as a type of material culture and a historical phenomenon, constructed through interactions with others and with objects. This reveals her intellectual inclusion of constructionist perspectives that emphasize the making of the human body through discursive practices. However, she also recognizes the body's 'extra-discursive' realities, noting that it is not formed solely by discourse (p. 60), as Foucault and constructionists would argue. Thus, she identifies prediscursive qualities, such as biological sex or biological systems related to cell growth, that exist before social acts and historical circumstances shape the gender, identity, health status or other aspects of the body. This sophisticated integration of constructivist and biological perspectives demonstrates

her ability to draw insights from both 'sides', and she encourages other scholars to do the same.

Sofaer's first four chapters provide an excellent discussion of how to integrate these theoretical approaches, and the last two chapters put this unified theory into practice through a focused discussion on sex/gender and age. Her book is a valuable contribution that provides exciting prospects for osteoarchaeologists who have been striving to incorporate 'anthropology of the body' into their work, and it demonstrates a maturing of the discipline. Social anthropologists and archaeologists with interests in anthropology of the body, mortuary practices, gender roles, and the changing life course would also benefit from this reading. I think they will be pleasantly surprised by all that osteoarchaeology — of the kind that Sofaer espouses — can offer.

#### Disciplinary structures and its structuring of research practices

*The Body as Material Culture* may be met with some resistance from scholars who position themselves on the extreme of either approach. Sofaer is cognizant that she is trying to raze a long-standing disciplinary and theoretical wall that will not tumble easily, so she goes to great lengths (more than two-thirds of the book) to spell out the strengths and weaknesses of each approach and show how they might be unified. In particular, she tackles the notion that osteoarchaeologists are purely technicians, echoing Buikstra's (1991) call on bioarchaeologists to get 'out of the appendix and into the dirt'. Thus, while a theoretical osteoarchaeology has been in the making for quite some time, it is in Sofaer's book that various approaches are collated, enabling archaeology, biological anthropology and social anthropology to be integrated. She calls on osteoarchaeologists to examine the archaeological body in a new way: to use theoretical insights to view the human body not purely as a biological specimen that is predetermined and stable, but also as a type of material culture that is responsive to (and I would add, generative of) discursive practices.

Sofaer goes into some depth on disciplinary structures, but lest one think this is a navel-gazing enterprise, her insights into our disciplinary practices identify problems and potential remedies. Her work reveals issues of structure and agency within our own field, as she argues that the organization of most research projects, departments, and journals serve to create and maintain the divide by putting demographic and pathological studies into one sphere and interpretive studies into another. Osteoarchaeology, she explains, is not solely about aging and sexing skeletons or observ-

ing pathological lesions; these are only a few of a series of steps undertaken before broader anthropological questions can be addressed.

One of the problems that Sofaer identifies is that few osteoarchaeologists synthesize and interpret diverse data sets from archaeological investigations. This significant role is often undertaken by an archaeologist, while the osteoarchaeologist maintains the analytical and interpretive focus solely on the human bones. Because the skills of the osteoarchaeologist are transferable between regions and time periods, osteologists are often perceived as lacking 'in-depth place and period knowledge, which means that osteoarchaeologists are deemed unable to synthetically interpret' (p. 33). Clearly, Sofaer wants to change this. However, the potential agents of this change, osteoarchaeologists, as she notes (p. 33),

have been somewhat slow in being proactive. They have failed to demonstrate the wide potential of skeletal data outside of their own community, and have been reluctant to take on archaeological theory.

I agree with her assessment that osteoarchaeologists must expand their knowledge of archaeological and social theory to more fully engage in interpretation, and I add that osteoarchaeologists must also be involved in more stages of the research, including the development of research agendas and the excavation of burials and other contexts. This would enable osteoarchaeologists better to integrate and evaluate the social contexts that would have shaped the lives of past peoples.

### Too many dichotomies

A central argument of the book is that it is necessary to reduce binaries such as life:death, subject:object and culture:nature if we are to develop more nuanced understandings of the body and the body in society. She shows how, alone, either biological determinism or extreme social constructivism are much too limiting for understanding the complex nature of the lived (and dead) body:

[A]rchaeological bodies are not well captured either by biology or by social constructionism as the body is simultaneously biological, representational, and material (p. 11).

At the one extreme, she finds explanations from evolutionary psychology unsatisfying, as it views all humans as the same hard-wired organism, relying too heavily on genetic inheritance to explain human behaviour (isolating and emphasizing 'nature'). This natural, universal human body is in conflict with the notion that there are heterogeneous bodies and multiple ways of being. At the other extreme, she targets Foucault and critiques his notion that the body is purely a cultural construction

created through discourse and historical circumstances that are manipulated by societal structures.

As an osteoarchaeologist, she surely recognizes the corporeality of the human body and its extra-discursive aspects, making it difficult for her or any number of osteoarchaeologists who handle physical remains to accept uncritically the notion that bodies emerge solely through discourse. Perhaps it is the tactile interaction with human skeletons and knowledge of generally similar skeletal development and bone structures that contribute to osteoarchaeology's recognition of pre-discursive realities. Nevertheless, as she recognizes those, she simultaneously views the human body as a social entity, seeking to identify the discursive aspects that help to shape it. In this way, she begins to break down the divide between the 'natural' and the 'cultural'.

Sofaer's work breaks down many dichotomies but I was particularly intrigued by her argument for maintaining the distinction male:female and its relation to sex and gender (also see Walker & Cook 1998), a position with which I agree. Sex, Sofaer writes, 'has a material reality. It is not simply a representation' (p. 96). With this, she challenges constructionist arguments that claim biological sex is a cultural construction; she finds this position difficult to reconcile with 'morphological contrasts in the skeletal anatomy of men and women that are related to hormonal differences between them' (p. 90).

Sofaer also suggests that constructionist critiques of osteoarchaeology stem from the conflation of biology with genetics, even though many bioarchaeological studies examine 'development, not genetics; and the social domain of lived experience rather than its categorical representation' (Ingold 1998, cited by Sofaer at p. 27). She clearly shows that this is a key goal of osteoarchaeology of the body: it is about how people, through their bodies, interact with the world, not merely how biology categorizes their bodies.

Sofaer goes on to note that constructionists, paradoxically, cite modern genetic evidence — Klinefelter syndrome (XXY) and Turner syndrome (XO), among others — as evidence that there are more than two sexes (also see Fausto-Sterling 1993), but they still reject the 'relevance of scientific osteological sexing to the social understanding of biological sex' (p. 27). She also critiques constructivist approaches for conflating the social construction of osteological methods for estimating sex with the social construction of biological sex. Clearly, the act of creating scientific methods (e.g. traits examined to estimate skeletal sex) is a social act (Latour & Woolgar 1986), but that does not mean that biological sex itself is a social construct.

In addition to the distinction between biological male and female, she argues for a distinction between

biological sex and culturally constructed gender, a stance that challenges the influential works of Judith Butler (1990; 1993). As Sofaer argues, biological sex is not socially constructed, but gender is, and skeletal data on sex are fundamental for documenting how gender and gender roles were constructed and performed in the past. Constructionists will take issue with this, for she argues that biological sex is prediscursive, and gender is what may be constructed from it. That is, it privileges biological/skeletal sex and, for scholars like Butler, this is precisely what makes it appear 'natural' or 'normal', thus seemingly providing an unbiased, value-free foundation from which to construct gender and sexuality. I am sympathetic to Butler's arguments, and I think Sofaer is too, especially when biological sex is misused to discipline the body (Foucault 1977; 1978), limiting expressions of gender and sexuality. But, as a bioarchaeologist who analyses human remains and assigns skeletal sex as a proxy for biological sex, I find Sofaer's perspective extremely compelling. I, like Sofaer, still find the designation of skeletal sex a crucial component — a starting point, even — for reconstructing gender roles and the performative aspect of gender identity. Acknowledging this does not presuppose constraints on the performance of one's gender and sexuality. Thus, in studying past societies, distinguishing between sex and gender may provide one of the most fruitful ways to examine how gender roles and behaviours have been variously created and resisted in different times and places. Osteoarchaeologists, as Sofaer notes, are well positioned to examine this because gender, and other aspects of identity, are performed through the body — the locus of analysis for all osteoarchaeologists.

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 London: Routledge; ISBN-13 978-041533151-7  
 hardback, £71.25 & US\$132; ISBN-13 978-041533152-4  
 paperback, £24.69 & US\$44.95; xxi+243 pp., 64 figs.

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Growing numbers of archaeologists are inspired by the possibility that new theoretical work in the social sciences might provide breakthroughs in the study of prehistoric figurines. The objects in question, generally of clay, often anthropomorphic, are well known in prehistoric contexts across the globe. Figurines seem relevant to topics of current interest in archaeology — power, identities, social relations, and embodied subjectivities. They promise to be an invaluable testimony from 'within', since they were modelled by the people whose subjectivities we seek to understand.

Those working on figurines today are apt to be impatient with traditional scholarship. The basis of our feelings of superiority is that we have at our disposal new ways of thinking about people, bodies and representations. These theoretical insights will, we claim, yield a greater richness of knowledge about the materials we study and the people who made them. Still,