

## BOOK REVIEW – RECENZE

**Tomasz Gralak: *Archaeology of Body and Thought: From the Neolithic to the Beginning of the Middle Ages*.** Archaeopress Archaeology, Oxford 2024. ISBN 978-1-80324-721-9. 198 pages with 56 figures.

The relationship between the human body and culture is a significant topic in a multitude of academic disciplines, including anthropology, ethnography, ethnoarchaeology, archaeology, history, and numerous others. However, it is not only the disciplines that focus on our past; the human body is perhaps an even more significant topic of our time. This is not only in terms of medicine, healthy lifestyles, or fashion; it is increasingly a socio-cultural topic, as the twin terms of sex and gender are used perhaps more than ever before. As long as the body and physicality retain their biological significance for us as a species, they will continue to be an integral part of our cultural and social tradition. The physical form of the body and its cultural reflection will continue to be inextricably intertwined and to influence each other. It is therefore unsurprising that this topic has been the subject of considerable interest among scholars for many years (notable examples include the ethnographic works of *Mauss 2006/1935* and *Leroi-Gourhan 1943*). Its popularity has continued to grow in recent years, as evidenced by the large number of recently published works, including this book.

Before embarking on a detailed examination of the book itself, it seems appropriate to allow myself a brief personal input. It should be mentioned at the outset that for me, as a reader and a biological anthropologist not only by education but also by thinking (whereby the whole review is greatly influenced), reading the author's opening sentence, '*A human body is an artefact and an archaeological source*', start ringing the bell. I would posit that my state of mind is analogous to that of a significant proportion of the archaeological community when they initially encountered the assertion '*Archaeology is anthropology or it is nothing...*' published in 1958 by Willey and Phillips (*Willey – Phillips 1958*, 2). Although I cannot inherently identify with book opening statement, and the extent to which it is and is not possible to view human remains as artifacts could be the subject of a long debate, it did prompt me to read the text more closely. The deliberately provocative opening sentence was well chosen, if the author's aim was to provoke potential readers.

The book examines the various ways in which people in the past treated their bodies, the functions they ascribed to them, the modifications they made, and the ways in which our ancestors understood the body. It also considers how we can gain insight into these understandings through the interpretation of the past. However, this is not primarily a biological perspective; rather, it is a socio-cultural and historiographical one. It is therefore not reasonable to expect that this publication will address questions such as the biological response of the organism to environmental stress and its possible interpretation of the statutory hierarchy of the society under study. Instead, it will address the ways in which human remains are reintegrated into a living culture and reflected in the social status of their bearer, or the projection of corporeality in a figurative style into the artefactual equipment of a given culture and its meaning. The author addresses individual research questions in fourteen chronologically arranged chapters, preceded by an introduction and summarized by a conclusion. The chapters present a selection of intriguing facts from our prehistory and history concerning the potential projection of corporeality into material culture and vice versa. The author endeavours to address these individual questions in a solitary manner, relying on an evaluation of grave finds, anthropomorphic depictions, and written records. Overlaps between chapters are minimal.

The book's temporal and geographical scope is extensive. It covers the period from the Neolithic to the early Middle Ages in central Europe, Greece, Scandinavia, the Eurasian steppes, and also contains a number of analogies from all over the world, including Asia and Africa. The author partially builds on his previous book, *Architecture, Style and Structure in the Early Iron Age in Central*

*Europe (Gralak 2017)*, in which he addressed the influence of ideology on the understanding and shaping of space and material culture, as opposed to the perception and shaping of the physical aspect of people in culture. Due to the extensive temporal and geographical scope, the author selects topics that are both popular in the scientific community and among the general public. He does not hesitate to emphasise these topics, which he sometimes does by using somewhat provocative titles such as ‘Bone Collectors’, ‘Head Hunters’, or by revisiting the previously very popular topic of vampirism. While this approach may attract more attention to the book, it does not detract from its overall value. On the other hand, the author employs these contentious topics, it would appear, with a certain lack of critical engagement, particularly when they pertain to archaeological or biological anthropological subjects. This is particularly evident when the author does not present alternative interpretations that may be perceived as less engaging from a popular standpoint.

It is regrettable that this review is unable to examine each chapter in turn and address all of the topics discussed by the author. Given the author’s selection of popular topics, it is challenging to select only a few representative examples to convey the thematic scope of this publication to potential readers. Chapter XI, entitled ‘People on the Steppes’, is worthy of particular mention. In it, the author focuses on nomadic groups in the Eurasian steppes of the Iron Age. In this context, the author highlights the well-documented findings of animal-style tattooed human remains from sites such as Pazyryk and Verkh Kardzhin II. These tattoos were believed to have served as status symbols among nomadic communities because they were characterised by a lack of material possessions. On the other hand, there were also large and rich mounds, which could have served, among other things, as landmarks in the often-monotonous steppes, but certainly also had a statutory significance. In addition, the author also manages to address in the chapter the nature of early Iron Age nomadic society, its potential brutality, and the issue of rituals (based on written sources) that today could be considered rituals that desecrate human remains.

In certain instances, it would be beneficial to enhance the book with additional support literature for the author’s claims or to conduct experimental verification of these claims. An illustrative example is Chapter IV, ‘The Únětice Culture Bone Collectors’, wherein the author discusses the typical Únětice daggers and halberds and their most effective use in combat. As a biological anthropologist, I would be particularly interested in a reference to skeletal material or directly to soft tissue from an experimental setting. In Chapter XV, ‘The Slavs and the Myth of Vampire’, the author proposes that part of the world-understanding of the populations of the Migration Period and the early Middle Ages was the belief that the body and soul were tightly bound together. This led to the conclusion that decapitations or other forms of disintegration had to be conducted in order for the soul to complete its exit from the world of the living. However, the author does not provide references to other works, historical or linguistic sources, nor does he offer other possible explanations. Consequently, the author makes statements of a general deductive nature that may be misleading in certain respects. To illustrate, consider the following sentence: ‘*We may thus conclude that in both cases this phenomenon accompanies the change in funerary rites from cremation to skeleton burials as its consequence.*’ In this sentence, the author refers to the change in burial rite during the period of the Migration period and the early Middle Ages and relates it to ‘anti-vampiric’ measures. Without further substantiation in the existing literature and a more detailed examination of the text itself, the impression may be given to the reader that the fear of the supernatural was the driving force behind the general change in the manner of burial of the populations of the time. It is unclear from the text whether the author is referring to the transition from skeletal to cremation burials in the transition from the Migration period to the early Middle Ages or the gradual transition from cremation ritual to flat skeletal burials in the early Middle Ages. It is evident from the historical record that the people of the past were able to cope with the bodies of revenants. In addition to cremation, they treated them with various stabbing and chopping instruments, as well as soaking them in water and letting the remains go downstream (*Barber 1988*). They also tied them up, turned them face down,

and weighted them down with stones (e.g., *Betsinger – Scott 2014; Gregoricka et al. 2014; 2017*) have all proposed various methods for dealing with the remains of the deceased, including the use of lime as a sarcophagus (*Králíková 2007; Schotsmans et al. 2015*). It is not my intention to engage in a detailed debate on this topic. My objective is merely to utilize this enumeration to illustrate the numerous, more straightforward methods of dealing with the remains that have the potential to evoke superstitious fear in the broader community. Furthermore, I aim to highlight the limitations of generalizing such statements.

The book presents a synthesis of a number of chronological, cultural, and contextual themes. The author includes these themes in one volume under the thematic umbrella of corporeality and different views of the human body, which is always determined by a particular social group. The aforementioned themes are discussed in isolation, with no overlap into the other chapters. The book does not aim to produce broad chronological interpretations of human behaviour; rather, it presents a synthesis of knowledge based on written records, artefacts, and, in some cases, finds of bodily remains specific to the period and population under study. As a result of its nature, this work is not only intended for scholars engaged in any of the topics covered, but can also serve as an introduction for researchers who are just beginning to work on similar topics, or can provide a direction for further research. It would be of great interest to connect the author's chosen research model with more in-depth biological and anthropological or bioarchaeological research. For example, the integration of kinship and mobility assessment with the author's methodology for analysing past populations would significantly enhance our understanding of the past. Such an endeavour would undoubtedly yield a plethora of insights, while also prompting a multitude of further inquiries, as is often the case in our field.

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