

Autumn Meeting 2014

Neolithic Bodies

Organisers: Penny Bickle and Emilie Sibbesson

10.30am-5.00pm Monday 3rd November 2014
The Stevenson Lecture Theatre, the British Museum, London

NB Please organise own refreshments on arrival and lunchtime: we only provide afternoon tea!

- 10.00 **Coffee (available for purchase at outlets in the Great Court)**
- 10.30 *Welcome* Tim Darvill
- 10.45 *Introduction* Penny Bickle and Emilie Sibbesson
- 10.50 *Gendering the Neolithic body world: what was Neolithic gender really like?* John Robb and Oliver Harris
- 11.10 *Articulating the disarticulated: human remains from the Early Neolithic of the eastern Fertile Crescent (Iraqi Kurdistan)* Sam Walsh and Roger Matthews
- 11.30 *Ambiguous bodies in the Neolithic Near East* Karina Croucher
- 11.50 *Identities on display: Material culture, the body and the presentation of roles in funerary practice* Susan Stratton
- 12.10 Discussion
- 12.20 **Lunch (make your own arrangements)**
- 13.50 *Life on the frontier: stress in early farming communities* Abigail Ash and Ron Pinhasi
- 14.10 *Dismembering bodies and atypical human deposits of the 4th millennium in the Upper-Rhine valley: part of sacrificial practices?* Philippe Lefranc, Anthony Denaire, Christian Jeunesse and Bruno Boulestin
- 14.30 *'It was the best of times it was the worst of times': Quantifying assaults on the Neolithic body* Martin Smith
- 14.50 *Warm air – cremation in the late Neolithic of mainland Scotland* Kenneth Brophy, Gavin MacGregor and Gordon Noble
- 15.10 **Tea/coffee**
- 15.40 *Embodying communities: post-mortem treatment of the body as a reflection of life and landscape use in the British early Neolithic* Samantha Neil, Jane Evans, Janet Montgomery and Chris Scarre
- 16.00 *The Alentejo Central Stelae: Bodies in stone, crosses in shale, and limestone half-moons* Ana Ferraz
- 16.20 *Stone bodies between social constructions and ontology: The Neolithic steles from the central Alps (Valcamonica, Valtellina and Val Venosta)* Claudia Defrasne
- 16.40 *Discussion* Julian Thomas
- 17.00 Close
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Gendering the Neolithic body world: what was Neolithic gender really like?

John Robb and Oliver J. T. Harris

University of Cambridge; University of Leicester

In a recent publication (Robb and Harris 2013) we have defined the concept of a body world, a term that for us captures the way in which all periods of the human past are shaped through the experiences of human bodies, and how understandings of those bodies create the very possibilities for historical worlds to come into being. In this paper we want to build on some of the arguments explored in that text to examine an aspect of the Neolithic body world: gender. As with all body worlds gender was a critical element in the Neolithic, but it played out in very different ways from later periods, and these differences in part help to explain the much more explicit evidence for gender we see from the Bronze Age onwards. We suggest that a new approach to the gendered body world of the Neolithic can not only open up new understandings of the period, it can point to the place of the Neolithic as a critical hinge between different modes of gendering the body in European Prehistory.

Articulating the disarticulated: human remains from the Early Neolithic of the eastern Fertile Crescent (Iraqi Kurdistan)

Sam Walsh and Roger Matthews

University of Reading

The eastern Fertile Crescent was one of the first regions on earth to host the transition from hunter/forager to sedentary farmer/herder, from approximately 8000 BC. As part of this fundamental transformation in the human condition, new practices of disposal of the dead are attested at many archaeological sites of the region. In this paper we present recently excavated evidence from the site of Bestansur, Iraqi Kurdistan, dating to ca. 7800 BC, which consists of multiple human bodies deposited below the floors of a special building. The bodies are mainly in disarticulated states, with some co-mingling of individuals. A high proportion of the human remains were infants and young children, often layered over one another.

We will discuss the modes of deposition, demography, health and artefacts associated with the human remains. We will situate the burials within the broader social and cultic contexts of the earliest stages in sedentarisation of human communities of the eastern Fertile Crescent during this episode of dramatic change.

Ambiguous bodies in the Neolithic Near East

Karina Croucher

University of Bradford

This paper considers representations of ambiguous bodies from the Neolithic of the Near East, including figurines and larger monumental constructions, including the large monoliths from Göbekli Tepe in Anatolia. Potential incentives behind the choice to craft bodies will be explored, where the material culture merges categories and crosses boundaries, including between people and stone, gendered identities, fleshed and skeletal, human and animal. Finally, this paper will consider our analytical techniques in recognising, describing and understanding such material culture.

Identities on display: Material culture, the body and the presentation of roles in funerary practice

Susan Stratton

Cardiff University

In the Late Neolithic of south-east Europe (c. 5000–4500 BC) we see the emergence of the use of formal separate cemetery areas for the disposal of the dead for the first time in the region. At the same time there is a sharp increase in the amount of grave goods buried with the body. These include items of personal ornamentation clearly worn on the body, as well as tools and pottery which would have formed part of the individual's daily activities. Difference in distribution of these items indicates that they are representative of a variety of identities, based on age, gender, status and specific roles. Far more than being representative however, these items, through being permanently worn or from their everyday use these items became a part of the body, an assemblage which constituted the individual's identity. The display of these items in the funerary setting both served to express the identity of the deceased to the mourners and to reinforce the symbolism of certain object types with specific roles or identities. This paper will explore these ideas through a number of specific cemetery examples from south-east Europe.

Life on the Frontier: Stress in Early Farming Communities

Abigail Ash and Ron Pinhasi

University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

Across much of central Europe, settlements of the *Linearbandkeramik* (LBK) represent the first Neolithic presence in the landscape. The culture arose in Transdanubia around 5500 cal. BC and spread west to the Rhine within the course of a few generations, carrying elements of a mixed agricultural economy with it. The land LBK individuals crossed had not been intensively cultivated before and historical records and osteological analysis from cemeteries in seventeenth century North American frontier settlements highlight the hardships which may be endured by such pioneer settlers breaking new ground. The presence of local hunter-gatherer groups within the landscape may further have added to, or helped alleviate, this stress although interpretations of potential trade between groups, fortified settlements and mass graves in the western distribution of the LBK are contentious.

To investigate whether it might be possible to see evidence of frontier stress in the LBK, skeletal remains from two populations in western Germany were examined for the presence of four non-specific indicators of stress; porotic hyperostosis, cribra orbitalia, non-specific insult, and linear enamel hypoplasia. When compared with archaeological populations further east, these western populations expressed a significantly higher prevalence of both porotic hyperostosis and cribra orbitalia ($p < 0.001$). However only males differed significantly in prevalence of cribra orbitalia and linear enamel hypoplasia were actually less common in western LBK juveniles ($p = 0.002$). These results may suggest higher population level stress on the western frontier of the LBK, though the complex aetiology of such bony reactions require caution in their interpretation.

Dismembering bodies and atypical human deposits of the 4th millennium in the Upper-Rhine valley: part of sacrificial practices?

Philippe Lefranc, Anthony Denaire, Christian Jeunesse and Bruno Boulestin.

In this paper we focus on the particular cutmarks recently observed by paleoanthropologists on some of the skeletons found in Lower Alsace (France), dating to the 4th millennium BC, which indicate the dismemberment of the corpses while they were still fleshed. The most dramatic cases come from the Gougenheim settlement where we observed an adult whose legs were cut and partially burned and the body of an immature individual divided into several pieces placed in the same pit. These features integrated into a complex system of well-known recurring patterns, identified from the Rhone valley to the east of central Europe, whereby simple inhumations of crouched bodies in circular storage pits, identified as ‘true graves’, coexist with bodies found in a disorderly manner, which we interpret as being ‘accompanying deads’ (Jeunesse 2010; Lefranc et al. 2010). We suggest that the marks displayed by the bodies of Gougenheim reflect violent acts upon the corpses that do not really fit with the model of accompanying burials. We will also focus on the very unusual deposit from Colmar, where an individual laying in an unconventional position, on the stomach, was inhumed with 56 copper arsenate beads. It is, among other less conclusive examples of dismembered bodies, a very remarkable deposit that leads us to question whether all the human interments are part of funerary practises. We now speculate, drawing on this spectacular evidence, about the existence, during the 4th millennium, of some practices implying the use of the human body as a simple ‘ritual device’, maybe for sacrificial practices as recorded by social anthropology. What we know of human sacrifice and its practice in certain human groups shows that the act is often accompanied by the manipulation and mutilation of the corpses, comparable to the cases mentioned above. While this hypothesis surely does not provide an answer to all variation in mortuary practices, we will try to demonstrate that it could account for the data in a more satisfactory way than considering the practise of accompanying the dead alone.

Jeunesse, C. 2010. Les sépultures en fosses circulaires de l’horizon 4500–3500: contribution à l’étude comparée des systèmes funéraires du Néolithique européen. In L. Barry and B. Boulestin (eds), *Morts anormaux et sépultures bizarres, Les dépôts humains en fosses circulaires ou en silos du Néolithique à l’âge du Fer, Actes de la table ronde interdisciplinaire de Sens, mars-avril 2006*, 26–46. Dijon: Editions interuniversitaires de Dijon.

Lefranc, P., Denaire, A., Chenal, F., and Arbogast, R.-M. 2010. Les inhumations et les dépôts d’animaux en fosses circulaires du Néolithique récent du sud de la plaine du Rhin supérieur, *Gallia Préhistoire* 52, 61–116.

‘It was the Best of Times it was the Worst of Times’: Quantifying Assaults on the Neolithic Body

Martin Smith

Department of Archaeology, Anthropology and Forensic Science, Bournemouth University, UK.

After sitting in dusty museum stores sometimes for more than a century, the last 15 years or so have seen renewed interest in skeletal assemblages from Neolithic Britain. This has generated a range of new insights in areas such as diet, mobility, physical activity and the way people viewed their world. But arguably the area in which this modern re-examination has had greatest impact is in relation to violence. A generation ago the Neolithic was viewed as an idyllic time not yet marred by the levels of conflict that were to come later in human social development. However, re-analysis armed with modern understanding and interpretation of injuries to bone has revealed

injuries consistent with violent assaults to be startlingly common among the remains of Neolithic people. These include both healed and unhealed wounds, largely to the head, probably inflicted with a mix of blunt implements and lithic artifacts as well as repeated injuries caused by arrows. If we are to make sense of this line of evidence and go beyond the observation that 'Neolithic people sometimes hit or shot each other' we need to think about numbers. Each of these categories of injury has something to tell us at an aggregate level about the nature of Neolithic violence, as do the relative numbers of individuals affected by age and sex. This paper considers the overall frequency and distribution of violence-related trauma to ask what this can tell us about this crucial period in the human past.

Warm air – cremation in the late Neolithic of mainland Scotland

Kenneth Brophy, Gavin MacGregor and Gordon Noble

Glasgow University, Northlight Heritage and Aberdeen University

Over the past decade, we have gained an increasing understanding of the use of cremation as a Neolithic burial rite in Scotland. The excavation of a large late Neolithic cremation cemetery at Forteviot, Perth and Kinross, and the results of the National Museum for Scotland dating programme have gone some way to filling in a lacuna in the mortuary record of the first half of the 3rd millennium BC in the mainland. In this paper, we will round-up what we now know about late Neolithic cremation practice in Scotland, and consider what the emergence of this strategy for dealing with the dead can tell us about people and society at this time. Themes include fragmentary and partial bodies, mixed cremains, and the establishment of significant places through the deposition of such remains. Importantly, we also want to consider the impact on *the living*. The process of cremation was not just about the deposits that it leaves behind and that we excavate: it would have been a powerful experience for those who witnessed pyre events. To this end, we will report on an experimental pyre firing event that will be carried out in September 2014 on Arran. The focus of this experiment will be *how it impacts on spectators*, not the dead. Through this paper, we hope to offer a critical overview of the significance of late Neolithic cremation practice in mainland Scotland for bodies, both alive and dead.

Embodying communities: post-mortem treatment of the body as a reflection of life and landscape use in the British early Neolithic

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Archaeology has been criticised for dichotomizing the study of 'domestic' activities and 'ritual' practice (e.g. Brück 1999). This has been particularly problematic in the British Neolithic where evidence for day to day occupation appears ephemeral: discussion therefore frequently focuses on standing monuments and treatment of the body post-mortem. Recent advances in bioarchaeological techniques such as strontium isotope analysis are helping us to evaluate how treatment of the body in the mortuary sphere relates to residential traditions and social organization of living communities. This paper draws on results from a wider ongoing program of isotope analysis, using the specific example of humans and animals from Hazleton North, it will examine the relationship between the two spheres in the British earlier Neolithic.

Burial rites during this period commonly involved disarticulation and co-mingling of human remains. Burial practice therefore appears to have placed overt emphasis on group, rather than individual, identity in death. Results of isotope analysis suggest this may have been a reality during life: each monument was used for burial of a collective, closely knit, social group. Individuals buried at Hazleton North accessed very similar sources of dietary strontium, oxygen and carbon whilst they were alive. Individuals also exhibit similar patterns of variation in isotope values between consecutively mineralizing molars. They are inferred to have pursued very similar residential traditions. Traces of sub-cairn activity could indicate that monuments were built in places of pre-existing significance to the communities who constructed them (Graf 2012). The majority of individuals at Hazleton North have at least one molar tooth with a strontium isotope value comparable to that bioavailable where they were buried. The site chosen for placement of the body after death could as such have been an area in which individuals resided during part of their early life.

Brück, J. 1999. Ritual and rationality: some problems of interpretation in European archaeology. *European journal of archaeology* 2(3): 313-344.

Graf, J.C. 2012. *Windows into the past: an investigation into prior activity at Neolithic monuments in Britain*. Doctoral thesis: Durham University.

The Alentejo Central Stelae: bodies in stone, crosses in shale and limestone half-moons.

Ana Lúcia Ferraz

Université Toulouse le Mirail

Amongst the four-hundred standing stones in the Alentejo region, in south Portugal, thirty-five are decorated. They are decorated stelae with figurative features, in which human bodies are at the centre of the conveyed image. These stelae are part of groups of standing stones (that can go up to 100 individuals in a single spot) or isolated individuals.

We were able to distinguish at least three sets of stelae, each one with distinct key features. These features concern the kind of group they integrate (isolated or in groups) as well as the region and geomorphologic environment they occupy. They also concern the class of symbols that are used: anatomical (eyes, nose, breast), artefactual (crosses, moon-shaped necklaces, pendants) and abstract symbols (lines, circles, cupules) as well as their intrinsic layout and general thematic.

How do these stelae integrate the transition context of the 4th to the 3rd millennium B.C in social, political and symbolic levels? How is the human body depicted? What are the roles of the anatomical and artefactual symbols in the sketch of the human body? What message and how is this message transmitted by human bodies in stone? Who is depicted in these stelae and what is being told? A mythology, a story, a tale?

With the help of a methodology inspired by the semio-pragmatic approach of images we will proceed to the dissection and reassembly of the constitutive elements of these images and try to answer this questioning.

Stone bodies between social constructions and ontology: the Neolithic steles from the central Alps (Valcamonica, Valtellina and Val Venosta)

I propose here to consider Neolithic bodies through the study of the steles of the 3rd millennium BC from the Italian central Alps (Valcamonica, Valtellina and Val Venosta). These are stone bodies, personal effigies of men, women and maybe children. Indeed shapes, dimensions of these stones erected in ceremonial sites connected with the mortuary sphere and engravings of material culture they are wearing convey information about conceptions of gender and maybe of social maturity. Moreover, these bodies are connected with space. Shapes of female ornaments and male daggers engraved on steles suggest strong regional identities and place these stone bodies, settled in a ceremonial network sometimes very dense, in a territory socially built. Finally, in addition to convey information about social structures, these figured Neolithic bodies appear directly conditioned by the way of being in the world and relationships with the environment. Male bodies are engraved with animals and defined by a structural opposition between red deer and ibex. Animal species are used to distinguish male effigies. Moreover, the spatial structure of the male iconography, and consequently of the male body, could evoke a more general structure of the world. From these observations, it seems that Neolithic bodies are much more than biological organisms. They are at the intersection of social constructions and ontology of the prehistoric groups.