

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE HUMAN BODY
IN ANTIQUITY

EDITED BY DANIEL H. GARRISON



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SERIES PREFACE

A Cultural History of the Human Body is a six-volume series reviewing the changing cultural construction of the human body throughout history. Each volume follows the same basic structure and begins with an outline account of the human body in the period under consideration. Next, specialists examine major aspects of the human body under seven key headings: birth/death, health/disease, sex, medical knowledge/technology, popular beliefs, beauty/concepts of the ideal, marked bodies of gender/race/class, marked bodies of the bestial/divine, cultural representations and self and society. Thus, readers can choose a synchronic or a diachronic approach to the material—a single volume can be read to obtain a thorough knowledge of the body in a given period, or one of the seven themes can be followed through time by reading the relevant chapters of all six volumes, thus providing a thematic understanding of changes and developments over the long term. The six volumes divide the history of the body as follows:

Volume 1: A Cultural History of the Human Body in Antiquity (750 B.C.E.–1000 C.E.)

Volume 2: A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Medieval Age (500–1500)

Volume 3: A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Renaissance (1400–1650)

Volume 4: A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Age of Enlightenment (1650–1800)

Volume 5: A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Age of Empire (1800–1920)

Volume 6: A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Modern Age (1920–21st Century)

General Editors, Linda Kalof and William Bynum

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Introduction

DANIEL H. GARRISON

In the 130,000 to 200,000 years since homo sapiens evolved on this planet, the human body has had a more or less constant natural, anatomical construction. Its *cultural* construction is another matter entirely. The human body is the subject of its own master narrative in every culture and many subcultures. It is the task of this volume to reveal key features of that master narrative as it played out in the world of the Greeks and Romans and in Europe of the first millennium C.E.

Though to some extent grounded in the facts of human anatomy and physiology, the cultural body has a life and a construction of its own. In 1543 the anatomist Andreas Vesalius wrote,

It is commonly believed that men lack a rib on one side, and that men have one rib fewer than women. This is plainly absurd, even if Moses did say in the second chapter of Genesis that Eve was created by God out of Adam's rib. Granted that perhaps Adam's bones, had someone articulated them into a skeleton, might have lacked a rib on one side, it does not necessarily follow on that account that all men are lacking a rib as well.

Well before the scientific era, it was increasingly evident that a gap was opening between traditional thinking and the biological facts of life. The modern period is in part defined by the need to distinguish between these two realities. A few other examples will suffice to illustrate features of the ancient body that (perhaps) differ from the body perceived in the modern world.

The belief that female nature is less stable than male was tied in Western antiquity—and long after—to the belief that the human womb was not anchored by tendons as it is in other animals but can wander about the body, attaching itself to the heart, the liver, the brain, and other unlikely places, causing a variety of disorders peculiar to women. It was thought that the womb was particularly susceptible to odors, and that it could be moved about by the application of pleasant or unpleasant odors to the vagina.

One of the most persistent constructs of the cultural body in the West, now embedded in our language, is the belief that character is determined by one of four fluids or humors produced in the body. Blood, bile or choler, phlegm, and black bile (a mythical product of the spleen invented to complete the tetrad) were not only natural fluids: a predominance of one over the other three produced what we still call sanguine, bilious or choleric, phlegmatic, and atrabilious or splenetic personalities. Originating in Hippocratic medicine, by the Middle Ages the humors had solidified into the four temperaments; by Shakespeare's time, they had become part of the language, beyond the reach of scientific refutation.

Scarce can I speak, my choler is so great (2 *Henry VI* 5.1. 23)
 If she must teem,
 Create her child of spleen, that it may live
 And be a thwart disnaturaed torment to her. (*Lear* 1.4. 273–6)

Another cultural construct is the belief that certain parts of the body have a medical relationship with other parts to which they are not provably connected. The now largely discarded practice of cupping and drawing of blood through venesection (phlebotomy) developed in the West from the Greek belief that certain disorders were the result of an excess or plethora of blood. This ancient legacy became increasingly elaborate, not to say mystical: the Jewish Talmud ruled certain days favorable or unfavorable for bloodletting. Christians recommended certain saints' days. Astrological considerations also gained influence in its practice. Other lore emerging in the Middle Ages prescribed specific veins to be opened for certain conditions elsewhere in the body. The cephalic vein in the arm owes its name to the medieval belief that certain affects in the head could be treated by draining blood from that vessel, even though it does not go to the head. In the sixteenth century, pleurisy and related inflammations of tissues surrounding the lungs were treated by opening a tributary of the basilic ("kingly") vein of the arm, so called because it was also thought to communicate with the liver (right arm) or spleen (left arm). Therapy by acupuncture, still popular worldwide, is based upon similar doctrines of vital energy originating in Chinese traditional medicine. Such doc-

trines, East or West, are no less potent for being cultural constructs without a proven basis.

The examples we have given show what a tremendous range cultural constructs of the body have in history and why it is important to keep track of them if we can. We see what we have been told to see, and we believe what we have been told to believe about our bodies. Besides taking most of its terminology from ancient Greek and Latin, modern medicine is from time to time tripped up by some ancient conception that runs afoul of clinical reality. Our visual culture is no less conditioned by legacies from the ancient world.

PALEOLITHIC BODIES

There is not much reason to believe that our early ancestors took a great interest in the human body during the Upper Paleolithic when the first great art was produced in Europe. The most arresting masterpieces of cave art at Lascaux, Altamira, Trois Frères, Chauvet, and other sites in France and Spain depicted animals with great accuracy over a period of 25,000 years until about 10,000 years ago: bison, stags, aurochs, ibex, horses, and mammoths. Depictions of humans are relatively few and casual, especially when they represent the male. Three-dimensional representations of the *steatopygous* (fat-buttocked) female body are iconic in a different way from the animal art, displaying features of an idiom that lasted longer than any other in the history of art. Though they bear a slight resemblance to some women who can be seen in any American shopping mall, these figures are unlikely real-life specimens of hunter-gatherers who lived transient lives in the landscape of paleolithic Europe before the establishment of settled farming villages. Breasts, buttocks, hips, and thighs are prodigiously obese; feet and hands are typically missing, and there is usually no face. Shoulders are narrow, as of a person who does no work with the upper body, but the genital cleft is shown when not overlaid by fat. There is no sign of ornament or clothing. Though they come to us with no explanatory captions or primary informant to explain their meaning, it is easy to guess that they represent success in eating and reproduction, two privileges that did not come easily to Paleolithic man or woman.

These “Venus” figures, as they have been ironically (but perceptively) called, have been found all over Europe from France and Italy to Moravia and Russia, transcending the styles of any region or ethnic group. Because they are anatomical fantasies, they are the first appearance known to us of the human body as part of a symbolic and projective system, the first cultural construction of the human body. Various carved in bas-relief on a limestone wall or molded in clay, the stylized, schematic “Venus” figure presents an instructive contrast with the sharp realism of animal figures belonging to the same period. It is the distinction between nature and culture.

NEOLITHIC IDIOMS

Naked female images, both of the “Venus” type and of less exaggerated features, are more numerous than male throughout the Upper Paleolithic. It would be a mistake to think that they represent a dead end in the history of art. Their lasting symbolic value is argued by a tendency to abstraction that survived the Paleolithic cultures and emerged as a theme in the Neolithic communities that developed in the upper Balkans, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Malta, and Greece. The repertory of forms grew into a visual idiom that survived into the Bronze Age and finds its most refined expression in the Cycladic figurines beginning in the Neolithic fifth millennium B.C.E. and reaching their peak in the third (Early Cycladic I–III), where at its most abstract the female figure is reduced to a “fiddle form” icon with a long narrow neck and no head, arms, or legs. Cycladic figurines, the great majority female, have been preserved in significant numbers because they were buried with the dead.

Much older than the Cycladic carvings are the Early Neolithic figurines of northern Greece that precede 6000 B.C.E. Here the idiom includes phallic heads and necks, hands upon or just below the breasts (a gesture that never died out), minimal facial features with slits for eyes, and heavy thighs. The Neolithic cultures of Sesklo (7000–3200 B.C.E.) and Nea Nikomedeia produced simplified female figurines with birdlike faces, others with pronounced buttocks, and the kourotophos, a nursing mother with infant that was much later revived in Christian art. These types occur far beyond northern Greece: Neolithic Lerna in the northeastern Peloponnese, Hacilar and Çatalhöyük in southern Anatolia, Cyprus, and numerous other sites. Though they are part of the legacy of human representation in what is now Greece, they precede Greece and belong to a widely distributed koine that extended beyond the confines of the Aegean basin and included southeastern Europe, Malta, and some of the Adriatic basin. It is now thought that the early Greek Neolithic culture that employed these styles was influenced by a large-scale influx of pioneer communities from southwest Asia ca. 7500–6500 B.C.E., but it is unclear whether the idiom we have been describing was also indigenous to the entire Balkan peninsula and was familiar to the newcomers.

BRONZE AGE INTERNATIONALISM

Historical Greece, the homeland of classical civilization, was a distinct complex of traditions of which the neolithic substratum was only one element. The Aegean world of the third millennium benefitted from a new period of Early Bronze Age internationalism anticipated by Cycladic sea trading that linked the western Greek mainland with the Anatolian coast (3100–2700 B.C.E.). In the centuries that followed, Troy II, the distant ancestor of Homer’s Troy at the south end of the Dardanelles, became prosperous; deep-hulled sailing ships

displaced the Cycladic rowed canoes, and Minoan Crete began to assert its hegemony in the southern Aegean. The second millennium opened with a Cretan thalassocracy that extended its reach into southern Greece and was the first true civilization in what would become the Greek world. As suggested by the myth of Europa, the princess of Tyre carried by Zeus in the form of a bull to Crete to become the eponymous founder of Europe, Minoan Crete had strong ties with the Levantine east. The language of its still-undeciphered Linear A script is believed to be a Semitic dialect, and the script may be derived from an eastern Mediterranean cuneiform. Minoan trade relations extended to south Russia or Afghanistan (copper ingots, lapis lazuli), Attica (silver), and Egypt (fine stone and finished products such as stone vessels, scarabs, and statues).

A palace civilization with multiple centers in Crete and an important settlement at Akrotiri on the volcanic island of Thera about seventy miles north of Crete, the Minoans created art in several media including ivory, stone, faience, gold, clay, and wall painting. Human subjects included male figures such as athletes, harvesters, bull jumpers, and worshipers. Both male and female figures are shown clothed, but with greater attention to anatomical detail than was typical in earlier Neolithic or bronze age art of earlier eras. In what could be taken as an anticipation of the athletic ideal of Classical Greek art, Minoan male and female figures are notably narrow in the waist to the point of being wasp-waisted. Especially in contexts of worship, where they are often shown, women have well-developed, exposed breasts that are clearly distinct from the obese breasts of the Paleolithic "Venus" figures of Europe. The best-known type is the "snake goddess" shown with a snake in each hand and fully clothed in a long flounced dress that leaves only her breasts exposed. It is unclear whether this is a goddess in epiphany or a worshiper; multiple figures in cult scenes, similarly costumed, appear in gold rings and seal stones.

MYCENAEAN GREECE

Minoan civilization declined in the late fifteenth century B.C.E. and its palace sites were occupied by Greek Mycenaeans. It is unclear to what extent this decline was a result of the volcanic eruption of Thera not far to the north sometime between 1630 and 1550, as many Minoan remains are above the ash layer attributed to that eruption. It is clearer that the mainland Greek Mycenaean civilization, which had earlier been a subset of the Minoan, took on a life of its own in the last phase of the Greek Bronze Age. Its independence is signaled in myth by the story of the Athenian prince Theseus slaying the Minotaur and running off with Ariadne, the daughter of Minos, whom he later abandons on an Aegean island.

Mycenaean civilization was based on a decentralized set of sites in eastern and southwest Greece. Significantly, it is proven from their Linear B writing

that the Mycenaeans were a Greek-speaking culture, dominated by a warrior elite probably descended from migrants who came from somewhere to the north or northeast. They took most of their language, some of their religion, and their distinctive character from the final ethnic component of the historical Greek people, the Indo-Europeans. Paradoxically, the arrival of this potent new group sometime near the beginning of the second millennium is marked in the archaeological record by a long period of relative stagnation (Middle Helladic—Emily Vermeule described its early stages as “spiritually very poor”). But contact with the Minoans early in the Late Helladic period (beginning ca. 1550 B.C.E.) stimulated a rapid development in Greece that lasted until the collapse of Mycenaean civilization about 1100 B.C.E.

Early in the Greek Bronze Age, designated in archaeology as the Helladic period, the stylized female idols that formed an artistic idiom in Neolithic and Cycladic art had begun to disappear, perhaps because of religious changes. By Mycenaean times, the bright colors and ornamental themes of figural art were wholly Minoan in derivation. The presentation of female figures conforms to Minoan style: short-sleeved jacket open at the breasts, tubular flaring skirts with rows of flounces, bare feet, and elaborately coiffed hair. Prominent breasts and erect posture remain the rule for women, and small, well-defined waists continue to represent the ideal for both sexes. A distinctly Mycenaean theme, appropriate to the people to be remembered for the sack of Troy, is the warrior, most famously represented in the “Warrior Vase” of the twelfth century showing a line of helmeted warriors, each with round shield, spear, and small sack of provisions, marching away from a grieving woman.

THE END OF THE BRONZE AGE

The Trojan War, traditionally dated at 1184 B.C.E., was the last great event of the Greek Bronze Age, which came to an end with a system collapse throughout the eastern Mediterranean between 1200 and 1100 B.C.E. The Greek warlords who were the nominal victors at Troy would soon have their own palaces reduced to a burnt layer. Athena, coming to Ithaca to rouse Telemachus to search for his father in Homer’s *Odyssey*, disguises herself as a trader in iron—a mark in the later epic tradition of the beginning of what we now call the Iron Age. The archaeological record of the centuries that followed the legendary Trojan war suggests a “dark age” in which populations declined and many Greek emigrants settled east and south of the mainland, most importantly in Ionia on the southwest coast of Anatolia. In later centuries this outlying region would become the home of the first Greek philosophers and the home of Hippocrates of Cos, the father of Western medicine.

The Mycenaeans had maintained constant trade with the east, as the Mycenaean Greek community in Ugarit (Ras Shamra) in the northern Levant shows.

The system collapse of 1200 cut east-west trade routes and isolated Greece from western Asia for several generations. But this did not last forever. By about 900 B.C.E., contact with the Phoenecians revived to the extent that the Greeks adapted their Semitic alphabet, converting some of its characters to vowels. Thus began a pattern of adaptive reuse that would characterize the civilization that invented itself during the following centuries.

PANHELLENIC ATHLETICISM

Two events in the eighth century marked the emergence of a Panhellenic identity that accompanied the beginning of the Archaic period, the first era of historical Greece. The transformation of religious games in honor of Zeus at Olympia to Panhellenic games is nominally tied to 776 B.C.E. Very little is known of the early history of the games, as the earliest written record dates from the work of a local historian, Hippias of Elis, near the end of the fifth century B.C.E. The quadrennial Panhellenic Olympics were, however, important enough long before Hippias to become the basis for dating any event in Greek antiquity. For historians of the body, the important fact is that the main events were athletic, and that victories in the contests were supremely important for the cities and families of the victors. The revival of the Games in 1896 C.E., the colossal audiences they command today, and the prestige accorded to participating nations according to the number of victories achieved by their athletes demonstrate the durability of the underlying ideologies of the body in world culture.

Another significant feature of the ancient Olympics was the establishment of male nudity. The origin of this custom is unclear, but two ancient authors place it in the Games of the year 720 B.C.E. Vase paintings confirm the practice of athletic nudity. To some extent, this practice grew beyond the athletic arena to become a costume of sorts so that nakedness, a symbol of helplessness, was transformed to nudity, a symbol of power especially among the oligarchic classes who cultivated their athletic prowess in the *gymnasion*, literally a place of nakedness. Only the most powerful were secure enough to flaunt their unprotected condition. Thus begins the cult of the nude body as an icon of power and social rank. In athletic contests as in warfare, the body is implicitly not a cosmetic object as much as a means to *do* something. It was both an instrument of power as its abstract representation. It represented and made possible the supreme virtue of *aretê*, which is cognate with *aristos*, "best."

The second defining event of the eighth century was the composition of the Homeric epics, which re-created the Trojan War some 450 years after the actual event and became the defining literary projection of the Greek character. Probably set down in writing between 750 and 700 B.C.E., the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* took full advantage of the distance in time and the absence of an exact written record to make the war and its aftermath an affair that bridges the

gap between the Mycenaean and the Archaic eras, making the epics a kind of commentary upon both. Like the Olympic games, Homeric warfare in the *Iliad* was a competitive enterprise in which the Greek Achaeans are as busy competing among each other as they are occupied with the defeat of the Trojans. Students of the body and its representation have long ago noticed that Homer rarely describes the body as a whole. Bruno Snell once argued that he had no conception of it but could articulate only one part or another. Helen of Troy is famously left undescribed, as if Homer were allowing his readers to construct their own Helen from their personal imagination.

BODY AND SOUL IN THE EPIC WORLD

So far as the ideal Homeric body can be pieced together from his epics, it is not the short, dark-complexioned body of the Mediterranean genotype. Two of the greatest Achaean or Danaan heroes are fair-haired (Achilles, Menelaus), as is the goddess Demeter and the underworld judge Rhadamanthus. Odysseus is an untypical hero because he is short in the legs, and Agamemnon is lordly for his height. The fullest physical description in the *Iliad* goes to the deformed antihero Thersites, who rails against Agamemnon early in the poem:

This was the ugliest man who came beneath Ilion. He was
bandy-legged and went lame on one foot, with shoulders
stooped and drawn together over his chest, and above this
his skull went up to a point with the wool grown sparsely upon it.
Beyond all others Achilleus hated him, and Odysseus.

Iliad 2.216–220, trans. Richmond Lattimore

Like slavery, deformity was hated by the Greeks who read Homer, but they had little compassion for its victims.

Without doubt the most important statement Homer makes about the body is dropped into the very beginning of the *Iliad* where the poet talks about the cost of Achilles's wrath, which is the theme of his story. This wrath "sent the strong souls of heroes to the house of Hades, but made *themselves* spoils for dogs and birds." As if inserting a polemic against any system of belief that overvalued the soul, the poet of the *Iliad* insists in this programmatic moment that the self is the body that is destroyed in death. Similarly in the *Odyssey* when Odysseus tries to embrace the spirit of his dead mother in the underworld but fails three times because she is only a wraith, she explains,

[this] is only what happens, when they die, to all mortals.
The sinews no longer hold the flesh and the bones together
...

but the soul flitters out like a dream and flies away. Therefore
you must strive back toward the light again with all speed.

Odyssey 11.218–223, trans. Richmond Lattimore

It could scarcely be made clearer that anatomy is ontology in the Archaic mind. Your body is all you get. This helps to explain the high value the Greeks of later generations were to place upon physical conditioning, health maintenance, and medicine.

GENDERING NUDITY

A lesser writer of the same century as Homer was Hesiod, author of a narrative about divine origins, the *Theogony*, and a handbook of wisdom for farmers, the *Works and Days*, both composed in the same hexameter meter and epic dialect as the Homeric epics. Like the epics of Homer, Hesiod's poems were foundational in Greek thought, not least when they told of the creation of woman, a story recited in both Hesiodic poems. The centerpiece of both narratives about the creature sent by Zeus as the evil antidote to fire stolen by Prometheus and given to man, is the costuming of Pandora (the name is mentioned only in the *Works and Days* version) with a gown, a veil, a garland of flowers, and a gold crown. Thus at about the time (ca. 720 B.C.E.) male nudity was established as the uniform of physical excellence in the Olympic games, female nudity was being covered in Hesiod's account of the creation of woman. Like Homer's polemics about the centrality of the body to human identity and the unimportance of the soul, Hesiod's account turns out to be a kind of polemic against western Asian representations of Ishtar (Babylonian)/Astarte (Phoenician)/Inanna (Sumerian), the goddess of love and war who was sometimes represented in the nude. The literature and institutions of Greece were therefore in the first century of the cementing of Greek identity rejecting female nudity and elevating male nudity to heroic status where it constitutes what Larissa Bonfante has called "the chief distinction between Greek and barbarian." This distinction was to endure until the slow emergence of the female nude in the last century of the Classical period, which ended about 332 B.C.E.

Paradoxically, the human figure depicted in vase painting contemporary to Homer and Hesiod is not as nuanced or articulated as we should expect. The geometric style reduced humans to simple formulas: a triangular chest, simplified beaked head, and bulbous thighs tapering to spindly lower legs. There is no attempt at perspective or display of emotion except the formalized gesture of mourning with one or both hands placed on the head. It is not until the seventh century that Daedalic and orientalizing influences make their way into Greek art, introducing a naturalistic rendering of volume and an organic unity that anticipates the monumental kouroi of the late Archaic period: statues of