

An anthropological approach

Chris Fowler

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF PERSONHOOD

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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF PERSONHOOD

Understanding personhood, the notion of what it means to be a person, can reveal a great deal about societies in any place in any time. It is therefore highly relevant to those reconstructing past social worlds from the archaeological record.

The Archaeology of Personhood examines the characteristics that define a person as a category of being, highlights how definitions of personhood are culturally variable and explores how that variation is connected to human uses of material culture. Applying an anthropological approach to detailed case studies from European prehistoric archaeology, the book explores the connection between people, animals, objects and their societies and environments; it also investigates the relationships that jointly produce bodies, persons, communities and artefacts.

Bringing together a wealth of research in social and cultural anthropology, philosophy and related fields, this is the first book to address the contribution that an understanding of personhood can make to our interpretations of the past.

Chris Fowler lectures at the University of Manchester. He is a specialist in the British Neolithic and archaeological theory, particularly focusing on concepts of the person and approaches to identity in the past.

THEMES IN ARCHAEOLOGY

Edited by Julian Thomas

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book first came to mind during my postgraduate research into the British and particularly Manx Neolithic. As I wrestled with the interpretation of personhood in the past I wondered why there were no books on the subject for archaeologists by archaeologists. Since then a few books have been published that address personhood, but in the main these are detailed contextual monographs, and do not introduce the anthropological approaches in great depth. The primary aim of this book is to provide a guide through interpretations of personhood for archaeologists, and to review ways that these approaches enrich the archaeological imagination. In particular the book considers recent studies of personhood within European prehistory, and the ongoing role of anthropological theories in this field. I have therefore explored the anthropological literature from an archaeologist's point of view and for archaeological purposes.

During 2000–2 I conducted research on southern Scandinavian Mesolithic and Neolithic archaeology alongside the British Neolithic, while I continued investigating theoretical approaches to personhood. This book springs from the majority of that research, although readers will not find detailed interpretations of the Neolithic material here. This research was carried out at the University of Manchester as part of a Special Research Fellowship awarded by the Leverhulme Trust. I would like to gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the Trust, and the support of the School of Art History and Archaeology at Manchester. I have

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benefited enormously from the expertise of my colleagues at Manchester in researching and preparing this text. Ina Berg, Vicki Cummings, Tim Insoll, Siân Jones and Julian Thomas have all read draft material and offered comments. Julian Thomas deserves special mention for all his interest in this work over the years and his continued willingness to provide advice and discuss ideas. Sarah Henson and Anne Pangbourne helped with proof-reading, and Vicki Cummings gave vital advice during preparation of the illustrations. There are a number of other people with whom I have discussed this work and who have made useful suggestions, but in particular I would like to thank Eleanor Casella, Sarah Green, Lesley MacFadyen and Rob Schmidt. The experience of teaching some very keen students interested in personhood and identity over the last two years at Manchester has been enormously beneficial in deciding how to write this book. I am also indebted to two anonymous reviewers for their comments on the draft proposal. I would like to thank Lars Larsson for permission to reprint his photograph of grave XXI at Skateholm II. I am also grateful to Chicago University Press for granting permission to reprint figure 9 from Battaglia (1990) as figure 3.1.

On a more personal note, I would like to thank Debbie, John, and Margaret Fowler, Ben, John, Liz and Sarah Henson for all their support. My family, Sarah, and her family have all endured the writing process and participated in discussions on many of the subjects covered here over the last few years. I would like to dedicate this book to the Fowlers, Hensons and Hiltons.

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INTRODUCTION

Most of us wonder from time to time what people were like in the past. For example, Figure 0.1 shows the grave of three people buried together around 7,000 years ago in Denmark. How should we interpret this deposit, the bodies, objects and animal remains that it includes? What should we make of the people who were buried here, those who buried them, and the act of burial itself? How should we attempt to trace the relationships that featured in their lives, the routines of activity that shaped their experiences and bodies, the way they related to animals, places, things, and the dead? How can we tell what other people in their community were like? What strategies did they pursue in their interactions with others? In answering these questions I will argue that it is necessary to first interrogate some of our common-sense understandings of what it means to be a person, loosen their grip on our imaginations, and then illuminate some other conceptions of personhood. The reward of this approach is a far richer picture of what past people were like. While I will use only examples drawn from current research on European pre-history, both the topic of personhood and the approach presented here have a wider relevance for archaeology as a whole.

Bodies, persons and the modern world

Individuality is extremely important to us. In recent years individual lifestyle choices and experiences have become an expression

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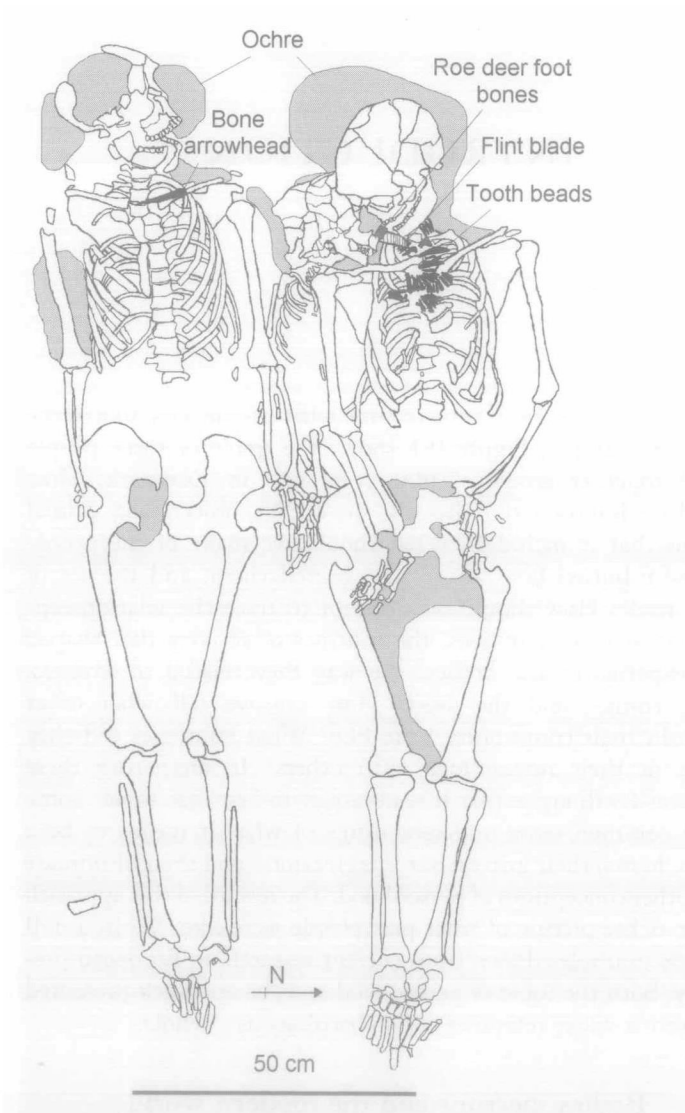


Figure 0.1 Vedback Bøgebakken, grave 19.

Source: Adapted from Albrethsen and Brinch Petersen (1976).

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of our individuality (Giddens 1990, 1991). While we may change our lifestyles we record our personal histories in a cumulative way, building up valued biographies of remembered events and experiences. These biographies are selective and partial, though we present them as indicative of our individuality as a whole. The body is central to this project, and people continually reflect on their bodily appearance, movements and health (Shilling 1993). There is nothing new in this, but what is specifically modern is the way that these routines are carried out, the kinds of personhood they produce, and how choices are made. Each of our bodies is understood as our own property, our own project, our own business. Personal concerns are understood as private concerns centring around the knowledgeable actions of each individual. It is tempting to pursue these features in past people, to trace their individuality, the projection of their internal selves into the social world, including through their presentation of their appearance. However, this conception of individuals and individuality is emergent from the modern era, and is the result of a lengthy history, traced in the first chapter. Many prehistoric communities did not live through this history, through a world of mass production, capitalism, internalized reflection, privatized concerns, and social technologies that individuated each person and alienated people from both the wider community and nature. People in past societies were not necessarily individualized in the same way as those of modern people, and past identities may have been temporary, contextual, and community concerns. I argue here that past concepts of personhood may have supported identities that were highly contextual, and relational to specific events and interactions. In this book interpretations of contemporary ethnographies investigating personhood are used as a starting point to illuminate features such as these that are overlooked or absent in western society, and which are frequently overlooked in interpreting the past. It will be demonstrated that there are other conceptions of personhood that complement or countermand individuality, and each of which, taken as a whole, is rather unlike modern and post-modern notions of the individual. While we can reasonably assume that all people in the past were

self-aware, this book aims to explore the diverse kinds of self they were aware of.

Peopling the past

It is only relatively recently that archaeologists have made concerted efforts to people the past, and to provide a humanized view of prehistory. Culture-historic approaches, dominant worldwide until the 1960s, were not concerned with individuals but with cultures, ethnic groups or even races (Jones 1997: ch. 2). Processual archaeologies generally pursued universal laws of human culture, and in so doing sought frameworks to quantify and compare social identities and statuses. Analyses of mortuary practices (e.g. Saxe 1970; Tainter 1978) drew extensively on sociological ideas about social personae and social roles drawn from sociology and sociological anthropology (e.g. Goodenough 1969). Social identities were roles people held (shaman, priest, mother), while social personae were the presentation of any combination of these roles in a specific interaction. Individuality, equated with a very personal and unique self-identity that was consistent at the core of a person (cf. Cohen 1994), was therefore kept separate from social interaction and social personae, and explicable only as a factor of innate individual preferences and psychological character traits. This understanding of people – as primarily individuals who enter into social roles – dates from liberal philosophies of the eighteenth century. In *Missing Persons*, Douglas and Ney (1998) illustrate how these ideas presume individual desires as fundamental to human nature, and society as a ‘place’ where these individual wills battle for survival. Aside from presenting an impoverished view of society, Douglas and Ney argue that this restrictive view of persons is dehumanizing, and fails to recognize the crucial role of contextual identities in forming the very motivations that people have. Archaeologies of personhood therefore need to attend to the cultural motivations that guide people, and people’s strategies for negotiating those motivations, as well as the identities that are produced by social interaction.

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In many ways, the movement to people the past is synonymous with the broad agenda of post-processual archaeology. From the late 1970s archaeologists increasingly accentuated human bodies as 'sites' for culturally specific forms of political negotiation and social disputes (e.g. Thomas 1991; Yates 1993). It was argued that people were generated through their entanglement in social, political and symbolic interactions. Renewed emphasis was placed on contextual social relationships, and in particular the negotiation of power relations and identities through the manipulation of material culture (e.g. Shanks and Tilley 1982; Shennan 1982). During this period post-processual archaeologists were inspired by work from feminist and Marxist approaches to society, and embraced new trends in anthropology and sociology, including the emerging fields of cultural studies and material culture studies (e.g. Barrett 1994; Gero and Conkey 1991; Hebidge 1979; Hodder 1982, 1986; Miller 1987; Shanks and Tilley 1987a, 1987b; Tilley 1990). Analysis shifted from finding laws that applied universally to culture, to understanding culture as something that is socially manipulated and consumed in heterogeneous ways. The emphasis on the consumer, the reader, the interpreter, shifted the focus towards heterogeneous social sub-groups and even the individual person. One result of this process has been to lodge modern individuals in the 'archaeological imagination' (Thomas 1996: 63–4). This has prioritized western concepts of the person at the cost of a wide range of other ways to understand what it means to be a person. This book reviews ways that archaeologists can and have addressed that imbalance.

Personhood beyond the individual

This book examines how people emerge from an ongoing field of social relations involving humans, animals, things and places. Detailed readings in ethnographic analyses of personhood form the basis of this book since these ethnographies have also been extremely influential in the archaeological imagination, but key details are seldom explicitly explained in archaeological literature. Personhood itself is defined, along with some of the other key

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terms used in this book, in Box 0.1. Different societies have different concepts of the person, different understandings of the boundaries of and interpenetrations between people and things, and one person and another. Some artefacts might be features of a person, or persons in their own right. Animals and objects and even natural phenomena may be persons: not just *like* people, but actually persons in their own right sharing the same social and technological world. Archaeologies of personhood investigate how past people were generated alongside their social worlds, through social technologies, and look for the key metaphors and principles that structured daily lives. This book therefore focuses on the different social practices through which people are constituted in each context. The redistribution and circulation of bodily and worldly substances are all discussed as major features in the attainment and maintenance of personhood, where the person is one social being embedded in a larger cosmos. Special emphasis is given to the interactive production of personhood within a community, and the differing strategies people employ in negotiating their own personal identities through the larger trends in practice that structure their lives. Age, caste and gender all play a role in formulating these strategies, as these are all inseparable from personhood. While I do not attempt an exhaustive review of archaeological interpretations of personhood within European prehistory in this short book, several recent approaches are discussed. The aim of the book is not to offer critiques, but to illustrate the broad potential of these approaches and locate them within the theoretical debate over personhood in the past and present.

Box 0.1 Key definitions

Person is used to refer to any entity, human or otherwise, which may be conceptualized and treated as a person. A person is frequently composed through the temporary association of different aspects. These aspects may include features like mind, spirit or soul as well as a physical body, and denote the entity as having a form of agency. Exactly who or what may or may not be a person is contextually variable.

Personhood in its broadest definition refers to the condition or state of being a person, as it is understood in any specific context. Persons are constituted, de-constituted, maintained and altered in social practices through life and after death. This process can be described as the ongoing attainment of personhood. Personhood is frequently understood as a condition that involves constant change, and key transformations to the person occur throughout life and death. People may pass from one state or stage of personhood to another. Personhood is attained and maintained through relationships not only with other human beings but with things, places, animals and the spiritual features of the cosmos. Some of these may also emerge as persons through this engagement. People's own social interpretations of personhood and of the social practices through which personhood is realized shape their interactions in a reflexive way, but personhood remains a mutually constituted condition.

Modes of personhood, or *fields of personhood*, are terms used here to describe the overarching logic of being a person within any social context and the specific long-term trends in the practices that support that logic. Modes of personhood provide the forms that relationships are supposed to take. People

continued on next page

actively engage with these trends, and with that particular concept of personhood, when they pursue strategies of interaction. As a result of these interactions, each person is constituted in a specific way.

The following are key features of contemporary modes of personhood:

- 1 *Individuality and indivisibility.* Individuality in our common conception of personal uniqueness is a feature of all persons. I use the term 'indivisibility' to refer to the state of being a unitary, totalized and indivisible person. Indivisibility is a predominant trend in our contemporary western mode of personhood, and individuality lies at the core of a constant, fixed self.
- 2 *Individuals.* Obviously, all people are individuals in the common use of the term. I use the term 'western individual' to refer to personhood in which a constant individuality and a persistent personal identity are stressed over relational identities. All people have individuality, but the shape that it takes, the desires that characterize it, and the value accorded to it vary immensely.
- 3 *Dividuals and dividuality.* A state of being in which the person is recognized as composite and multiply-authored. People are composed of social relations with others to the degree that they owe parts of themselves to others. Furthermore, the person is comprised of multiple features with different origins, like a mind, soul and body, and some of these may not be fixed in the matter of the body but either enter into or emerge from the person during certain occasions. The body itself also has different constituent elements, and changes in the balance of these may alter the disposition of the person. Interactions reach into and affect the constitution of the person. All of the elements of the cosmos may pass through dividual people. Two examples of dividual personhood are discussed in detail:

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