



# Making Sense of Things

*Archaeologies of Sensory Perception*

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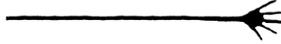
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# The Inescapable Body

Stephen Houston



Imagine a movement from past to present that traces in rough order the papers in this volume:

- ... most ancient peoples craved and enjoyed tasty meals and drink, just as we do today, but in distinctive ways (Fahlander)
- ... Maya sculptors of the Yucatan peninsula and environs crafted images of royal faces and then undid them by acts of mutilation (Normark)
- ... a helmet embellished with images served to augment facial expression and personal identity among elites in the Vendel period (Back-Danielsson)
- ... white beads passed into the graves of women in the Viking age as tokens of their identity (Thedeén)
- ... pain as sensation and suffering as emotive response afflicted ancient Europeans, whose very bones reflected such agonies (Kjellström)
- ... a world of color and its attendant meaning went into the making and scrutiny of medieval coins (Myrberg)
- ... a beloved child or spouse or parent lay dead, in simulated sleep or celebration of spiritual innocence (Nyberg).

On November 26, 2009, the discussant listened to papers that described these phenomena. He had the pleasure of practicing his rusty Swedish and eating food that can be difficult to obtain in the United States.

Yet, despite the fun of meeting new friends, he thought longingly of a missed meal: Thanksgiving. In North America, this feast is meant to fill the stomach. But, much more than that, it affirms loving bonds with family and friends. Now, at the end of this long process, and long-overdue in his moral obligation to hosts, he has adjusted his glasses to read the papers. He notes their polished English and ponders, with regret, the linguistic deficiencies in his own country. He thinks about content, processes it all according to his own training and idiosyncratic predisposition. He types a response by interacting biomechanically with a QWERTY keyboard.

In all of the above, bodies play and have played a role, as they must always do in human existence. In fact, bodies can be described as ‘topical inescapabilities.’ They are so central that archaeology and anthropology must always account for them, yet so central as potentially to be taken for granted. Sometime in the 1990s, archaeologist began to consider the relevance of human bodies to archaeology, not only as physical anthropologists might, or as interpreted by outlying approaches like Edward Hall’s proxemics or Erving Goffman’s face-work. The new stimulus coalesced from varying, heterogeneous input: Michel Foucault and his automatic views of authoritarian will and the coerced human form; a burgeoning anthropological literature that looked to emotions, clothing, food and drink, and, above all, the theme of identity and the formation of ‘self’; re-readings of German and French phenomenology; and reflections about the differences and meanings of human gender, occasioned by social movements and self-explorations of the time that very much ripple into the present. Interpretative doorways opened--not all of them leading to the same place, or consistent as to their source--along with novel opportunities for the stimulating importation of ideas from other disciplines. Archaeologists took full advantage of them. Useful articles and books ran along the customary arc of manifesto (Meskell 1996)—“We must focus on topics that have been ignored”—to monographic application (e.g., Meskell and Joyce 2003; Houston et al. 2006; Houston et al. 2009)--“We must evaluate specific evidence against these new ideas”—to the installation of new orthodoxies (e.g., Geller 2009)—“We must adhere to correct thought.” Or: “by some miracle, our research has brought us to perfect consonance with our political views and self perceptions. Indeed, this is both expected and needed given the subjective nature of human thought. ...and because our views are eternally right.” At this juncture, the trend has passed from

the avant-garde to the mainstream to the status of a banality. From a careerist point of view, its (approximately) ten-year arc may accord with the time it takes for a young career to be established. In that time, too, younger students learn to speak and think in its language. Then, in bored reaction or under impulse to create their own identities, they begin to discern, craft, and follow the next alluring arc.

At the Stockholm meeting, if I remember correctly, Fredrik Fahlander mused, in Swedish, “look, just because a topic has passed from trendy regard does not mean that it has been exhausted intellectually or that it cannot be extended or developed further.” In the United States, much archaeology has shifted, often with reason, to a concern for archaeological practice and public reception. In part, this comes from ethical qualms about the conduct and results of archaeology in an indigenous setting, and, at least outside of Europe, from anxieties about the roots of archaeology itself in the colonial experience (Liebmann and Rizvi 2008). The present arc conforms to a more general concern in anthropology--our parent discipline in the United States--with ameliorative, development-oriented approaches that now dominate many academic departments. (To exist in institutions controlled by sociocultural anthropologists inclines archaeologists to scuttle after their research agenda: models from the living usually trump models from the dead.) Archaeology should be interesting and instructive, but must also *make a difference*. Of course, there is also, as in all regional research, continuing excavation, processing, and publication, often along trajectories established decades before. These ‘flows’ of work have their own, discipline-bound inertia. They may touch only tangentially on metropolitan theory.

Still, the inescapability of the human body means that the topic as an integrative focus of study must form an enduring part of archaeological interpretation, if only to be revisited by subsequent generations, and in view of reworked or newly elicited data. The fact of the matter is that the initial monographic expositions (see above) may not build on the most careful or scholarly review of evidence. This is the potential cost of being trendy or modish. The very nub of the process is to work quickly. That way, there can be an agile embrace of the next wave and perhaps the chance of helping to define it.

But what are the contours of that sustained work and thought, and how can they be refreshed? The essays collected here show that there are still vast quantities of evidence with which to reshape and remodel theory. Our main history of archaeological thought, by Bruce Trigger (2008),

appears to make that claim that theory exists independent of data or discovery; or, to put this more precisely, that theory can be discussed in isolation from the substance of what we find. Surely, however, the notion that data collection is saturated with theory implies its corollary, that theory exists in tandem with the data it is supposed to illuminate. Can this be why a prominent theorist, Ian Hodder, has turned in the past decades to one of the most minutely empirical (and expensive) of all archaeological projects (Hodder 2006), using ever finer tweezers to recover ‘truth’ from these early deposits? (His simultaneous embrace of empiricism and subjectivism remains an unresolved irony.) It may be, too, that further injections of energy need to come from comparative studies, as seen throughout this collection of papers. Whether those studies should re-fashion terminology, as in John Normark’s contribution, draw further on anthropology or local history, as in the papers by Fredrik Fahlander and Nanouschka Myrberg, or integrate the most basic of physiological commonalities, as in Anna Kjellström’s essay, are all promising leads. But they are not exclusive ones.

My view: whatever works, whatever leads to insight and inspiration, these are the desired properties of a deepened archaeological approach to the body. Since we are all human, as were those who buried the dead, clothed the living, and considered sensation in faraway times, there must be some basis for empathy or, as John Lewis Gaddis has put it, ‘*a packaging of vicarious experience*’ by which other perceptions are represented and distilled into the productions that we call scholarly writing and imagery (italics in the original, Gaddis 2002:33). But let there be no mistake: the predicaments of subjectivity are always present, yet there is also, or should be, a ‘loop of reiteration’ in which evidence interacts in muscular play with the ways of conceptualizing it (Gaddis 2002:46).

The Stockholm meeting was also, for the discussant, a chance to do some furtive intellectual ethnography. Increasingly, and as indicated in the references of most essays, English-language sources serve as a theoretical starting-point; local languages, such as Swedish, tend to be used instead for empirical studies of monographic length. (A century from now, we may well be writing in Chinese.) This pattern suggests that the community of young Swedish scholars that I met in Stockholm regards its interlocutors in discussions of theory as Anglophone and its community as larger than a regional one of, say, Vendel- or Viking-period Scandinavia. Johan Normark’s paper revealed a different

orientation—of French philosophy—but also, to judge from the citations, a group of texts accessed through English-language translations, if from sources that are, as yet, relatively untouched by other archaeologists.

The questions for me were, to what extent would a US-based scholar write a similar essay and to what extent is archeology itself globalized and pan-regional in its intellectual goals? Is the creation of globalized archeological theory a necessary development? My own work on the human body, with Mayanist colleagues, has directed itself to asking whether a theory or approach is the right instrument with which to elucidate a particular body of data. For me, the target is always the Maya, whatever other, non-Mayanist scholars might make of the research. I doubt that distinct communities, rooted in local training, interlocution, and the particulars of evidence, will ever be supplanted by the virtual communities of a shared language or a set of collectively perused publications. It would be a bad thing if they were. The myriad sources of novel, instructive ideas would be flattened out, with little possibility of creative renovation or extension. My impression is that some of the essays in this volume make use of documentary sources to explore meaning (Danielsson, Myrberg, Normark, Thedéen); others are rooted firmly in a tradition of prehistoric, materials-oriented research or broader, comparative studies (Fahlander, Kjellström). Again, whatever works: the objective of a pragmatic archaeologist is to find ideas and views that enlarge the range of possibilities, that cause a widened or shifted perspective. This is how we move beyond the mere recycling and repetition of earlier thought.

The individual papers were of high quality. They made me think. Nonetheless, as an outsider I might not have written them the same way. Fahlander's paper asked many excellent questions, including ones all of us should ask about the where, how, when, and who of daily meals. Johan Normark's paper continues his exploration of non-anthropological theory, finding its inspiration in what I take to be the universalizing claims by French philosophy. (For all its weaknesses, anthropology at least sees comparison as an abiding and vexed problem of interpretation. Most philosophy would seem to begin with the dubious assumption of comprehensive applicability. Is it truly plausible that philosophy should exist outside history, that its verities be decultured, its proponents devoid of preconception?) I suspect that some of the aversion to taking an anthropological approach may stem from the distinct history of Swedish archaeology, which, to my understanding, tends as a prehistoric inquiry

to detach itself from local ethnography and all of its nationalistic, ethnic claims as embodied in places like Skansen and Nordiska Museet. Is there some lingering malodor to these ethnic propositions, a distaste or sense of caution that an outsider might not fully understand? Does a much-changed society, from the hardscrabble, agrarian roots of my ancestors in Skåne to the tempered socialisms of the past century, make an implicit argument for discontinuities? Later Swedish belief and practice—to be sure, much transformed over time—would seem to have strong, logical ties to earlier ones studied by some contributors to this volume. As for Normark's essay, probably, most likely, the terms and framework he employs will not enter the general archaeological instrumentarium. But one has to praise his search for alternative sources of inspiration. It is provocative and gutsy in a good sense.

Danielsson's paper addressed the masks and helmets of Late Iron Age Scandinavia, again to my great instruction. I did wonder whether an emphasis on transformation—do historic sources ever explicitly described such helms as 'masks'?—might detour from what are likely to be, fundamentally, their martial referents. For her part, Thedéen undertakes a classic example of semantic correlation: white shells, especially cowries, mark many interments of women, perhaps as tokens of notional purity, elite status or sacred stature. My only concern is more mundane and empirical, whether the sexing of the bodies in her table is unambiguous. If not, the table could be thrown readily into statistical doubt. The essay by Kjellström left no doubt that earlier Scandinavians were in misery. As such, it represents a pioneering attempt to bridge the domains of pathology and its personal experience as suffering. It is less clear, however, how to build on that understanding in a general way, as the pain qua suffering is really an issue of semantic, even theological interpretation (Houston 2009). This semantic freight will be difficult to deduce from shattered or necrotic bone.

Myrberg's essay was an especially gratifying relation of texts, iconography, thought, and material evidence, of a sort familiar to those who work in Mesoamerica. The layered evidence of encoding of color, by means of cross-hatching, and what that color might have meant or elicited at the time are persuasively argued. I have done similar studies, partly in evaluation of anthropological models of color (by Brent Berlin, Paul Kay, and others), with the proviso that colors are inherently relational to others colors—Michel Pastoureau's studies of certain colors or design in Medieval art seem both brilliant and profoundly wrong-headed

(cf. Pastoureau 2001, and Houston et al. 2009, for discussion). As Myrberg points out, ‘color’ is not even to be understood in all times and places by the terminology favored by cognitive anthropologists. Is shiny or wet a ‘color’? They are in some parts of the world, at least as an evaluation of surface. The final essay in my chronological order, by Nyberg, was exemplary too, as an attempt to penetrate what the clothing and disposition of the honored and beloved dead might mean. In Stockholm, however, I did ask whether this needed couching more fully in Lutheran theology of the day.

My fingers no longer tap the keyboard, this biomechanical exercise is at an end, my body has done its duty. The chance to comment on these lively papers, to meet the authors behind them, and to engage with other traditions of scholarship leave memories of fond respect. I close with an exhortation to do yet more, to continue on paths set by the pages of this volume, and, as archaeologists, to engage in the long term with the inescapable human body.

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