

Human remains as quasi-objects

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Abstract

The prominent dualistic division of mind and matter has lead to a distorted image of the way past people may have conceived the physical realm. It has also unavoidably lead to an imbalance in the study of the archaeological record. In this article I will discuss the need for a more precise divisioning of *things*. I will then present the concept of quasi-object, and discuss its implications in archaeology and in the study of human remains in particular.

Key words

archaeological theory, human remains, identity, materiality, modernity, quasi-object, quasi-subject, symmetrical archaeology

Introduction

The problem of the nature of human remains has significant ethical implications in archaeology and is particularly relevant when it comes to the study of historical periods and modern history. In Finland, most human remains, at least those preserved well enough for extensive study, are less than thousand years old. The question whether human remains should be treated as mere artifacts or as something else deserves some attention. The more recent human remains are, the more they will bear human attributes, and the more difficult their categorization as artifacts will be.

I will begin with a brief chapter on the ontology and the identity of the dead body - the relationship of the living and the dead through the material aspect of the living/dead

division. I will then present the concept of quasi-object and discuss its applicability in the problem of the thing/human division.

Identity of the dead body

Archaeologists tend to intuitively have a somewhat different approach on the treatment of human remains than they do on other archaeological material. Still, human remains are often taken as artifacts. The classification of human remains into the artifact category would be justified only after the term artifact has been properly defined. In archaeology the term artifact is usually taken to mean something manmade. It can be contrasted with *ecofacts* which are natural objects. Ecofacts are something significant enough for archaeological study to be collected and called archaeological evidence in the context that is being studied, but are not manmade. The whole division of the material record into artifacts and ecofacts is a synthetic one. Cereal pollen, for example, are usually taken as being ecofacts. Still, if that specific pollen is thought to be significant to the archaeological study, it must have been produced by past human activity in the area. We can now propose that all pollen should be taken as artifacts. Human remains do not fit into the ecofact category either, although in their influential book Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn (2006: 54) explicitly place human remains into this category. A living human being is not an ecofact nor an artifact, and on this basis I propose that human remains are not ecofacts nor artifacts. Nothing is lost at the moment of death that would automatically make human remains belong to one of these categories.

The metaphysical and very central question of the identity of the dead body arises (for more on the topic see Carter 1984; Rosenberg 1984). At the very moment of death the human body changes but qualitatively. The body which existed before the moment of death ceases to exist and something else comes into existence. The once living person seems to transform in a way that leads to the disappearance of the individual and the appearance of the human remains. What is left, simply appears as a “chunk of matter” (Rosenberg 1984). Still, the body can be recognized as that of the once living

individual. The ontological issue is an important one, but I will not go into it in any more detail here. It is, however, a good indication of the difficulties that follow the simple inanimate/living and dead/alive divisions.

It is evident that the strong tendency to divide the living and the dead into two separate categories is to some extent a product of modernity (for more on the kind of modernity discussed here see for example Lefebvre's texts in Elden et al. 2003; and Latour 1993). It is a common notion that the dead may have been treated very differently in past societies than they are today. There are, of course, several ethnographical examples of societies where the division between the living and the dead is not as strict as it is in the western culture. I use the term 'western culture' here very loosely to describe the somewhat unified aggregate of cultures that is usually referred to as 'the western culture'. The individual/social division, to this extent, is also an important one. Whether the dead were treated as individuals or as an integral part of the social complex, as a historical continuation the elements of which are inseparable, may not be evident in the archaeological material, but is an issue worth considering. This notion is therefore vital for the accurate interpretation of archaeological material.

Towards a symmetrical archaeology

This notion of redefining the border between objects and humans can also be seen as a step toward symmetrical archaeology (for more on symmetrical archaeology in general see for example Shanks 2007). In his book *Archaeological semiotics*, Robert Preucel notes that "[o]ne of the most exciting developments in contemporary anthropology is the revival of interest in material culture studies" (Preucel 2006: 14). The material culture - including the archaeological record - has to regain its reputation as an active participant in the everyday life.

The Cartesian dualism of mind and body has lead to a strong tradition in dichotomies. The advent of strong dualism can also be seen as a product of christianity, which has shaped the modern world-view extensively. This tradition has been evident also in

archaeology where the material and the ideal, along with binary opposites like living/dead, individual/society, cultural/natural, and most eminently, past/present have been seen as duals (Shanks 2007; Olsen 2007). Symmetrical archaeology tends toward the realization of the problems this kind of divisioning is capable of arising. Symmetrical archaeology is about acknowledging that the past is an inseparable part of the present. The past can only be experienced and studied through the present in the present. Human remains are active agents in the present and it is this active role that makes it impossible to simply place human remains in the artifact category. All things are active, but the nature of human remains is somewhat more active than that of most other things. A lot of individual personal attributes are attached to human remains that separate them from (other) things.

The quasi-object

The French philosopher Michel Serres uses the concepts of *quasi-object* and *quasi-subject*. I use his terms to better describe the role of human remains in archaeology. The rigorous two fold object/subject division, I argue, is not sensitive enough. This needs to be realized and, even though the division proposed here nevertheless is a division, it will lead to a more precise dealing with the concepts of subject and object and therefore to a more precise hadling of the archeological material and its classification into different groups, be they artifacts, ecofacts, or something else.

A quasi-object is a combination of natural and cultural attributes. They are a mediation between inanimate objects and human subjects. One central quality is the quasi-object's ability to bring together, to combine. Quasi-objects are active. They circulate. The quasi-object is also a quasi-subject. To clarify this distinction, Serres gives the following definition:

"[The] quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or

designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject.” (Serres 1982: 225)

The quasi-subject, according to Serres, is a nominator of the subject. Through the quasi-subject we know how and when we are and are not subjects (Serres 1982: 227). This means that also the subject/object relation will be better understood through the concept of quasi-object. It is not simply the attributes of a subject or an object that define them. It is their relation to each other and to them as a whole that gives them their significance. We can not discard division altogether but use it more precisely to better understand the complexity of materiality.

Practical applications

What exactly is the significance of a more precise divisioning of things in archaeology? It may seem insignificant at first but the notion has for example many ethical implications as well as an impact on the study of the relationship between mind and material.

Whether human remains were to be treated as artifacts or as something else will affect their treatment and storage. Human remains in particular have received attention when archaeological associations have been formulating ethical codes for the handling and storage of archaeological material (Cassman&Odegaard 2007a; 2007b). It is still, however, unclear in archaeology whether human remains should be treated equally with all artifacts or if they deserve to be perceived as something more than simply things.

We will also attain a clearer image of past people’s way of conceiving the world once we realize that our way of understanding the ideal/material relation is not necessarily the only one. One example of the active role of human remains is *the Day of the Dead* people in Mexico celebrate. The remains of ancestors are stored in a wooden box and taken out and cleaned every year to show that the dead have not been forgotten when their souls come and visit the living on the day of the dead (Adams 2007). In this case

the remains still have many of the attributes of the once living individual. The remains are individual as well as collective in that, in addition to the memories about the once living, they carry the notion of a long and uninterrupted history. Just like Serres wrote, the human remains as quasi-subjects designate the subject. The subject is one only by the notion of a quasi-object and quasi-subject.

Conclusions

Bruno Latour (1993) has used Serres' terms to redefine the physical realm. According to Latour, it is modernity that has lead to the ontological distinction between objects and human subjects, whereas in fact the world is filled with quasi-objects and quasi-subjects. The division between human remains as quasi-objects or quasi-subjects and the living as quasi-subjects or subjects is a diffuse one. It is one of the qualities of the quasi-object to become a quasi-subject. The whole notion of quasi-object and quasi-subject is a move toward a more liberal object-subject division; a division that does not separate objects and subjects, but sees them as an unseparable whole. The material is seen not as separate from the mind, but as an extension of it. That is why the archaeological record needs to be studied as a whole and as a historical continuation, not as a collection of specimens that are supposed to represent an objective past. The past, more precisely the notion of past, only exists in the present and can be conceived through the study of the meanings and relations of agents in the present.

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