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(Dead) Bodies that matter? Examining Prehistory from a Queer perspective

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Abstract

Over the last decade Queer Theory has begun to impact upon archaeology in numerous ways. One particular direction has privileged the body, and archaeological finds of bodies, representations of the body and bodily adornments within queer approaches to the past. However in this paper I argue that such a practice raises some inherently problematic issues for the discipline. Primarily such accounts rely upon a notion of the body that is particular only to the modern west, and that is a product of the historically specific conditions of western Modernity. In turn this endorses the presence of a series of sexually normative values within archaeological practice, which in turn lead to further sexually normative interpretations of the past. Instead, using the case study of interpretations of stone tools in Mesolithic hunter-gatherer groups in Europe, I argue that by looking towards other ways in which non-western identities can be conceived, we can radically disrupt such hegemonic normative accounts of the past.

Key Words

Archaeology, Queer Theory, the body, identity, Mesolithic, stone tool technology, personhood, archaeological theory



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Introduction – Turning Bodies on their heads

In this paper I am going to turn bodies on their heads.¹ That is, I will use a key example of how prehistoric materiality is studied, and can be studied, in order to provide an alternative interpretation of a prehistoric period. Yet, this paper is part of a volume which has been conceived to examine approaches to gender and queer theory in *current* academic discourse. In the light of this a discussion of archaeology, of the *past* and of people who have been dead for thousands of years may at first seem out of place. However what I will demonstrate here is that a queer approach to the past is critical in the present and the insights archaeology can provide are uniquely placed to have a fundamental impact upon academic discourse in the future.

Thus, in this paper I will argue firstly that the radical implications of queer theory are already being diluted, both within archaeology and without, as “queer norms” are secured within academic discourse. By examining the body I will first illustrate how in archaeology one such “queer norm” is the notion that the body is central to a queer approach. I will demonstrate that contrary to the perpetuation of this effectively limiting notion, the queer critique of archaeology clearly extends beyond the body. By presenting my own queer examination of understandings of identity within the Mesolithic period in north-western Europe I will demonstrate that rather than the body being central to such accounts, in fact it is more productive to see Mesolithic identities as produced through the continual fragmentation, dispersal and reconfiguration of persons by their extension into material culture. In providing such a radical reformulation of the production of identities through embodied material interactions this account not only challenges the centrality of the body but provides a critical analysis of present material culture studies in the period. By doing so it will demonstrate the extent to which these are fundamentally underpinned by sexually normative values which in turn facilitate the production of sexually normative interpretations of identity within the period.

“Queer norms” – or Conceptualising a queer critique in archaeology

Turning first then to “queer norms”, this oxymoron may at first seem problematic, however I would suggest that a series of these norms are indeed already developing within

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academic discourse. This session that this paper was originally presented in, for example, stands as testament to this. This session was entitled “Queer Transgressions”, and such a title inevitably suggests that there must be “queer norms” from which the subjects the session covered were deemed to transgress. Yet I would like to turn at this point to Halperin’s definition of Queer as simply,

‘whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant...[Queer] describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance’ (Halperin, 1995, p.62 – original emphasis).

Here such an unbounded way of conceiving what queer is seems entirely at odd with the suggestion that “Queer Transgressions” could even exist. In fact I would argue that it is where a queer critique is developed in the unconventional areas that were brought together under this session title that we have the most to learn. Indeed it is in bringing these discussions to and developing them with an interdisciplinary audience that the radical potential of the queer critique is able to be most sharply developed.

This is of course just one example, but I argue that archaeology itself is not exempt from developing its own “queer norms”. Here the first queer critiques entered the discipline in the late 1990s and since then the queer movement in archaeology has developed in some diverse directions. Yet in all disciplines the urge to develop a narrative account of the rise of certain paradigms is often insatiable. Herein lies the problem for queer theory in archaeology, for the narrative that is beginning to develop surrounding its rise is in some cases particularly normative, and demands that the body is central to such accounts.

Such a narrative begins by suggesting that the development of a queer critique in the discipline rests upon the growing influence of Butler’s work within the discipline. Of course the insights from Butler’s discussion of the body and of the discursive embodied acts through which identities are created, and the discourses of power within which bodies are entwined has had an undeniably fundamental impact upon archaeology. However normative accounts of the rise of queer archaeology suggest this has arisen as an intellectual progression of ideas regarding the body and as such situate the body, representations of the body and bodily adornments as *central* to a queer interpretation of the past (for example Joyce, 2004; Meskell, 2004, 131). Indeed it

would suggest that there are few queer accounts of the past, both historic and prehistoric, that are constructed without recourse to the body (*Ibid.*).

However, the centrality of the body, and of Butler, to all queer critiques of archaeology is questionable. Indeed some of the first queer critiques in the discipline drew more from Halperin than from Butler, and as such were more concerned with exposing and challenging the presence of a series of normative practices in archaeology that are underwritten by sexually normative values (Dowson pers comm.; Dowson, 2000, 2001). Thus queer critiques have been able to radically challenge issues such as the chronocentrism of the discipline (*Ibid.*) and the heteronormativity of hunter-gatherer studies (Cobb 2005) and maritime archaeology (Ransley 2005) without the reliance on the body that such normative queer accounts hold central. As such, the narrative that suggests all queer critiques of the past do and must focus on the body is in itself a “queer norm” that does little justice to the realities of the voracity of the critique.

Queer(y)ing Prehistoric Technology

It is clearly critical to challenge the development of the kind of “queer norms” that I have reviewed here, as their suggestion that certain ways of doing, being and thinking in academia are and should be the norm are entirely counter to the very notion of queer. Furthermore I would like to highlight how fundamentally problematic an adherence to the notion of the body can actually be in studies of prehistory. As such, in the rest of this paper I will develop a queer critique of studies of technology within the Mesolithic. This will both illustrate the problematic heteronormative assumptions that underpin traditional material culture studies from the period which stem directly from interpretations centred upon normative understandings of the body, and will challenge this by providing a reconfiguration of such material culture by fundamentally disrupting the notion of the bounded body.

The Mesolithic period (between about 10,000 and 5,000BP, after the end of the last age, and prior to the advent of agriculture), to which I now turn, was characterised by the presence of mobile hunter-gatherer groups, who largely did not have ceramics, did not build permanent

structures, and generally did not bury their dead². As such the material traces left behind from these groups are dominated largely by stone (and less frequently bone) tools, and the residues of the production of such tools. At first glance, this may not appear to be problematic. However for almost as long as they have been studied, the interpretation of these tools has been made through a series of naturalised assumptions most explicitly seen in discussions of tool use and the division of labour. Furthermore because the record for the period is dominated by stone tools more than any other artefact type, such discussions of tool use form the back bone of narratives about the period.

The assumptions that structure such discussions stem from a series of analogies that were drawn with ethnographic material in relatively early work on the period. In this work it was argued that hunting activities were practised exclusively by men, whilst women predominantly gathered plant resources and were restricted to base camps by child rearing tasks (for example Clark, 1954). As such, hunting tools such as microliths were suggested to have been used by men, whereas tools for the processing of plants and animals, such as scrapers, were used by women. Recently this “man the hunter” model, and the associations of the primacy of hunting, has rightfully received a sustained critique (for example see papers in Dahlberg, 1981; Conkey and Spector, 1984; Brumbach and Jarvenpena, 1997), but its legacy on our interpretation of tool types still remains. Indeed in a recent paper Finlay has illustrated that gendered associations with tool types have fundamentally shaped interpretations of hunter-gatherer groups to the extent that different tool types have almost simply been seen to equate to the presence of men or women (Finlay, 2006). Finlay illustrates this through a critique of the work of Murphy at the site of Mount Sandel in Northern Ireland. Here Murphy presents a traditional interpretation of tool types as representing gender identities and in turn this has been extrapolated to produce a “gendered” account of site use (Murphy, 1996). In response Finlay has drawn upon the work of Butler, as well as a series of alternative ethnographic accounts to examine the notion of gendered identities as continually being in production through bodily practices (Finlay, 2006). As such, rather than fixed tool uses equating to gender identities that were equally fixed, instead

² Please note that this is intended only as a general account, and it is worth stressing that specific examples of Mesolithic groups in North-West Europe who had ceramics and undertook the practice of burial do exist - for example in Southern Scandinavia. Equally it could be argued that shell midden sites in this area, as well as throughout the Atlantic coast acted as permanent, and in some cases monumental structures. Nonetheless, even in these areas, a concern with stone tool technology has remained an issue of central importance.

the fluid meanings and uses of tools played critical parts in the creation of equally fluid gender identities, allowing gender to be continually enacted and performed (*Ibid.*).

This interpretation of the data is powerfully made and clearly provides an important and long over due challenge to the simplistic association of gender and tool type. However, I would like to suggest that Finlay's critique can be extended further; it is clear that by the association of tool types with gender, a series of heteronormative assumptions are also sanctioned. Thus in many cases where areas of male and female activity are identified through tool type these are then further explained as structured family units. This can be seen, for example, in Ole Grøn's work on the spatial distribution of artefacts on hut floors in the Danish Maglemosian. Here Grøn identifies the presence of hearths associated with microliths in hut dwellings as representing the presence of male (signified by microliths, through the association with hunting) and female (signified by the hearth, and the assumption of females with food production) individuals (Grøn, 1995). Quite rightly Finlay has noted that "the classic 1950s pastiche of a nuclear family is thereby recreated in the past" (Finlay, 2006, p.47). Whilst Finlay's critique of this example is mainly centred around its adherence to simplistic associations between gender and tool type, as she briefly suggests, it is clear that there is a further problem with this interpretation; Grøn's account is reliant upon the notion that each unit was structured through the same heterosexual norms and values that are present in the modern west.

I have explored elsewhere how the modern western notion of the heterosexual family unit is regularly unquestioningly assigned to past hunter-gatherer groups in discussions of practices of dietary differentiation and subsistence activities (Cobb, 2005). However it is in examining the implications of interpretations of tools that this point is at its clearest. In narratives such as Grøn's, that are constructed around Mesolithic tools, a series of implicit assumptions about gender and sexuality are revealed; tools were used by heterosexual male and females who converged as a core social group which is envisaged as the conventional *heterosexual* family unit. Such an unquestioned adherence to this notion is clearly dangerous, as it works to insidiously perpetuate modern western gendered and sexual norms through narratives of the past.

However I would suggest that a queer critique of technology can and must extend further than simply a critique of interpretations of tool use, and must challenge even the very roots of our interactions with these materials. Conventionally tools, and particularly stone tools, are

studied in a clinical manner. They are measured, weighed and drawn, and these criteria then enable them to be fitted into typological schemas. Once this process has taken place, they are then subject to the kind of interpretations that I have addressed above that see them fitted into further structures of naturalised, heteronormative assumptions regarding the circumstances in which they were used. In recent years a series of accounts have called for a reformulation such studies, drawing upon such notions as the *chaine operatoire* (Dobres, 2000) and the multiple authorship of composite tools (Finlay, 2003) to understanding these within wider social contexts. These accounts have reinvigorated studies and provided some significantly different interpretations of technology, and I shall return to these below. However I think that it is important to note that whilst such approaches critique the Cartesian subject/object divide that is perpetuated in traditional clinical techno-typological studies, they often still continue to rely, in part, on such a methodology. In many senses this is not driven by their own research agendas, but by the academic community as a whole, which demands that all considerations of technology can only be valid if they include at least some techno-typological element in their analysis.

This dominance of normative practice recalls Dowson's observations on the perceived "invalidity" of rock art studies. Here Dowson (2001) illustrated that rock art studies were regarded as "not proper archaeology" because they lacked firm chronologies, and he illustrated that such a chronocentrism was itself linked to "a masculist hegemony, that privileges normative research practices" (Ibid., p.324) in the discipline. It is clear that the chronocentrism that Dowson identifies is ultimately entwined with the techno-typological emphasis of studies of Mesolithic technology. Indeed techno-typological approaches demand the ordering of these materials to support exactly the type of chronological frameworks that Dowson has illustrated are underpinned by masculist values.

Further to Dowson's critique, I would argue that the simple manner through which technology is studied, in such a disassociated and clinical fashion is also entwined with the "Western Gaze". The gaze, a product of Cartesian principles that demand the primacy of "objective" analytical, visual observation, is clearly anything but objective. Rather, as Thomas argues, the appropriating, 'objectifying, penetrating gaze is a way of looking that is distinctively male' (Thomas, 2004, p.199). Indeed, through the circumstances and historic conditions through which the gaze has come to primacy, I would argue that it is not simply the male, but the

heterosexual male gaze that it represents. Traditional technological studies then, demand a technique which by its very nature is a normative practice which is both underwritten by sexually normative values and which perpetuates these in the interpretations it affords.

Transforming persons, Unbinding bodies

Clearly to move away from such westernised normative assumptions requires a significant shift in our conception of tools and technology, and recent approaches have begun to make this shift by challenging the fixed nature of technological enquiries. That such a fixed understanding allows little discussion of human interactions with the materials in their making and that they promote the notion that finished products were used for fixed, singular tasks has been a central tenet of the critique of this material (Dobres 2000). It is clear that this fixed image of tools relates them to people only in a fixed sense, and immutable categories of tool are portrayed as being used by immutable categories of persons (for example Gendel, 1989; Grøn, 1995, 2003). In contrast a series of recent, detailed studies, have illustrated that this central way of understanding tool types as so fixed and immutable is indeed highly problematic, and through challenging it a series of innovative and radically different interpretations have been produced (Conneller, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2006; Dobres 2000; Finlay 2003a, 2003b, 2006; Warren 2006).

These studies have shown that making, using, curating and discarding tools in the Mesolithic period involved highly corporeal practices embedded in wider cultural understandings. As such they argue that tools acted as a nexus for social relations (Finlay, 2006; Warren, 2006). Tool production, for instance, involved a complex entanglement of relationships best illustrated through the example of composite tools. These are likely to have been multiply authored, with several people making the several microliths required, and probably group efforts required to gather and prepare the wood, resin and twine that would then enable the microliths to be hafted (Finlay, 2003b). As such the production of tools would have demanded connections, between persons and between different materials, individual bodily practices, and group actions. Furthermore both the production and use of tools required intimate associations not simply between people, but between people and materials from diverse sources. Tool production

therefore required practices of fragmentation of persons, materials, and the essences of places, and the social transformation and renegotiation of all of these (Warren, 2006).

Furthermore, tools were as much made by persons as they were intimately entwined in the processes in which persons were made. As such they reveal complex and changing relations between people, places and animals. For example certain locations appear to have held specific connections between humans and animals as played out through the production of tools. Here Star Carr in North Yorkshire is a critical example, with specific areas that appear to have been reserved only for very particular parts of the process of barbed antler point production and the deposition of these points (Conneller, 2004; Warren, 2006). In this case Conneller has suggested the presence of smoothed and perforated red deer antler frontlets may not mean that people were simply wearing animal masks but that interactions between human and animal body parts may have drawn out particular forms of identity (Conneller, 2004).

Discussions of tools and of social relations in the Mesolithic such as those by Conneller, Finlay and Warren draw upon a series of ethnographic accounts from Melanesia and Southern India which attest to understandings of bodies not as fixed and bounded, but as individual and defined through permeable and partible means (Strathern, 1988; Busby, 1997). Whilst very different, these examples concur with Butler's notion that identity is performed. Yet these examples do not simply envisage a performance *between* people and things, rather such accounts extend the notion of persons to *incorporate* animals and inanimate objects. As such bodies and identities are perceived as fluid, and objects, materials and substances are understood as holding identities in their own rights. Thus the production of personal identity is one of continual performance enabled through the continued changing relations enacted between people and materials. It is, of course, important to stress that it is not unproblematic to simply adopt these ethnographic analogies unquestioningly (Jones, 2005). Moreover Conneller, Finlay and Warren do not uncritically adopt these ethnographic analogies to explain the data. Rather they draw upon such accounts simply as critical challenging ways to think about the production of fragmented identities (Finlay, 2006, p.40).

My own research, in the northern Irish Sea Basin, follows the themes raised above and additionally seeks to develop methodologies which fundamentally challenge the primacy of the sexually normative practices of traditional techno-typological tool analyses. Instead my research examines the sensual interactions between persons and tool production at the micro scale.

Furthermore it draws upon the conception of the taskscape (Ingold, 1993) to explore the temporally situated nature of these interactions within the landscape and draw out connections between materials, places and people. This methodology is enabling me to explore alternative conceptions of identity in the period and examine how these were produced through the continual fragmentation, dispersal and reconfiguration of persons by their extension into material culture. Clearly, whether from a queer critique (such as my own) or from other theoretical influences (such as those by Conneller, Finlay and Warren), the implications of this kind of approach on our understandings of tools are profound; they illustrate that tools and materials did not simply hold fixed meanings but were deliberately used in different contexts, for different acts, for the fragmenting and reconfiguration of ideas and identities. Tools played a central role as part of practices that continually challenged, subverted and created behavioural norms (Lemonier, 1993).

Conclusion

In many ways this paper represents a very general account, and it is important to stress that the Mesolithic period in the UK as well as throughout north western Europe cannot be treated as homogeneous through space and time. As I have illustrated here, tools, technologies, persons and materials were clearly being constantly reconfigured and understandings remade on localised levels. However, whilst it is at once general, this paper raises some critical points. Primarily it is clear that a queer approach in archaeology does not require an adherence to the body. Instead I suggest that rather than focusing on bodies in the past, we must first challenge the normative practices in present day archaeology that are underwritten by sexually normative values. Only then can we fundamentally challenge how the body may be conceived in the past, and clearly for the Mesolithic period, to do so requires an unambiguous movement away from traditional understandings of the body. Instead we must acknowledge the centrality of the temporally situated contexts of tool and material production and use in engagements with the world as critical in bringing Mesolithic identities into being.

Finally I would like to conclude by arguing that the implications of the approaches discussed in this paper resonate beyond archaeology, to the wider academic community. Approaches such as these presented here significantly contribute towards destabilizing the

heteronormative methodological hegemonies that fundamentally underpin all empirical academic enquiry. But moreover their potential lies not simply in providing this challenge, but in exploring alternative methodologies and accounts of how identities are produced in a sense that is relevant not just in the past, and not just to archaeology, but to the present, and to the academic community as a whole.

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