The Body as Material Culture: A Theoretical Osteoarchaeology.

By Joanna R. Sofaer. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006. ISBN 0-521-81822-2 (cloth), 0-521-52146-7 (paper). xvii + 188 pp. £40 (cloth) or £15.99 (paper).

This book focuses on the theory of the human body, and aims to turn human osteoarchaeology into a study of the human body as part of the humanities. One of the common grounds between osteoarchaeology and studies of the body is the 'learnt body' which is formed by social practices. Traditional osteoarchaeology has also paid attention to this, but the originality of this volume is that the meaning of osteoarchaeology in studies of the body in archaeology and the humanities is clarified by a theoretical approach.

The arguments from Chapters 1 to 4 are related to the theoretical examination of osteoarchaeology, and the fundamental and extensive research behind the theory used in the book. Chapters 5 and 6 then focus on the themes of gender and age, using practical analyses to consider the theoretical framework the author has developed.

First of all, Chapter 1 provides the disciplinary allocation of osteoarchaeology. Sofaer examines the present state in which the disciplinary divide between science-based osteoarchaeology and interpretative archaeology—'material-culture-based archaeology'—is maintained in Britain. Through the following arguments, she proposes that osteoarchaeology is more than a specialist activity, and can extend the boundaries of interpretation. In Chapter 2, the research history of archaeologies of the body is examined, and the relationship between osteoarchaeology and the archaeology of the body is revealed. The research history which Sofaer offers is characterized by paying attention to the New Archaeology and criticizing constructionism on which post-processualism, or interpretative archaeology, is based. A comparative study between osteoarchaeology and such an interpretative archaeology proceeds in Chapter 3, leading to a rethinking of osteoarchaeology. Sofaer explains the following general divides between osteoarchaeology and interpretative archaeology: atheoretical/theoretical; dead/living; inside (unfleshed)/outside (fleshed); nature/culture. Reexamining such conventional divides, she finds skeletal remains as not only nature but also culture as skeletal modifications are provoked over the human life course.

On the basis of the above research, Chapter 4 is the central chapter in which the key concept, 'the body as material culture', is provided. Sofaer considers the human skeleton to be social, contextual, unstable, and contingent. This argument is similar to that of embodied archaeology, which has focused on lived and embodied experiences. However, Sofaer's perspective differs in that the center of the investigation is the physical materiality of the human body which underpins such experiences.

The theoretical framework is examined further in the following chapters. Chapter 5 takes up the theme of sex and gender. The author argues that interpretative archaeology has a contradiction between method and theory; with respect to

methods, interpretative archaeology is based on biological sex, while it aims to deconstruct biology with respect to theory. Instead of such an approach, Sofaer tries to read both sex and gender from the human skeleton itself, taking her practical analysis from the 16th to 18th century site of Ensay in the Hebrides. In chapter 6, her perspective, which considers the skeleton to be the unstable and contingent process in a specific context, is studied through the theme of age. Sofaer argues that osteological assessments do not play an important role in the interpretations (e.g. 'child' and 'adult' as social categories) offered by interpretative archaeology, but are simply used as a basis for those interpretations. In contrast, this book explores the links between interpretative archaeology and osteoarchaeology, and aims to show that the materiality of the body is changed through social practices, a practical analysis which mirrors that of gender in Chapter 5.

In summary, the significance of this book is that it offers a new perspective on osteoarchaeology through a theoretical study which explores the links between osteoarchaeology and the theory of interpretative archaeology or that of the humanities. I am certain that Sofaer's perspective can be regarded as a valuable theoretical work in the study of the human body in archaeology.

On the other hand, a few questions also arise. The first point is related to the dialogue with constructionism. I consider that the meaning of constructionism is how the truth or norms are constructed in the specific context which includes both the past and the present. I believe that Sofaer's perspective will be able to examine such an aspect of constructionism which is appropriate for historical and critical analysis, while I can understand that it is very important for osteoarchaeology to try to answer skepticism toward the result of biological assessments about gender as mentioned by Sofaer. Secondly, the materiality of the body which the author provides seems to be social and contextual, in other words, passive, rather than active or performative, although Sofaer aims to include the multiple characters of the body in her argument. I also agree with the importance of the social aspects of the body, but I consider that the active aspect, which embodied archaeology has emphasized, is one of the main themes in studies of the body in the humanities (e.g. Hodder and Hutson, 2003). I am sure that Sofaer's deep understanding with regard to the materiality of the body is also open to such an interdisciplinary trend. I hope that this book is read by not only osteoarchaeologists or anthropologists, but also by many material-culture-based archaeologists.

Reference

- Hodder I. and Hutson S. (2003) *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*, Third edition. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

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