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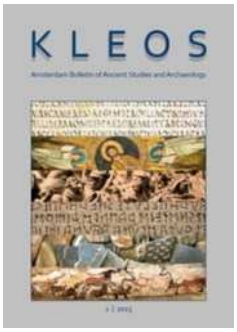

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CONTENTS

Bodies in showcases. Objectification of the human body from a cognitive perspective

NATALIA ZHURAVSKA

ABSTRACT

Nowadays, even though it is quite normal to see (ancient) human remains in museums next to vases, paintings and other objects, this idea of the display of human remains is still being heavily discussed. The main aim of this article is to investigate the display of human remains in museums on a meta-level, by asking the question why do people have a problem with witnessing other, dead people in museums. An interdisciplinary approach will be used, combining archaeology, social anthropology and neuroscience and propose an answer to this question.

What do a little boy and a vase have in common? Both of them might end up in a museum next to each other after they have lost their original function: the vase as a vessel and the little boy as a living human being and both got excavated by an archaeologist and gain a new meaning as an archaeological find.

In this article an attempt will be made to get a better understanding on the subject of the display of human remains in museums as archaeological objects. The question posed in the beginning, and the research presented in this article were inspired by a particular object: a child mummy displayed in the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden (see Figure 1).

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Figure 1
The mummy of a boy, Roman Imperial Period
(▶ photo: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden)[1]

In this museum, it is the only mummy that is displayed without any wrappings, which is why it is, at least in my opinion, one of the most interesting, extravagant and even shocking pieces in the collection. The provenance of this mummy is unknown and the objects that accompanied the little boy in his grave are not on display. The mummy has been kept in private cabinets of curiosities since 1612, before arriving at Leiden on New Year's day of 1829 with the wrappings completely removed. The mummy of the child has been preserved in an excellent state (see Figure 1). The body is completely dried out and has a dark brown colour, which is common for mummies. It is covered with resin-like substance which gives a clue about the dating: this embalming technique was used during the Roman Imperial Period, however a more exact date is impossible to specify.[2]

As already mentioned before, this particular mummy served to me as an inspiration, hence the research does not focus on it specifically, but rather on the display of bodies as archaeological objects in general. Displaying human remains in museums is a much debated issue. Various articles and several books (e.g. *Human remains. Guide for museums and academic institutions*)[3] have been written on this subject, in most cases discussing the ethical aspects of this matter. And even though putting corpses in showcases seems quite like a common practice, it appears that (at least some) human beings still cannot find peace in the decision to do this. The question remains why are people so concerned about studying and displaying human remains? Is it the megalomaniac human nature that puts The Man above all else in this world and cannot accept being equated with the pots and jewellery and even stuffed animal corpses? Or is there a more nuanced explanation for it?

It is not the aim of this article to resolve the ethical debate, but rather to take a step back and try to gain an understanding of why such discussions even take place at all. An attempt will be made to explore what it is about seeing, handling and objectifying human remains that troubles the minds of the living people. There are various ways in which this matter can be approached, various perspectives from which this issue can be looked upon, and discussing them all, would result in a vast series of publications. Therefore, in this article only one approach will be discussed: how the emotional issue of displaying human bodies can be explained from the perspective of neuro-psychology.

In the past decade several attempts have been made to combine neuro-psychology, archaeology and anthropology in an interdisciplinary study, one of the examples is 'The sapient mind' project, conducted at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research in Cambridge by among others Colin Renfrew and Lambros Malafouris.[4] This kind of research focuses mainly on the development of the human species on a very early stage, and discusses subjects like tool use and learning processes. I believe that other disciplines like psychology can also be used as an aid in studying the way archaeological remains are being interpreted by scholars nowadays, thus providing a meta-interpretation of the post-processual

perspective. This article is in a way an experiment on such an approach. In my opinion this kind of interdisciplinary research, combining humanities with exact sciences, might be able to provide more concrete evidence on cognitive processes that guide people into certain ways of perceiving, interpreting and thinking. And in the end will hopefully provide a clearer picture and understanding of what exactly makes human remains look different from other objects in the eyes of a person.

The dead through the eyes of the living

The objectification of the human body has been an issue in different fields of the scientific community, though perhaps archaeology is one of them where it is being looked at, at the most literal level. In the archaeological sphere human remains get collected, treated, stored or displayed in the same manner as it is being done with for example pottery or metal objects. In 2010 Mary Leighton (a socio-cultural anthropologist at the University of Chicago) published an article 'Personifying objects/objectifying people' in which she discusses the way archaeologists treat human remains.[5] According to Leighton, the objectification of the dead by archaeologists is almost inevitable, as 'the archaeologist learns to recognise that certain "things" are human remains as part of their professional training – in the same way they recognise other "things" as ancient pottery'.[6] Putting excavated bones and even complete skeletons into plastic bags and labelling them is quite a common archaeological practice. Why then when it comes to dealing with a mummy, which is in fact the same as a skeleton: a dead body, only much better preserved, the situation changes and the object/person dilemma come into play on a much bigger scale?

In her article Leighton presents results of interviews conducted amongst archaeologists where this question gets extensively explored. It is interesting that one of the aspects discussed in these interviews was the language the archaeologists use to describe parts of the human remains they study. The better a body part has been preserved, the more 'human' it looks, the more 'human' names it got called: 'For instance if you were excavating bones on site putting something into a bag saying "left femur" or "skull", soon as you are dealing with something that looks more life-like or alive, or recently dead, we were talking about a "hand" or a "head"'.[7] Leighton convincingly argues that the key component of judging the degree of personhood is the degree of recognition of 'living human' aspects in the remains, it is 'highly dependent on both the physicality of the body itself, and the individual archaeologist's understanding of their own body in relation to the body being studied. [...] In their multiple states of dryness/wetness, articulation/fragmentation, age and recognition, archaeological bodies elicit emotions of curiosity or disgust, desires to create biographies or objectification, and different degrees of empathy'.[8] In another interview a woman described her experience with studying remains of a female who was approximately the same age and posture as her. The woman in question describes that she thought 'Ah I wonder what

she looked like!' and it was different than while she had studied other human remains.[9] Clearly, the more the person recognizes him or herself in the human remains they encounter, the more they identify and empathise, thus the more they treat the remains as a 'person'. The degree of empathy depends on the degree of 'personhood' that can be attached to certain human remains: 'Some remains are just an object, but an object onto which personhood can be consciously constructed and an empathetic connection actively created without arousing horror or distaste'.[10]

In the case of the child mummy in Leiden, the body is preserved in such an excellent state that it can be said to have a very high degree of personhood and almost certainly will arouse a great feeling of empathy in the minds of the living. Even though the body is dried out and has a dark colour, the body is still complete and the facial expression almost makes it seem like the boy is just sleeping. Identification with a child is perhaps slightly different from the way the earlier described woman 'recognized herself' in the female corpse she was researching, it is quite difficult to say what a living two year old would feel seeing this mummy. I think that seeing a dead child can generate a quite strong reaction in the adult psyche. I expect that the emotional reaction might be quite similar to one when a person hears of the death of a child of some distant acquaintance, thinking something like 'what a shame, he was just a boy; he died before he has lived a life'. It is also different though who exactly is looking at this child. Perhaps a young female would have a stronger emotional reaction, guided by maternal instincts, and one who already has a child an even stronger one, as perhaps imagining that a sudden death can occur to her own son or daughter. Probably the strongest feeling of empathy would be experienced by a parent who has (recently) lost a young child of their own, mentally projecting the image of their lost offspring on the little dried out corpse in front of them, imagining that this might as well have been the son they had lost. This kind of experience is different from the direct recognition and identification described by Leighton, though a child is in a way a prolongation of his parent and the empathy is being evoked by the thought 'what if this had been my child'. In any case, what is clear is that the mummy generates an association with a person, not a 'skull' or a 'femur', which then could be connected to an idea of a living child.

Leighton states that 'Individuals [...] perceived human remains in comparison with other objects found in archaeology not as indexical of personhood, but as personhood itself'.[11] This is another interesting point that needs discussing. Even though an individual might consciously perceive human remains as the person himself, in my opinion this is no more than the result of an analysis of the seen remains subconsciously done by the human brain. I believe that the perception of a corpse as still being a person exists in the human mind, and this perception is based on the association of a body with a person residing in it during one's life. This is where neuro-psychological research comes into play to help us understand what processes are responsible for this phenomenon.

Meanwhile inside our heads …

The ability to distinguish between animate and inanimate objects as a cognitive phenomenon is noticed in human beings at such an early stage as infancy. Research and experiments in the field of developmental psychology has shown that starting from the age of 6 months, a human being is able to distinguish between animate and inanimate objects.[12] It is still not exactly clear how it is possible that a human being, is able to make this distinction at such an early age, though it is commonly thought that this distinction seems to rely primarily on the differences of the moving patterns of animate and inanimate objects.[13] Also other aspects seem to aid to distinguish between the two: 'motion onset, causal action, pattern of interaction, and causal role'.[14] By the end of the first year of life, an infant can also 'develop expectations about the motion characteristics of objects',[15] and by the age of 18 months they can also understand and distinguish the meanings of the animate and inanimate objects by differentiating various psychological cues or causalities.

Furthermore, within the animate/inanimate distinction there is another differentiation: the distinction of the human versus all other kinds of other animate objects. This is the case first of all because another human being is most similar to the perceiver, and secondly because in most of the cases people most frequently encounter other people during their first months of life. Finally, another reason could perhaps be that there is a certain instinct that makes the special attention towards other humans vital for survival in a social community.

Another interesting aspect is the excellent ability of humans to recognize faces: an adult can distinguish between hundreds of different ones. The process of face recognition works mainly on processing of relational information, called 'configural processing', which implies the processing the 'gross position of the elements' of the face (the eyes are above the nose, the nose is above the mouth, etc.). Various experiments were conducted in order to research the 'inversion effect', which lead to the conclusion that the face inverted with 180° are more difficult to recognize and also the task takes more time.[16]

Another interesting aspect of face recognition is that the more the perceived face looks like the perceiver's, the easier and faster it would be recognized. This is for example visible from what is commonly known as 'own-race bias' (ORB), a phenomenon that implies that human adults are much better in recognizing faces of people from their own ethnical group.[17]

Yet another neuro-psychological research conducted in 2009 at Princeton University by Sara Verosky and Alexander Todorov, takes this research even a step further and finds a link between face-recognition and the emotional response to it, in particular focusing on empathy.[18] An experiment was conducted where subjects were presented a series of pictures of faces, which were derived from their own faces, morphed to different degrees. They had to tell whether they found the face that has been shown to them trustworthy or not and at the same time their brain

activity at different regions of their brains was measured.[19] In conclusion the faces changed to a lesser degree were perceived as more trustworthy and generated a greater feeling of empathy than the less similar faces.[20] In short, the more someone looks like oneself, the more empathy one can feel towards that person. There is also another peculiar fact that indirectly follows from this experiment and needs to be noted: the images presented to the test subjects were morphed images, thus not images of real people, even though a response was given to them as if they actually were real people. This shows that human beings can give an emotional response, in any case produce the feeling of empathy towards an image of a person, thus projecting a certain personality onto the image, a personality that does not even exist in the real world.

The research described above focuses mostly on the perception of human faces, and this is perhaps not exactly applicable in the discussed case of perception of human remains, and in particular mummies. Surprisingly, the recognition of humans versus non-humans in general has got far less attention in the scientific world, than face-recognition. I would like to propose a hypothesis that the face-recognition and the recognition of humans in general might have a similar origin and effect in the human brain. While the face-recognition experiment by Verosky and Todorov relies only on the visible aspects of identification, from the article by Leighton it is quite clear that people can also recognize and identify with the general picture of the body (e.g. length and posture) and not only the face. In addition, a person can deduce immaterial aspects of the body, which he or she can recognize and identify with (e.g. a certain physical dysfunction). In the case of our child mummy from Leiden, the person identifies with the fact of having to deal with a dead child, a whole concept in itself, and even not so much with being dead themselves. It seems that the feeling of empathy can be evoked by many more factors than just the similarity of one's face, though I would like to argue that the more 'general' empathy probably has the same origin as the empathy documented in Verosky and Todorov's brain scans.

In the final part of this paper I would like approach the matter in more general terms. The research discussed in the previous paragraphs showed in how much detail a human being can distinguish between the visual aspects of other human beings and how the slightest differences in similarity with oneself can influence the emotional response. So if we 'zoom-out' from this kind of distinction to the more general difference between 'human' and 'non-human', what would happen with the differentiation of degrees of empathy? If you continue with the principle 'the more something is similar to oneself, the more empathy it evokes', a logical conclusion would be that the more 'human' something would appear, the more empathy it would evoke. For example perhaps monkeys would stand on the second place after the humans, then other sort of animals. Animals, or other (representations) of animate objects would still be able to evoke a feeling of empathy, because they are animate, and in

this way 'closer' to humans than inanimate objects. I think that a human cannot feel empathy for inanimate objects (except for perhaps, if they have been made to seem animate, in e.g. a cartoon or a motion picture).

In conclusion, I would like to present the hypothesis that just as human beings cannot experience empathy towards inanimate objects, in a greater or lesser degree they empathise with other animate beings, in particular other humans. The fact that the two belong to the same species and are in a way too similar to each other does not allow a human being seem as thing-like as an animate object. And as we have seen before with the morphed images of a person only the visual likeness of the observed has to resemble a human in order for a person to be able to link a certain subjective dimension to it. This subjective dimension is thus not always existent, but even if it is, it is quite probably never the same as the image of it created by the observer. The observer creates this image of another person partially by reflecting it on him or herself and comparing it to his or her own 'subject'.

Having a positive emotional response towards others who are similar to the perceiver is also a theme in social psychology. In terms of this discipline, this phenomenon has been researched with regard to relationships between living people, thus showing its functional meaning. There are several theories that try to provide an explanation. One possibility is that likeness in appearance or character refers to biological or genetic likeness.[21] Helping others 'like oneself' thus can be seen as an attempt to help genes like one's own succeed. Another theory is that the positive attitude towards others is a reflection of a positive attitude towards the familiar, which is the opposite of the fear of the unknown.[22] Yet another theory argues that we are drawn to people with whom we can best compare ourselves. Communicating with others a person can evaluate his or her attitudes or ideas on a social level, being agreed with leads to validation of self-beliefs which leads to a positive attitude.[23] These theories are perhaps not directly related to the issue discussed in this article, though they might provide an explanation for the phenomenon of empathy towards the similar.

So returning to the main discussion put in general terms: is a mummy in a museum a person or an object? Concluding from what has been discussed in this article, it is both and it is neither at the same time. Objectively speaking, thus excluding human perception as much as possible, human remains are a lifeless 'chunk of matter', an object, an 'bodysuit' for the human soul. The 'person' connected to the corpse resides only in the minds of other human beings that encounter it, simply because it is in their human nature to attach a certain immaterial, personal dimension to its material representation - the body.

Conclusion

The issue of subjectivity vs objectivity of human remains in archaeology is a quite complicated matter. If traditionally it was acceptable to distinguish the soul from the body, the material from the immaterial, nowadays

scientists try to figure out whether these are plausible dichotomies after all. The display of human bodies in museums place a problem in the minds of people: on the one hand it should be right, as the body is but an object, though on the other hand human beings cannot help but project a person onto these remains. The feeling of empathy is perhaps an emotion that is inherent to human beings only. Even being shown a picture of a non-existent human, the human brain is able to project a personality onto it and give its emotional judgement. Perhaps a similar process is happening in our heads when we see a human mummy in the museum: even though the person that resided in this body has been gone for centuries, and we have never known him, an individual would be able to empathise with it. This empathy is being created by the identification of oneself with the body he or she is seeing. Thus the personality of the corpse exists only in the perception of another human being, as objectively speaking, the dead body is an object without soul, an empty bodysuit that once had contained a soul. As long as the living are looking at the dead, the dead are not dead, as a part of the living will be projected onto them, giving them a drop of new life.

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Notes

1 ▶Photograph from the digital collection of Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden. Last accessed 19-04-2015.
2 Raven / Taconis 2005, 184.
3 Cassman et al. 2007.
4 Renfrew et al. 2008, 1935.
5 Leighton 2010.
6 Leighton 2010, 81.
7 Ibid., 89.
8 Ibid., 80.
9 Ibid., 88.
10 Ibid., 91.
11 Leighton 2010, 85.
12 Rakison / Poulin-Dubois 2001; Gaur / Scassellati 2006.
13 Rakison / Poulin-Dubois 2001, 224.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Pascalis et al. 2009, 63-64.
17 Pascalis et al. 2009, 63-64.
18 Verosky / Todorov 2010.
19 Ibid., 1690-1693.
20 Ibid., 1696-1697.
21 Franzoi 2005, 423-424.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.