

Materiality of Body: The Material Practices of Life and Death in Medieval Britain

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to investigate the ways people understood their body during the medieval period in Britain. I bring together the multiple different ways in which the body was treated in death, I focus on the role and power of grave goods and evidence found in dead bodies for plasticity in life to embrace the complexity of the medieval body, I examine the cultural practice of nutrition and environment affected the bodily mold. Another point I take into consideration is the practice of dietary through differentiation between male and female body in which we explore how medieval people socially and culturally constructed body based on their notion and understanding of gender identity. In addition, religion had a great influence on people's understanding to deal with dead bodies and I concentrate on how bodily resurrection impacted on people's preparation for the Day of Judgment by placing the goods in burials.

Keywords: Medieval, Britain, Body, Diet, Gender

1. Introduction

One of the most discussed spheres in archaeology is death and the means of burial through investigating the form of their burials and grave goods, which were buried with corpses. These yield information to archaeologists examining how people understood their bodies in the past. We could say fairly that death was a supernatural phenomenon and was always with us. Consequently, even in this postmodern world, it could be asserted that certainly, the loss of members of all human societies was not a cultural construction but a biologically determined fact.

Hence, it was proved that simply the living could not ignore death, at the most basic level, if only to preserve themselves against contamination and disease, their physical remains had to be disposed of. In addition, throughout history, beyond an initial period of bereavement and grief, the emotional bonds, which linked the living to the dead, needed necessarily some form of symbolic commemoration and a belief in the deceased's continued journey to the afterlife, in a variety of scenes, people were obliged to bury their ancestors (Gordon & Marshal, 2000). With regards to the concept of the body, we simply know that in different cultures and period, people understood different realities. Therefore, the medieval period is an important period in the history of human beings. It has attracted scholar's attention to understand how mediaeval people thought about and treated their bodies. In this manner, burials have been significant to archaeologists to consider and focus on how medieval people understood their bodies

and how they expressed their beliefs through the study of burials, because certainly after the process of dying, the deceased's status and the role was changed completely.

This article mainly aims to explore that how we can approach mediaeval body through investigating the practice of burial and how mediaeval people managed the dead body emotionally, physically, spiritually, culturally and socially. I will, in addition, concentrate on the practice of nutrition, selfhood, the practice of division practice, the religious perspective of the resurrection of the body's grave goods and the plasticity of the body.

2. Medieval Diet and Gender Differentiation

Mediaeval people understood the concept of body in a variety of perspectives; they expressed their understanding in various ways which drew scholar's attention to reveal people's thoughts in this regard. An investigation of osteological evidence of the quality of life of the respective age category and grave goods, which were placed with the dead person, could help us to examine the idea of the medieval diet. Hence, "the theory of the humours", rooted in the works of Aristotle and Galen affected notions regarding medieval diet, with potential implications for the nutrition of categories of age and gender (Gilchrist, 2012, p.33). Gilchrist goes on further and proposes that males and females consumed different kinds of food, the "hot" body, for example, associated with males, burned the food, whilst the "cold" body linked to females, stored the food as blood milk and flesh in order to nourish and sustain the foetus (Gilchrist, 2012, p.33). In addition, Classen continued with the idea of distinction between male and female body and believed that physical senses of smell; touch and taste were more highly developed in the female body, whilst male body was attributed with more cerebral functions of sight and hearing (Classen, 1997). Moreover, Woolger proposed that the behaviours were understood to affect the individual sense of taste, saltiness, for example, controlled the plate of those who had phlegmatic behaviours (Woolgar, 2006). Therefore, men were strongly advised to eat "heavy" foods such as meat; women, in contrast, were suggested to consume "lighter" foods, especially fruit, sweets and dairy products, which were thought to be appropriate for them and they were expected to avoid strong foods including wine, meat, and strong liquors, which were believed to aggravate lust (Bynum, 1987, p.191).

In addition to dietary differentiation in medieval period, there was a different view about elderly people, they were advised to eat and drink such foods and beverages which were thought to reduce the coldness of their bodies and dry behaviours, particularly those kind of foods which supplied "warmth" and "moisture" and which could be easily digested (Shahar, 1997, p.39). It was believed that such foods were the flesh of young animals and the milk of a well-pastured goat or donkey, mixed with the honey and flesh bread made from fine flour and essentially every old man ought to eat three times a day (Shahar, 1997). New archaeological evidence was found about the actual dietary practice in the middle ages, the food vessels, for example, were excavated from hospitals such as St Mary Spital in London, chemical analysis of the vessels indicated that they were used particularly to serve pottage and soups to the older people and the infirm (Thomas et al, 1997). Furthermore, according to the study of carbon and nitrogen isotopes in bones from medieval cemeteries to discover dietary variations, it was detected that men who were buried at fishergate cemetery in York, appeared to have eaten more fish than women who were buried in the same cemetery, this was particularly so in respect of a group of adults buried in the 12 century (Muldner, 2009).

3. Construction of Social Body

Investigation and conducting archaeological excavation in the Medieval graves have helped us to understand how the deceased treated and commemorated differently by those who participated in the funeral process, such variations in treating Medieval body in death can be significantly helpful to show differences in self-understanding of dead body (Williams, 2006). It was the fact that the tombs were a complex field of display and this aspect can make an important contribution to understand the theory of selfhood through investigating the form of tombs (Biniski, 1996). In this case, archaeological works in Britain revealed that the early history of the Christian tombs was associated less with an individual than with a conception of the person with a totalizing history of the faith, with the rhetoric of future salvation, we could, therefore, consider that the history of the medieval tomb was the recovery of a sense of the commemorated people (Williams, 2006). In addition, the tomb's representational strategies were considered to be a new set of strategies for the hereinafter which involved both the dead and the living in a new shared relationship of mutual obligation (Forrest, 2010). Saint's shrines did not take lying down the representation and anthropomorphic images of the Saint's effigies in the shape of sculpted limbs or heads which were linked to the enclosure of the body parts. Consequently, the important of this point was that the tomb represented the power of the body because it represented a person who was still alive and effective in the living world. Therefore, be thirteen century, the effigy became a key means of expressing selfhood and in England, Robert Grosseteste Lincoln (1253) was one of the first occasions of this form of representation in major bronze tombs (Binski, 1996).

Thirteen century can be seen as a particular period for bodily division which was normally practices exactly in the highest aristocratic circles because of the importance of the economy of death, this was important due to two competing priorities: on the one hand, priorities of body and on the other hand, the priorities of the place. In this case, we can be more specific with the notion of bodily division by looking at the case of Franciscans' Archbishop of Canterbury. In 1292, Franciscans' Archbishop of Canterbury wanted to be buried with Franciscans in London but the previous archbishop of Canterbury was persuaded to practice the division of the body. Consequently, his body was buried in the cathedral and his heart was given to the friars in London (Binski, 1996). In this manner, two functions can be determined behind the hierarchy of the body. The first function is political, the head of the person remained the official site of the burial, and the second function is that bodily metaphors in Christianity tended to be based on the heart, it was, therefore, understood to be a seat of personal piety (Bynum, 1992). Moreover, the heart's significant status was one of the most important aspects in the context of aristocratic burial practice. The aristocracy understood that the burial of skeletal remained in one position and the heart in another; it was considered to be a different expression of personal identity of individual status and of familial identity and due to the important physiological position of the heart as a "most worthy" organ, it was understood to be a special part of the body which held the essence of one's being (Westerhof, 2008, p. 95). Religion and its ideological system can be linked privately to the social and political being of every person, as the ritual practices and beliefs can be taken as one strategy to theorise the social meaning and social power of the ritual practice in medieval period. For instance, by the thirteen century, by the gift of the royal body parts, the power was registered and the body had the same physical and mental energy of the royal virtue of largesse and another way of treating the dead body was "boiling the body", this follows the ritual practice of bodily dividing, in this mortuary practice, the body's flesh was removed to its skeleton and the person was reduced to a durable and pure

essence (Binski, 1996, p.64). This can be understood as the importance of bodily division for the body politic.

4. Religious Body and Representation of Selfhood

In the history of the middle age, the Christian theory of resurrection and philosophy of treating the dead was a controversial sphere. It is clear that in theological discussions, throughout the middle age, the meaning of bodily resurrection remained a significant issue. Intentionally, religious beliefs reflected on all human action. Consequently, the body in heaven was regarded as sublimating and continuing or rejecting change and reversing the body on earth (Bynum, 1995). In addition, the medieval period was defined as multiplicity of beliefs and of practices particularly in matters concerning the dead body. In this sense, the middle age Christianity believed that death and putrefaction in the grave were not the final fate for the dead but the dead body would be reborn at the time of judgement. The soul of the dead would be reunited with its actual and physical body; the body was clothed with flesh and was judged nakedly just as it came out of its mother's womb. Hereafter, the person's destiny was determined in either heaven or hell according to their actions in the living world (Park, 2010). However, between some philosophers, there were philosophical and controversial debates regarding the notion of resurrection. In this respect, it was argued that the body did not return after the death and never arose numerically the same and there was further argued that "god cannot give perpetuity to a mutable and corruptible thing, that man through the process of nutrition can become another numerically and individually" (Bynum, 1995, p.230). For this reason, it was believed that the burial process was not necessary for dead people as everything terminated after the person died.

Through investigating the material practices of life and death, archaeologists were reluctant to consider how medieval people expressed spiritual and supernatural beliefs. Throughout the middle ages, the notion of afterlife and resurrection would have influenced the selection of grave goods and it was necessary to obtain the physical integrity of the body (Gilchrist, 2008). A very commonly used item was an amulet which was selected as grave goods in order to transform or protect the diseased person from resurrection and this kind of magical performance expressed Christian beliefs about the body (Geake, 2003). For instance, at the Parish church of St Helen-on-the walls, York, a lead badge dated to the twelfth century was discovered with a young male (see Dawes & Magilton, 1980). Additionally, in medieval graves short poles of less than 1 meter to longer rods were buried with dead people and it was suggested that these items were associated with pilgrimage of journeying and the poles symbolise the resurrection and eternal life (Daniell, 2005). Another interpretation for the rod is that the object utilised traditionally in a journeying or healing charm to protect dead people in the journey of purgation, because the journey to this place was understood to be a complex journey to the souls between death and resurrection which suggested the bodily experience of suffering before the resurrection (Bynum, 1995).

In Christian theology, the moment of dying was understood to be the separation of the soul from the body and the destiny of the dead person was dependant on the actions and deeds of the dead in the living world, whether the soul took its place in heaven or hell or purgatory. In this sense, from the perspective of the medieval people the good deaths were those who lived and acted well before dying and the deceased person was treated in a respectful and ritual way and many people tended to involve in the deceased's funeral mass because they believed that the dead person's body did not suffer pain and the

soul was thoroughly pure (Park, 2010). However, the bad deaths were those who refused to settle in hallowed ground because despite their reaction in the living world in being responsible for the spiritual care of the corpse, they feared the disruptive and dangerous dead people (Gilchrist, 2012). In contrast, infants and young children were treated completely different to other age groups because they were regarded as being entirely “holly innocent” and they died without sin and they did not require prayers and ritual burial practice by living people. However, it was believed that infants and young children, who died before physically being able to walk, ought to be accompanied by adult protection or guidance in the purgatory journey, in this case, there are several instances which indicate that children were accompanied by adults (Gilchrist, 2012, p.208). Consequently, we can consider that, in the realm of purgatory, medieval people believed in the material continuity of the body.

The human body’s ingrained plasticity is the key to the body’s materiality, as in definition of plasticity, Roberts (1995, p.1) proposes that it is “the capability of being moulded”. Its importance was to view the cultural adaptation to the environment as being shared by bony structure and soft tissue. In the case of stillborn and infants, the body is mostly plastic: the rates of bone development rest on nutrition, formation of bone and the habitual activity, also, affects the bone morphology (Gilchrist, 2012). As a passive object, the body, therefore, could be moulded by cultural practice. In this sense, we cannot ignore that how social groups shaped different physicality through life experience and life course. In addition, it was understood that the inherent plasticity of the infant skeleton resulted from cultural practices such as swaddling and caring for infants in dark rooms, such circumstances contributed to the main cause of rickets because infant’s skin could not obtain sufficient sunlight. It is evident that high levels of healing rickets dated to the medieval age were discovered at St Mary Spital in London and these findings confirmed that in the hospital, children were deprived completely of sunlight (Thomas et al, 1997, p.229). Gilchrist (2012) concludes that the metabolic conditions resulted in the inherited plasticity of infant bones. She goes on further to illustrate that in infant’s bodies, the lack of vitamin D had a negative impact on their body’s development which caused in adequate mineralization of the bone which resulted in the fraying of long bones and the ends of the ribs, example of this comes from Warram Percy, as eight cases of rickets were found at death, all of them were aged less than eighteen months.

5. Conclusion

This study has concluded that Archaeological and osteological works have made a significant contribution to study the medieval period in England. Investigating the burials of middle Ages has enabled us to primarily understand how the relationship between death and personal life story was seen by individuals, families, communities and religion. Therefore, middle age material evidence of burials and medical literature were considered in approaching the theory and reality of medieval life and ideas with regard to human body. Thus, the major finding is that environmental, social and religious factors influenced the way people thought about and treated their bodies in life and death. This is affected by a social and religious system which equally ruled and organised the political structure for the whole people of the region.

Moreover, supernatural and religious realm had a predominant impact on social life and belief of individuals in different ways through performing material practices such as burial rites. Firstly, it created a social connection between the world of living and of the dead. Secondly, it was perceived to be away

to prepare the dead for the journey of afterlife. Based on these ideas, the concept of human body was subject to ideas and approaches of medieval period in terms of gender, age and health.

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