INVITED COMMENTARY

What can an ancient Egyptian body do?

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Published: 19th December 2025

Abstract

In this commentary I reflect on how archaeological theory opens up new possibilities for thinking through ancient Egyptian body worlds. By bringing the papers in this special edition into comparison with one another, and into conversation with some contemporary concerns in archaeological thought, we can explore what ancient Egyptian bodies could do, how they could relate, and what they could become. These possibilities, in turn, create the potential for further comparison, conversation, and collaboration between Egyptology and the wider world of archaeological theory.

Keywords: archaeological theory, bodies, relations, ontology

ماذا يستطيع جسد مصري قديم أن يفعل؟

الملخص

في هذا التعليق، أُسلِّط الضوء على كيف تفتح النظريات الأثرية آفاقًا جديدة لتفسير مفهوم عوالم الجسد عند المصريين القدماء. بمقارنة الأوراق البحثية في هذا الإصدار الخاص ببعضها البعض، وإدخالها في حوار مع بعض الاهتمامات المعاصرة في الفكر الأثري، يمكننا استكشاف ما يمكن أن تفعله أجساد المصريين القدماء، وكيف يمكن أن تترابط، وما هي ماهيتهم. هذه الفرص، بدورها، تخلق إمكانية لمزيد من المقارنة والحوار والتعاون بين علم المصريات وعالم النظريات الأثرية الأوسع.

الكلمات الدالة النظريات الأثرية، الأجساد، العلاقات، علم الوجود

1 Introduction

For many years working in the archaeology of Europe I have gazed longingly across the Mediterranean to Egypt. Who amongst archaeologists has not thought romantically of pyramids and pharaohs, of texts that enliven understandings, of access to a world that reveals difference but offers answers in a manner that our own silent stones, bones and monuments seem to deny? Yet these covetous glances have always focused on the material, rather than its interpretation. With notable exceptions (e.g. MATIĆ, 2021; MESKELL, 2004; NYORD, 2020), it has not been the intellectual resources of Egyptology that have impacted upon the wider discipline so much as its role in the collective histories of the subjects we study. In the deep past of Europe, specifically the Neolithic and Bronze Age where I work, we have sought inspiration in places as far afield as ethnographies of Melanesia or Madagascar, in the metaphysical manifestations of German and French

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DOI: 10.25365/integ.2025.x2.2
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philosophers, even in the challenges provoked by quantum physics. Egyptology, however, has not proved a source of theory. It has sometimes seemed, both from without but perhaps also from within, that with the great volume of resources available to researchers theory is an unnecessary distraction. Why would Egyptologists need theory anyway? It was from this position, largely of ignorance of course, that the request to be a keynote at an Egyptology conference came to me in 2022.

As the papers here show, and as I have increasingly come to appreciate, the increase in evidential data does nothing to diminish our need for theory. Our acts of translation, the familiarity of names from childhood, the long-term immersion of our world in a zeitgeist coloured in conjunction with Egypt, risks rendering understandings of this place all too familiar. It stabilises and fixes the way we think about this world, making new ideas harder to come by, new thoughts more challenging to dominant narratives, and makes the work of embedding new concepts more difficult. This means theory offers us an essential tool for destabilising and denaturalising the way we think about Egypt, and really about anything we take for granted, as Edward Scrivens (p. 130) points out in his paper for this volume. Theory offers us a tool for creating cracks in the edifice of the thought we take as common sense, or as good sense (Deleuze, 2015). It makes thinking something new, possible.

When I was invited to take part the conference organisers, and editors of this special edition, hoped, I think, to draw on the wider work I had conducted thinking about the history of the human body in Europe over the long term (Robb & Harris, 2013). In *The Body in History*, John Robb and I developed the concept of the body world, the notion that bodies emerge located in specific historical contexts. Working closely with a team of co-authors, we explored the changing nature of body worlds from the Upper Palaeolithic through to the contemporary world of modern medical technologies. This posed questions of ontology (what can a body be?), scale (at what scale does a body world work?), and historical change (how does one body world become another?). These questions continue to fascinate me (e.g. Harris & Robb, 2025; Robb & Harris, 2018), but in entering into dialogue with the Egyptological world I wanted to bring other concerns to the fore.

In archaeology more widely, there has been increasing concern with ontological issues (Alberti, 2016; Crellin et al., 2021; Harris & Cipolla, 2017) and with a turn away from human centred, or anthropocentric approaches (Cipolla et al., 2024; Crellin, 2020). These concerns have arisen in part to allow the alterity of alternative historical worlds to come to the fore, in part out of a desire to decentre the Humanist notion of man, and in part to allow non-humans to play a more dynamic role in the archaeologies we write. Under a multitude of guises (variously referred to as new materialism, posthumanism, the ontological turn and more), new approaches are transforming the problems archaeology is seeking to wrestle with. In my keynote at the conference, I wanted to bring this into dialogue with the central concerns of bodies and body worlds that emerged in my earlier work. As Emily Whitehead (p. 184) perceptively notes in her paper in this volume, there might seem to be a tension between the anthropocentric concern with the human body and the more univocal emphasis on non-humans present in these contemporary approaches. As her paper shows, however, this can be a productive tension allowing us to discuss human bodies in post-anthropocentric ways.

Let us turn then to the papers presented here and consider them in the light of discussions of both body worlds, and some of the other emergent ideas that these articles explore. To do this I want to talk about the papers in relation to three questions, or perhaps better, three problematics. First, what can a body do? Second, how can a body relate? Third, what can a body become? In each case I will foreground the theoretical concerns and discuss them in conjunction with the different approaches.

2 What can a body do?

What can a body do? This is the question, inspired by Baruch Spinoza, that the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze asks us to return to (Deleuze, 1988; O'Dell & Harris, 2022; Harris, 2021). Deleuze's work is increasingly having impact in archaeology, both in relation to assemblage theory (see Whitehead, this volume)

but also in connection with questions of bodies and difference (e.g. BICKLE, 2020) From the perspective of both Deleuze and Spinoza, bodies are not fixed but rather emergent. Deleuze's work decentres subjectivity as we traditionally conceive it. Rather than prefigured and bounded individuals, DELEUZE (2004: 100) writes of 'larval subjects' always in the process of becoming. The centrality of bodies acting and doing is clear in many of the papers in this volume. As Willeke Wendrich shows in her paper (this volume), bodies act in the world in a way which thoroughly integrates traditional categories like 'mind' and 'body'. She demonstrates how thinking about process and movement, which she locates in the language of a chaîne opératoire, helps us open up an understanding of the kinds of embodied action that were possible in the past. Richard Bussmann (p. 31) emphasises how these actions included hard labour, and how that labour itself was marked onto bodies both visually and in daily life. Non-elite bodies, in his account, were defined by the actions they carried out on a daily basis, which differentiated them from others.

One question we can ask from this starting point explores how forces and flows might shape bodies and challenge their boundaries in ways we don't expect. Bodies here are not human necessarily, nor are they neatly bounded. As DELEUZE (e.g. 1988: 124) shows us with his analysis of Jacob Von Uexkull's discussion of a tick, even this most simple of creatures lives its life orientated around three affects: a sensitivity to light; to the smell of a mammal; and to the heat-topography of that mammal's skin. Affects stretch beyond the living and beyond the organic too—such an approach can embrace the vibrancy of matter, as Jane BENNETT (2010) would put it. What counts as a body, then, does not prefigure the historical worlds we find, but rather emerges through our engagement with them. What would it mean, in an ancient Egyptian world, for example, to consider a sarcophagus, a piece of papyrus, or another piece of material culture as a body? How can bodies of architecture affect and be affected by the routine daily lives of humans?

This approach leads Deleuze, both alone and with Félix Guattari, to define bodies along two dimensions: latitude and longitude (DELEUZE, 1988: 127; DELEUZE & GUATTARI, 2004: 283). The former refers to the affects of which a body is capable, its intensive virtual capacities. The latter refers to the specific extensive actual relations of movement and rest that a body undergoes. By defining these two aspects, Deleuze argues, we can define what a body can do. This allows Deleuze to claim that bodies can have much in common with one another, without necessarily being of the same order or species. The plough horse, he comments, has more in common with an ox than with a racehorse (DELEUZE, 1988: 124).

By defining bodies in terms of these two geographical dimensions, the logical conclusion is that the route towards understanding what it is a body can do is to map them in particular contexts. Bodies are always on the move, they are nomadic, and so only a cartographic method, as the posthumanist feminist Rosi BRAIDOTTI (2019) has defined it, can produce an understanding of them. This is post-anthropocentric, emergent, relational and immanent with an emphasis on becoming. As such it takes the concept of the body world, disrupts it, sets it in motion and asks it to become ever more open to what might count as a body and what those bodies can do. We can have bodies that are human that emerge from the intersections of non-humans, and bodies that are non-human that emerge from the intersection of humans.

Whitehead explores this in relation to the Model Solar Boat, in which she expands the notion of the body world to include these non-human bodies. She rethinks the solar boat not merely as a representation revealing 'symbols' which 'stand for' something else, but an active element in an assemblage of active elements within the grave. In her paper, each of the non-human bodies on the solar boat are important not for what they represent, but instead for the manner in which they act—adjusting rigging, keeping watch and more (p. 193). These bodies are active in the world. Her paper takes a cartographic approach that maps the relations present in the solar boat both in the past and present. To do this, she also brings in other solar boats revealing how our traditional notions of biographies may not be suitable for such analyses. The concept of biography, rooted as it is in individual and bounded human lives, rules out the notion that the stories we tell might cross from one body to another, enlivening them in the complex myriad of events that each embodies (cf. TSORAKI et al., 2023).

A helpful example of the latitude of bodies, the intensive affects of which a body is capable, comes from

Jordan Miller's contribution to this volume. Miller argues that bodies and images are both better thought of as 'intensities' (p. 93), that is that as bodies enter into relation with one another, new capacities for action are brought to the fore. The bodies of gods or kings here are intensities of a different order of magnitude, their capacity for action, their affects, the latitude of their bodies was different to others. Statues of gods were capable of inhaling powerful smells or complaining about them. They took different places, different locations, different movements in society and this combination, where they could be found (longitude) and what they could do (latitude), changed their bodies fundamentally. As Miller points out in Egyptian religious contexts, depending on what a body does, it can become more of a body or more of an image with neither being a stable state—both are in the process of becoming. The art of Miller's paper is in showing us that this is not merely a question of ancient Egyptians imputing life to inorganic matter, but rather of different bodies being capable of doing different things, an ontological claim we return to below.

3 How can a body relate?

What a body can do, however, is not something that emerges in isolation but rather in relation to the world around it. As these papers emphasise, thinking relationally has become increasingly important in archaeology. Beginning with phenomenological thinking in the 1990s and moving through the developments of discussion of personhood in the 2000s, relations have become critical elements of numerous forms of archaeological thinking (see HARRIS & CIPOLLA, 2017). Thinking relationally frees us from an emphasis on ahistorical essences, towards a way of thinking that allows us explore how specific social and material contexts work collectively towards the production of history.

In many ways, all of the papers in this volume emphasise the importance of relations. Wendrich, for example, shows the importance of starting with a relational approach as a means, as she puts it, to 'map out experience' (p. 172) and to think about how we can include important considerations of the embodied engagement people in both the past and present have with the world around them (cf. TILLEY, 1994). Bussmann in his paper takes this further by showing how relational thinking offers a superior starting point to transcendent notions like 'social structure' (p. 25). In his engaging account, Bussmann explores how non-elite bodies were always relationally entwined in image worlds, and thus as those images change the possibilities for how bodies could relate also changed. In a similar manner, Whitehead shows how the range of relations in which the solar boats she studies were enmeshed, including with gods and kings and ancestors, allowed these objects to act in specific ways. Perhaps just as importantly, the changing histories of relations allows Whitehead to trace how the Solar Boat becomes capable of different things at different times, and how in the late 19th century CE these bodies took on new qualities; in the world of collections they could do different things. This reveals beautifully how an emphasis on relations always leads us to an understanding of becoming, that is how things change through time, rather than emphasising what a thing is.

We often in our contemporary society think of relations primarily in kinship terms (I often start off by teaching relations through familial concepts), and Leire Olabarria takes this as her starting point. Rather than revealing the familiarity of Egyptian kinship terms, however, Olabarria challenges us to think more critically about what counts as a relation in what context, and where we may have been too quick to dismiss certain forms of connectivity. Her emphasis that the relation 'bodily son' need not be biological emphasises the manner in which it is all too easy to presume forms of kinship in the past were oriented through not only contemporary understandings of biology, but also via an ahistorical concept of what counts as family life (DELEUZE & GUATTARI, 2013). Rather than seeing non-biological kinship as 'fictitious' or 'less-than', Olabarria reminds us that these are moments in which our own assumptions about what is 'natural' all too easily overcode what the past is trying to tell us.

Both Olabarria and Dina Serova emphasise the different forms relations can take. Serova explores the linguistic emphases on nudity and nakedness, and in particular contrasts relations between already existing entities and relations that constitute entities. The latter are relations 'within' an entity (p. 152) as she puts

it. Critically, she notes how the former, external relations, act back on the terms they connect, they are outside them but still shape and change them. They thus are not only external but also help to constitute the terms they relate (Smith, 2005: 140). Indeed, relations are also a question of scale. In many ways what appears to be an interior relation of connection at one level (a relation which gives rise to an entity) is an external relation of disjunction at another (a relation which reveals or records the difference between two pre-existing things (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013: 93ff). This stresses how both processes of change and becoming within entities need to be considered (whether these entities are the linguistic terms Serova studies or a material object, site, or piece of architecture), and we need to consider how the creation of new external relations also changes what it is something can do.

Serova's discussion of relations of nakedness leads us to the relations revealed in the artistic depictures of Qadesh, Min, and Reshep as discussed by Scrivens. Rather than looking at the symbolism of the lotus, or the snakes, depicted, Scrivens points out that it is in the relations between the three beings and the different objects that understandings can emerge. Notions of the power of these figures and the forms of gender they reveal emerge in the active 'negotiation' (p. 139) or the creation of relations that Scrivens maps. Indeed throughout his paper, he cleverly maps how different concepts of gender, foreignness, and 'otherness' emerge not through any form of fixed essence, but rather through complex interplaying relations.

As a final example of the critical nature of relational approaches to the bodies under discussion we can mention Camilla Di Biase-Dyson's important paper. Not only does Di Biase-Dyson use relational thinking to show that the concepts of the body and the relations between parts and wholes may not be what we expect, she reminds us that the importance of relations does not only extend to the past. Instead, she shows how we need to attend to the relations of research in the present. By excavating the context of the sources on which Emma Brunner-Traut drew to develop her aspective theories, Di Biase-Dyson reveals the problematic connections, and underling racism, that this understanding rests upon.

4 What can a body become?

If we take the question of what a body could do, on the one hand, and the relations in which it is enmeshed on another, we open new vistas onto past worlds. More than this, such an approach requires us to start thinking more radically about what those past worlds were. If bodies could do different things, if they are not limited to the bodies of humans, if they can form new kinds of relations, then to what extent might thinking like this open up a different set of questions about what a body can become?

Here we are drawn into recent archaeological discussions both of ontology (what exists in the world) and ontological difference (how we can comprehend variation in this). The discussions on ontology are varied, as Craig Cipolla (2021) has mapped, both in terms of how archaeologists and anthropologists have used the term and the extent to which its more dramatic implications have been appreciated. At one end, some use ontology in effect as another way of describing cultural difference (what Cipolla calls ontology as worldview). At the other, archaeologists inspired by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro seek to think through specific moments of radical difference to access the alterity of past worlds. Thus Ben Alberti (e.g. 2016) the most notable proponent of this, has explored how we might ask very different questions of figurative ceramics from the 1st millennium CE in Argentina if we treat them not as depictions of bodies, as representations of bodies, but actually as bodies. For archaeologists like Alberti, the aim is not to explore alternative ontologies as separate and contrasting worlds from our own, but rather to draw on specific moments of difference to explore the questions this brings to the fore for our Eurocentric concepts. As Scrivens shows this requires us taking 'seriously' (p. 130) the role of deities in the processes that created the Ancient Egyptian world.

Different ontological conceptions underlie Reinert Skumsnes' account of the sexed body. This requires thinking about what a body can do (indeed, at one stage what an onion can do (p. 47) and the different relations that make up a body. Bringing these together allows the ontological to emerge. Skumsnes traces the

connections within and between bodies, as well as the powers and affects of different parts of the body, especially its fluids. As Skumsnes shows elegantly, the way to appreciate the complexity of these understandings is not to start with modern medical conceptions, but rather to explore the ontological logics in their own contexts by combing an open-minded mapping of what a body could do with the relations in which it was enmeshed. Skumsnes maps how bodies connect relations, how these might diverge into different bodies (humans and non-humans) and how these could conjoin once again in a moment of conjunction that synthesised the ancient Egyptian body world.

Critical here, as Olabarria shows in her paper, is how we deal with notions of translation. Olabarria is concerned with translation in a specific sense, that is how to render a term like 'his bodily son' in a way that does justice to its complexity. By translating too quickly, we can, as Olabarria shows, simply assume that this relates to how we would think of the terms body and son, rendering the relation biological. In contrast, by drawing on the concept developed by Viveiros de Castro of controlled equivocation, Olabarria shows that we can maintain a critical difference between the Egyptian concept and our own. This difference is productive, it is a space in which the alterity of a different world can be allowed to subsist, to exist, without being domesticated to our own concepts. In her potent question of how to translate a term that is both 'generic yet culturally specific, vague yet incredibly nuanced' (p. 122), I am reminded of Deleuze's discussion of Leibniz (Deleuze, 1993: 88). How is it that the sea is composed of countless relations of water molecules, flows, gravitational pulls and more, each one generating the waves that crash on our shore, and yet as we sit and listen to it, we hear only the singular sea? The answer must lie in holding steady the difference between the overarching meanings one draws (what Deleuze would call molar which are clear, yet emerge from the confusion of multiple smaller relations) and the complex relations that make it up (which are indistinct but separate, and which Deleuze would call molecular) (e.g. Deleuze, 1993: 87; cf. Smith, 2005: 141–142).

Translation is also key in Di Biase-Dyson's piece. Words we translate, such as 'wholeness', do not conform to the category as we think about it in English. The key here, as she points out, is not to render this as completely 'other', or to simply devolve into our own categories of understanding. Instead, we need to stay with this moment of trouble, to hold this difference steady for a moment and use it to think with. In a different context Darryl Wilkinson (2017) makes a similar point: it is our lack of understanding that these moments reveal, that is our confusion in the present, and the trick is to keep that in mind. As Di Biase-Dyson notably emphasises 'Egyptian ideas of relationality between body parts might look different to what we expect' (p. 66).

A different approach to ontology emerges in Jordan Miller's account of images. Miller draws on Phillipe Descola's four-fold approach to ontology to characterise the Egyptian world as mixture of animistic and analogistic concerns. As we noted above, his paper uses the concept of intensity (cf. Deleuze, 2004: 144) to explore how potentials become actualised in differing ways in objects, people, images and 'meta-persons'. Miller's paper is hugely productive as it gives us tools to think with, concepts to think through. These allow us to explore elements including the potential transfer of qualities from image to body, and the capacity of metapersons to be located in natural or anthropogenic objects either in themselves in conjunction with other materials like light and water. I do wonder if Descola's original schema offers the most productive starting point, however. As Bruno Latour (2009) has pointed out, one of the powers of an ontological approach is not merely that it offers us the chance to typologise the world, but that it explodes our expectations. In contrast, Descola's types risk rather defusing this power. As noted, Miller argues for the blend between analogist and animist ontologies in ancient Egypt, and as such the force of his approach goes beyond Descola's; his excellent paper escapes from these types to create something new in our thought.

5 Conclusion: from comparison to collaboration and contamination

A key theme in the papers, and in the conference, came from my other keynote speaker Matei Candea. Candea (2018), as many of the papers show, raises the critical issue of comparison, and distinguishes

between frontal comparison (usually between 'us' and 'someone else' in anthropology) and lateral comparison (between multiple 'others'). In my contribution here I have undertaken a form of lateral comparison between the papers in this volume, mapping their shared concerns with what a body can do, with relations and with ontology in ancient Egypt.

One can also conduct a frontal comparison, however, between these papers as a whole, standing in for Egyptology, and my own discipline of European archaeology. This moment of comparison has much to teach me and for me take away to work through in my own context, not least Serova's point that the same relation can be different in both function and nature when looked at from an emic and etic perspectives. That reminds those of us working in worlds where texts are not available how multiple even a single relation can be. Serova's paper stresses how the relations we engage with must always be situated within what she terms a dynamic conceptual field. Deleuze and Guattari's (1994) term for this would be a plane of immanence or a plane of consistency; the horizon of possibility for thought and action. These papers together show archaeology how much Egyptology has to teach us about the sophisticated manner in which theoretical concepts can be paired with rich data to open up an understanding of these radically different planes, and how through an engagement like this, the bodies, relations, and ontologies of past worlds can come to life once more. If there is one final step I would like to see from this dialogue between archaeology, archaeological theory, and Egyptology it is that we collectively move past comparison towards collaboration; that these dialogues are the start, not the end, of an ongoing conversation. What this might lead to, through shared work, shared exploration and shared thinking may go beyond interesting and diverting comparisons to something much more significant, and something that is much harder to shift, to what Anna Tsing (2015) might call contamination, rather than comparison. It is in the mixing of thought that new understandings come to light, that once perceived can never be separated again.

6 Acknowledgments

It is enormously exciting, if a little intimidating to be invited to be an outsider joining in a conversation in a different discipline. I am enormously grateful to the organisers of the conference, and the editors of this volume, Camilla Di Biase-Dyson, Rune Nyord, Leire Olabarria, and Reinert Skumsnes for their thoughtful invitation. Learning from them and the other workshop participants was a huge privilege. My comments here draw, of course, on wider connections, and I am lucky to have learned a lot about bodies, relations and ontology from Ben Alberti, Rachel Crellin, Yvonne O'Dell, John Robb, and Darryl Wilkinson amongst many others.

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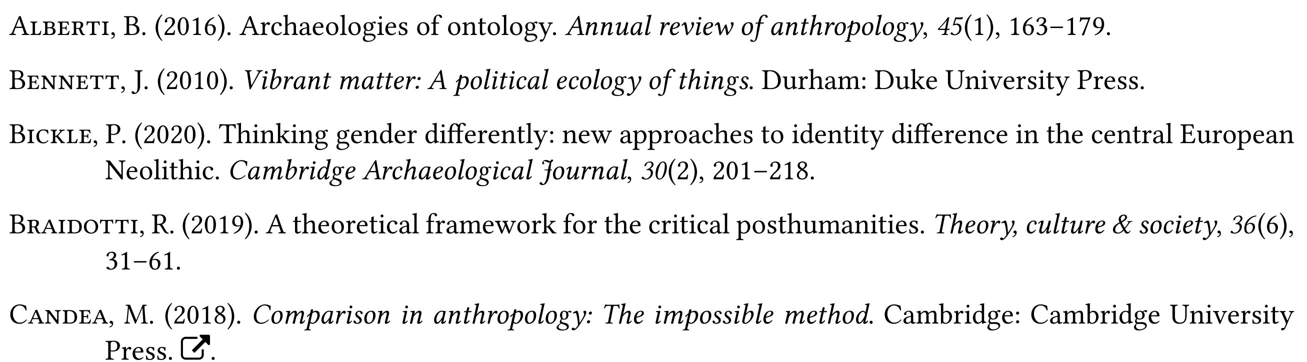

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