

## Impact case study template (REF3b)

**Title of case study:** Understanding the Historical Nature of the Human Body

### 1. Summary of the impact

This case study explores the impact of a University of Cambridge theoretically-informed programme on how the human body is understood in different historical settings. The major way the non-academic public encountered this research was through an exhibition 'Assembling Bodies' at the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, seen by over 100,000 people. Visitor documentation and external reviews show that this exhibition successfully provoked its viewers to think in new ways about human bodies, including their own. It has also inspired new creative initiatives in art and writing.

### 2. Underpinning research

To most people, it seems obvious what the human body is – our biological organism. It seems equally obvious that human bodies are universal and common to all societies. Yet scholars in the social sciences and humanities have shown that how the human body is understood varies immensely. For example, medieval Europeans thought of the body as a microcosm of God's Creation and battleground between flesh and spirit, whereas modern medicine is based upon an idea of the body as a purely material machine. Research on the sociality of the body has a strong background in Cambridge archaeology, for example in Sørensen's work on the materiality of gender and in Robb's studies of gender, art and skeletal remains.

To investigate how ideas of the body change over the largest historical scale, Cambridge researchers led by John Robb (employed by the University since 2001 and presently a Reader) carried out a Leverhulme-sponsored research programme (2005–2010) entitled '*Changing Beliefs of the Human Body*'. This interdisciplinary programme spanned prehistory, classics, history and social anthropology to trace the development of beliefs about the body from the origins of humanity through to the present. Most of the overall team of 8 co-PIs, 7 postdoctoral researchers and 2 museum-based collaborators were based in Cambridge. Archaeology: Robb (Neolithic archaeology, programme coordinator); Preston Miracle (Palaeolithic archaeology) who joined the University in 1999 and is a Senior Lecturer; Marie Louise Stig Sørensen (Bronze Age archaeology), who joined in 1987 and is a Reader; Simon Stoddart (Etruscan archaeology), who joined in 1996 and is a Reader; and postdoctoral researchers Dušan Borić (2005–2009), Katharina Rebay-Salisbury (2005–2008) and Oliver Harris (2007–2010). Because this was a comparative project examining many historical moments, each PI led an independent research project generating original data within his/her period of specialization. In a second, synthetic phase (2008–2010), the results of these parallel projects were brought together and expanded to provide a general history of how humans have understood their bodies. An important component was a museum exhibition at the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

The resulting research contributed original interpretations of prehistoric hunter-gatherer life-worlds (Miracle); of prehistoric art and the Neolithic–Bronze Age transition (Robb); of Bronze Age deathways (Sørensen); and of Etruscan bodies (Stoddart). The project created the first large-scale history of the culturally-defined body for Europe, an achievement unique in its scale and spanning of disciplinary boundaries. In contrast to most current scholarship, this history shows that we cannot see the human body simply in terms of a modern/pre-modern dichotomy; it has changed many times throughout our history. The project showed how the body has been constructed through its relations with material things, whether these were prehistoric figurines, Classical Greek statues, industrial factories, or modern medical scanning technologies. It

revealed that people never have a single way of understanding the body but switch contextually between radically different models (for instance, the body as a material machine vs. the body as a person in today's society). One key way in which these and other ideas originating in our 'Changing Beliefs of the Human Body' project have been made public is in the 'Assembling Bodies' museum exhibition discussed in Section 4 below.

This research matters. In contemporary society, we often feel that the body is in crisis as new biomedical technologies push it ever further away from a 'natural' body – a sense of crisis expressed in many ways, from sensationalist news about human cloning and virtual bodies to wildly proliferating bioethical regulation. Our research shows that the concept of technology subverting a 'natural' body is a modernist dystopia rather than an accurate picture of reality. Throughout the last 40,000 years of history, humans have always held multiple, contradictory ideas of the body, and the body has always been the locus of social tensions, contradictions and often traumatic change.

### 3. References to the research (in alphabetical/chronological order)

#### Key Research Outputs:

1. Robb, J. and Harris, O. (eds). 2013. *The Body in History: Europe from the Palaeolithic to the Future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 9780521195287
2. Borić, D. and Robb, J. (eds). 2008. *Past Bodies: Body-Centred Research in Archaeology*. Oxford: Oxbow. ISBN: 9781842173411
3. Rebay-Salisbury, K., Sørensen, M.L.S. and Hughes, J. (eds.). 2010. *Body Parts and Bodies Whole: Changing Relations and Meanings*. Oxford: Oxbow. ISBN: 9781842174029
4. Tarlow, S. 2011. *Ritual, Belief and the Dead in Early Modern Britain and Ireland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 9780521761543
5. Herle, A., Elliott, M. and Empson, R. 2009. *Assembling Bodies: Art, Science, and Imagination. Exhibition Catalogue*. Cambridge: Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Available at: <<http://maa.cam.ac.uk/assemblingbodies/catalogue/>> [Accessed 12 July 2013].

#### Research Grant:

1. Robb, J. *et al.*, 'Changing Beliefs of the Human Body', Leverhulme Trust (Leverhulme Research Programme Grant), 2005–2009, £1,181,061.

### 4. Details of the impact

Bodies are an issue which recurs constantly in public consciousness, whenever a new medical technology broaches a long-standing taboo or a new form of consumption, display, sexuality or death shocks us and challenges our beliefs. Such moments make us realize that the body is not the simple, taken-for-granted object we usually think. The 'Assembling Bodies' exhibition has encouraged the public to consider how different peoples have conceptualized the body differently. The principal impact of this work has thus been to provoke people to think about bodies in new ways.

The museum exhibition was the 'Changing Beliefs of the Human Body' project's primary avenue for engaging the public. It was curated by Anita Herle (Senior Curator, Anthropology – employed at Cambridge since 1991) and Mark Elliott (Senior Curator, Anthropology – employed at Cambridge since 2005), in collaboration with the academic team listed in Section

2 above, and was open to the public from March 2009 through November 2010 as the major temporary exhibition at the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. With funding from the Leverhulme Trust, Arts Council East and the Wellcome Trust, it brought together highlights from the museum's collections and loans from 15 other institutions. The exhibition's main thrust was not to overwhelm the visitor didactically in an academic history of the human body, but rather to provoke the visitor to question by "offering visitors an opportunity to make sense of the human enterprise of exploring and representing their material selves" (as a *Nature* reviewer put it). This was done by innovative strategies. For example, the exhibition juxtaposed objects from very different contexts. A Palaeolithic hand-axe and a 1920s prosthetic arm both revealed ways of extending the body. A DNA genotype and a medieval genealogy of Jesus exemplified different ways of relating bodies. A particularly effective strategy was the use of modern art, much of it original creations, to engage the visitor's own body tactilely (as in Bonnie Kemske's 'ceramic hugs') and to make them think about how we see the body (as in Jim Bond's 'anamorphic man' sculpture). As *Anthropology Today* commented, "It is striking how the curators of '*Assembling Bodies*' have pulled together such a cohesive argument from so many time periods, disciplinary standpoints and conceptual trajectories."

The exhibition was viewed by approximately 117,700 museum visitors, a notable increase in visitor numbers over the Museum's average for preceding years. During this time, 76 outreach events were held. These ranged from gallery talks by curators to tours for museum professionals to standing-room-only children's events at science festivals (including "sleep-overs in the Museum" on 15 May 2009 and 26 March 2010). This was a national and international audience, with 38% of visitors from areas of the UK outside the Cambridge area and 22% from overseas. The exhibition was also made available to the public via a website, which additionally included downloadable research packs for school use. Between March 2009 and November 2010, 1624 unique visitors accessed the website (6873 page views in total).

Several lines of evidence reveal the exhibition's significance. Reviews commended its creativity, accessibility and high impact. The exhibition was evaluated professionally using multiple techniques, including thermal-imaging observation of visitor-movement patterns (n=131), visitor questionnaires (n=663), in-depth exit interviews (n=25) and focus group discussions. Visitors included substantially more young people than other exhibitions (41% under 17, 17% 18–24). The key points to emerge from these evaluations were:

- Most visitors spent a considerable time at the exhibition: thermal monitoring showed that they spent on average more than twice as long viewing this exhibition as they did the Museum's previous temporary exhibition; attended to a wide range of the displays; and had a "high-quality" visit according to museum evaluation standards.
- Visitors particularly found themselves provoked to think by the original creative artworks and the interactive displays. For example, a typical visitor comment was "as a doctor, [I found] plenty to learn and reflect upon". They also left with vivid impressions of ethnographic and historical elements tied to the academic research behind the project such as modern shaman's costumes, medieval genealogies and Mesolithic deer-skull masks. For Anglia Ruskin University students, "visiting the '*Assembling Bodies*' exhibition was, based on the responses to our module evaluation questionnaires, one of the highlights of three of the main contextual and theoretical studies modules for BA Illustration and BA Illustration & Animation students" (Contact 1).
- Qualitatively, in free-text visitor comments, visitors overwhelmingly (90%) emphasized that

they had learned new things and been provoked to see the body in a different way by their visit to the exhibition. For example, Anglia Ruskin University English students incorporated a visit to the exhibition into their first-year teaching of imaginative writing – an unexpected use which suggests how much the exhibition provoked complex reactions (Contact 2).

The exhibition's offshoots also illustrate its wider reach and significance. For example, it inspired art students at the Cambridge Regional College to create '*Bodies Exposed*', an exhibition of photographs of bodies highlighting their own insights into bodies and body image. To quote one of the student photographers, "I had never been to the Museum before, and I didn't even know what Anthropology meant, so this has really [opened my eyes] to the different yet similar ways people can represent themselves." A popular and compelling element of the exhibition, the autobiographical 'body maps' drawn by South African women suffering from HIV, inspired creative artists Rachel Gadsden, Nondumiso Hlwele and the Bambanani Women's Group from Khayelitsha Township, Cape Town, South Africa to collaborate with the MAA in developing a further exhibition, '*Unlimited Global Alchemy*'; this was exhibited to very positive reviews in the Museum as part of the 2012 London Cultural Olympiad and has subsequently transferred to Pretoria, South Africa with equal success.

#### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (in alphabetical/chronological order)

1. Cambridge Regional College. 2006. *Major Photography Exhibition Explores Body Image* [pdf]. Available at: <<http://www.camre.ac.uk/Documents/News/Bodies%20exposed1.pdf>> [Accessed 12 July 2013].
2. Ferry, G. 2009. Our changing body image. Arts reviewed: Assembling Bodies, Art, Science and Imagination. *Nature* 459: 1060–1061. (24 June 2009) DOI: 10.1038/4591060a Exhibition review.
3. Gadsden, R. 2013. *Unlimited Global Alchemy: Anita Herle* [online]. Available at: <<http://www.unlimitedglobalalchemy.com/anita-herle>> [Accessed on 12 July 2013].
4. Geismar, H. 2010. Exhibitions. Assembling Bodies: Art, Science and Imagination. *Anthropology Today* 26(5): 25–26 (5 October 2010). DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8322.2010.00760.x Exhibition review.
5. Harknett, S.J. n.d. '*Assembling Bodies*'. Evaluation Summary. Manuscript on file, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge University. (Quantitative and qualitative monitoring data on museum exhibition and associated outreach activity).
6. Herle, A. 2009. Audio slideshow: Assembling Bodies. *BBC News* [online]. 7 September. Available at: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/8224706.stm>> [Accessed 12 July 2013].
7. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge. 2009. *Assembling Bodies: Art, Science & Imagination: Exhibition 10 March 2006 – 6 November 2010*. Available at: <<http://maa.cam.ac.uk/assemblingbodies/>> [Accessed 12 July 2013].
8. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge. n.d. *Assembling Bodies: Art, Science & Imagination: Resources for Schools* [online]. Available at: <<http://maa.cam.ac.uk/assemblingbodies/schools/>> [Accessed 12 July 2013].

#### *Testimonials:*

1. Contact 1: Senior Lecturer, Contextual Studies, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge.
2. Contact 2: Senior Lecturer, English, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge.