

Call for papers:
Emory University
Thursday 3. – Friday 4. November, 2022

Egyptology in dialogue: Historical bodies in relations of comparisons and negotiations

This conference brings together an international team of scholars in a collaborative effort to investigate historical bodies in relations of comparisons and negotiations, to engage in dialogue beyond disciplinary boundaries. Participants are asked to explore how four specific concepts – historical bodies (Robb & Harris), relations (Strathern), comparisons (Candea) and negotiations (Sørensen) – can be useful tools (if at all) for thinking through patterns (similarity), change and variation (difference) in the ancient Egyptian cultural output.

Contributions are encouraged to evolve around the following questions:

- How did the ancient Egyptians perceive of/conceptualize the body?
- How did the ancient Egyptians perceive of/conceptualize bodily difference?
- What were/are the key affective environments to past and present perceptions/conceptions of the body/bodily difference in ancient Egypt?
- Are the records in unison, or are there contradictions?
- To what extent are relations, comparisons and negotiations useful as analytical categories for the study of bodies, historically situated in ancient Egypt?

The focus on *historical bodies* is novel within Egyptological research.¹ By drawing on recent archaeological theory, this conference recognizes that every society understands the human body in its own way, that the body not only has a history and a cultural-specific logic, it also emerges through history, as historically contingent.² This means that although the body, and the individual experience of it, is very much real and coherent, it is never detached, and cannot be understood in isolation. The body is never just a fact about human life, but is always ‘a dynamic economy of alien powers’.³ It can be described, in line with new materialist approaches, as a continuous process of becoming-with,⁴ always entangled in mutually determining relations of comparisons and negotiations, with things, other beings and entities (human and non-human) that together form assemblages of affective environments,⁵ be they rules, habits and bodily practices, living conditions (diet, health, etc.), climate and particular events (stress, trauma, etc.), architectural surroundings (built or otherwise) and landscape, conceptual places and spaces. These *relations* (relationships, the relational and relationality) are imperative to understand the body. They are prime movers of sociality, not only between people as described in the records, but also pertain to all the past and future connections presently invisible within them.⁶ The concepts *comparisons* and *negotiations* place further attention on these relational encounters, between what can be described as spatially and temporally fractal positions, perspectives and records.⁷ This includes the

¹ Explicit discussion and theorization of the body in Egyptology remains rare, but see Bussmann, 2015, 7-11; Riggs, 2010; Nyord, 2009; Wendrich 2006; Meskell, 1998.

² Robb & Harris, 2013, 1-31, 213-234.

³ Holmes, 2017, 49.

⁴ Haraway, 2016, 12-13.

⁵ Foucault, 1988a, 50; 1988b, 11; Assemblages, see Bennett, 2010, 23-24; Affect/be affected, see Deleuze & Guattari, 2013 [1987], 262-263; Environment, see Ingold, 2000, 20.

⁶ Strathern, 2014, 14. See also Strathern, 2018; 2020.

⁷ Candea, 2018, 1-52, 325-354; Sørensen, 2007; 2000, 60-73. See also Strathern, 2004 [1991].

complexity of the records (the significance of material, genre, purpose and context of specific records), but also knowledge production and methodology (the selection of records, the questions and perspectives of the interpreter, etc.), and reception history.

Egyptologists have traditionally privileged narrow cultural-historical approaches, focusing on textual, visual or archaeological details instead of taking part in broader theoretical discussions. It has been observed that ‘despite its cross-boundary potential, the vast data set produced by Egyptology has tended to be a closed territory’,⁸ and that ‘the development of theory continues to be a relatively niche approach within Egyptology’.⁹ This is not to say that Egyptology has existed in a vacuum, but rather, the will to take explicit part in larger discussions is radically new.¹⁰ For this reason, increased attention is given to the discipline itself, leading scholars and institutions to become more self-aware and reflective on their role as knowledge producers, both politically and ethically. Interpretations and biases are being questioned to a larger degree than ever before.

This conference encourages theoretical input from other disciplines and methodological awareness, combined with the rich archaeological record. Participants are asked to orient their papers towards the larger dialogue, towards method- and/or theory- focused issues of interest to scholars beyond Egyptology. We welcome syntheses that critically assess and integrate research on the body, as well as examinations of the history and interdisciplinary potential of this specific area of research. This conference seeks the multi-layered processes by which patterns (similarity), change and variation (difference) are developed and potentially contested, both within the past and in relation to the present. It is hoped that the above concepts will stimulate a conversation that extends well beyond the discipline. But instead of being concerned with ready-made models, with social constructions (culture) as opposed to a biological baseline (nature), the concern of this conference is to question and unsettle what we think we know and seek to create ‘the conditions under which one can “see” things ... that one would not otherwise have been able to see’.¹¹ This includes both critique and positive formulations of alternatives, that hopefully will further our knowledge about ancient Egypt, by forcing us to reflect critically on current assumptions and categorizations.

The conference will take the form of a 2-day workshop, and will consist of c.20 individual paper presentations, each including some key theoretical/methodological points intended to initiate subsequent round table discussions.

A publication of select thematically coherent papers is also being planned, scheduled for the 2023 special issue of the journal *Interdisciplinary Egyptology*.

Organizing committee

- [Reinert Skumsnes](#), University of Oslo/ Emory University
- [Rune Nyord](#), Emory University
- [Leire Olabarria](#), University of Birmingham
- [Camilla Di Biase-Dyson](#), Macquarie University

⁸ Riggs, 2014, 2. See also Quirke, 2015, 4.

⁹ Olabarria, 2018, 89. See also Nyord, forthcoming.

¹⁰ Nyord, 2018, 73; Nyord & Howley, 2018, vi. See also Wendrich, 2010; O’Connor, 1997; Weeks, 1979.

¹¹ Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, 4. See also Viveiros de Castro, 2004.

Keynotes

- [Oliver Harris](#), University of Leicester

‘Nobody knows what a body can do’: on difference, relations and body worlds

In *The Body in History* John Robb and I developed the notion of body worlds to explore how particular corporeal regimes emerge in specific historical contexts. From the hunter gatherers of the Palaeolithic through to medical workers today, different body worlds emerge in the intersection of architecture, technologies, practices and beliefs. In this paper I reflect on the concept of the ‘body world’ and its usefulness. In particular I aim to explore how the idea of the body world changes once we stop thinking of difference (between bodies, between periods) as negative, and start approaching it as a positive and creative force. Here the broader relational notion of the body world encounters the differential philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, and returns us to one of Deleuze’s, and his inspiration Baruch Spinoza’s, key questions: what can a body do? This question will be explored through a number of empirical snapshots of different bodies in differing body worlds.

- [Matei Candea](#), University of Cambridge

Comparing bodies of knowledge: units, intensities and disciplines

This paper reprises some of the enduring ways in which the necessity and impossibility of a ‘comparative method’ has haunted anthropology, and asks how these intra-disciplinary conundrums might feed into an inter-disciplinary conversation with egyptology. I will be focusing in particular on the dreaded ‘problem of units’ (what constitutes an interesting, workable or legitimate unit of comparison?), and suggesting some of the ways the problem might be turned on its head, once we accept that comparison is not merely a solitary intellectual endeavour but actually an immanent, worldly and relational practice. Whilst this insight can be applied to the comparative investigation of bodies, it can also be brought to bear on the comparative investigation of disciplinary knowledges. Revisiting recent explorations of the relationship between egyptology and anthropology and their differing relations to theory, the paper asks in closing what might happen if anthropology were seen not as a donor, but as a recipient, of theoretical insight in that relationship - how, in other words, might anthropological comparison be enriched by egyptological concepts?

Other invited participants

- [Willeke Wendrich](#), University of California, Los Angeles
- [Richard Bussmann](#), University of Cologne
- [Thais Rocha da Silva](#), University of São Paulo/University of Oxford
- Edward Scrivens, Independent scholar

Paper submission guidelines

- Submit short biography (max 150 words) and abstract (max 300 words) via this form: <https://nettskjema.no/a/221426>

- All submissions must be in English.
- **Submission deadlines: 11. April 2022**
- Submitters will be notified via email regarding the acceptance, waitlist or rejection of their abstracts.
- **Acceptance notification: 16. May 2022**
- **Announcement of program: 6. June 2022**

Presentation guidelines

- Submission of an abstract is a commitment by the submitter(s) to present the paper.
- Papers may not be presented by anyone other than the named author(s).
- Presentations should be 15 minutes, with an additional 10 minutes for discussions.

Reading list

- Robb, J., & Harris, O. J. T. (Eds.). (2013). *The Body in History. Europe from the Palaeolithic to the Future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 1-31, 213-234
- Strathern, M. (2014). Reading relations backwards. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 20, 3-19.
- Candea, M. (2018). *Comparison in Anthropology: The Impossible Method*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 1-52, 325-354
- Sørensen, M. L. S. (2007). On Gender Negotiations and Its Materiality. In S. Hamilton, R. D. Whitehouse, & K. I. Wright (Eds.), *Archaeology and Women: Ancient and Modern Issues* (pp. 41-51). New York: Routledge.

Further readings

- Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bussmann, R. (2015). Egyptian Archaeology and Social Anthropology. In *Oxford Handbooks Online*, Oxford. DOI: [10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935413.013.24](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935413.013.24) (acs. 09.04.2021)
- Candea, M. (2018). *Comparison in Anthropology: The Impossible Method*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (2013 [1987]). *A Thousand Plateaus [Mille Plateaux]*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Foucault, M. (1988a). *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984* (L. Kritzman Ed.). London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1988b). The ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom. In J. Bernauer & D. Rasmussen (Eds.), *The Final Foucault* (pp. 1-20). Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Holbraad, M., & Pedersen, M. A. (2017). *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holmes, B. (2017). The Body of Western Embodiment: Classical Antiquity and the Early History of a Problem. In J. E. H. Smith (Ed.), *Embodiment: A History* (pp. 17-53). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Ingold, T. (2000). *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge.
- Meskel, L. (1998). The Irresistible Body and the Seduction of Archaeology. In D. Montserrat (Ed.), *Changing Bodies, Changing Meanings* (pp. 139-161). London: Routledge.
- Nyord, R. (2009). *Breathing Flesh: Conceptions of the Body in the Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press.
- Nyord, R. (2018). «Taking Ancient Egyptian Mortuary Religion Seriously»: Why Would We, and How Could We? *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 17, 73-87.
- Nyord, R. (forthcoming). Theory in Egyptology. In S. D'Auria & P. Lacovara (Eds.), *Methods and Aims in Egyptian Archaeology: A Sourcebook*. Atlanta: Lookwood Press.
- Nyord, R., & Howley, K. (2018). Editorial Introduction - Egyptology and Anthropology: Historiography, Theoretical Exchange, and Conceptual Development. *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 17, vi-ix.
- Olabarria, L. (2018). A Question of Substance: Interpreting Kinship and Relatedness in Ancient Egypt. *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 17, 88-113.
- O'Connor, D. (1997). Ancient Egypt: Egyptology and Anthropological Perspectives. In J. Lustig (Ed.), *Anthropology and Egyptology: A Developing Dialogue* (pp. 13-24). Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Quirke, S. (2015). *Exploring Religion in Ancient Egypt*. London: Wiley Blackwell.
- Riggs, C. (2010). Body. In E. Frood & W. Wendrich (Eds.), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, Los Angeles.
<http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz0025nqg2> (acs. 09.04.2021)
- Riggs, C. (2014). *Unwrapping Ancient Egypt*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Robb, J., & Harris, O. J. T. (Eds.). (2013). *The Body in History. Europe from the Palaeolithic to the Future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strathern, M. (2004 [1991]). *Partial Connections* (Updated ed.). Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.
- Strathern, M. (2014). Reading relations backwards. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 20, 3-19.
- Strathern, M. (2018). Relations. In F. Stein, S. Lazar, M. Candea, H. Diemberger, J. Robbins, A. Sanchez, & R. Stasch (Eds.), *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*.
<http://doi.org/10.29164/18relations> (acs. 09.04.2021)
- Strathern, M. (2020). *Relations: An Anthropological Account*. Durham: Duke University Press.
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- Viveiros de Castro, E. (2004). Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation. *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 2(1), 3-22.
- Weeks, K. R. (Ed.) (1979). *Egyptology and the Social Sciences*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.
- Wendrich, W. (2006). Body Knowledge: Ethnoarchaeological Learning and the Interpretation of Ancient Technology. In B. Mathieu, D. Meeks, & M. Wissa (Eds.), *L'apport de l'Égypte à l'histoire des techniques: Méthodes, chronologie et comparaisons* (pp. 267-275). Le Caire: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale.
- Wendrich, W. (2010). Egyptian Archaeology: From Text to Context. In W. Wendrich (Ed.), *Egyptian Archaeology* (pp. 1-14). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.