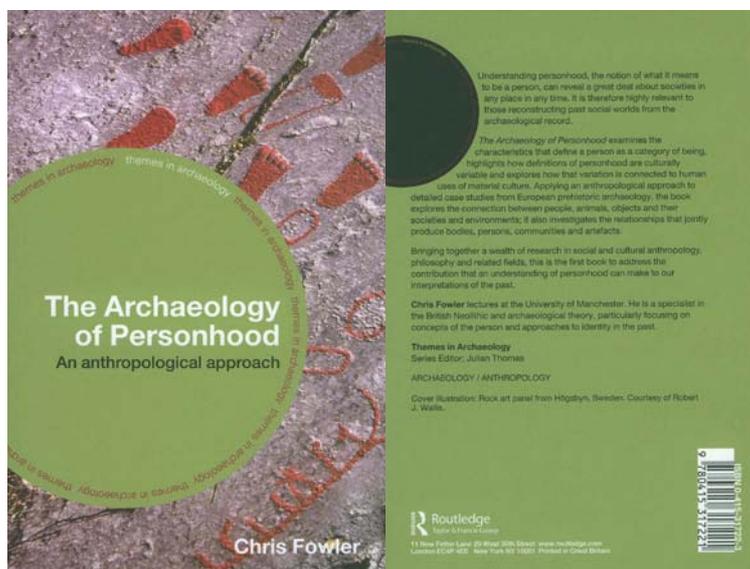


**Fowler, C. 2004. The archaeology of personhood. An anthropological approach. – London/New York, Routledge**

Book review by W.Z. Wendrich



In this book Chris Fowler sets out to determine what a 'person' is and how we should understand 'personhood' archaeologically. Perhaps the most important aspect of personhood is that it does not necessarily refer to a human being. In a separate section of key definitions (p. 7) Fowler writes: “*Person* is used to refer to any entity, human or otherwise, which may be conceptualized and treated as a person.” This tautological definition is then followed by the statement that “a person is frequently composed through the temporary association of different aspects”. Mind, spirit, soul and physical body are considered features of these unnamed aspects. In order not to over-simplify, Fowler tries to incorporate all forms and expressions of personhood as might conceivably have existed in past societies. He specifically draws upon present day ethnographic examples from Melanesia and India. Anthropological research enables a refined understanding of such intangible concepts as ‘person’ and ‘personhood’. Fowler outlines the range of meanings of these concepts by referring to three key features of contemporary modes of personhood (p. 8-9).

1. *Individuality and indivisibility*, is the mode of personhood most commonly considered in modern western society, in which the person is a unique, constant, fixed self.
2. *Individuals*. Fowler uses ‘western individual’ to “refer to personhood in which a constant individuality and a persistent personal identity are stressed over relational identities”.
3. *Dividuals and dividuality* are modes of personhood in which the person is recognised as composite and multi-authored. Based on a review of archaeological research, Fowler lists two types of dividuality: partibility and permeability. These are defined by the social relations between persons, and illustrated with ethnographic examples from Melanesia and India. Persons can be humans, animals, inanimate objects and groupings of any of these, depending on the interrelations and the context.

In the book no explicit clarification is given of which aspects of personhood this tripartition is based on and why ‘individuals’ are listed separate from the concept of individuality and indivisibility, while dividuals and dividuality are considered one feature. It is partly a matter of language and cognisance. Since English is the most widespread academic language the term ‘person’ is compared with concepts in other cultures that are considered more or less equivalent. To a certain extent the anthropological approach as presented in this book, projects a concept from one culture on several others. When more or less comparable concepts are found, an outline follows in what respect these concepts vary.

It is important to realise that something engrained in our culture cannot simply be transferred to a world wide (geographical) and timeless (historical) scale. That is without doubt the largest contribution of this book and produces a challenge and inspiration for any archaeologist who seeks to understand more than the obvious. Fowler could have been more explicit; the text is rather vague and results in a partly tautological treatise. Explaining modes of personhood by analysing social transactions between persons (p. 23), requires a definition of person. Because there are so many different types of persons, defined by the modes of personhood, a definition of ‘person’ requires a definition of the modes of personhood, which is done by analysing the relation

between persons, etcetera. Furthermore, Fowler's definitions are as fluid, contextual and shifting as personhood itself. He states (p. 9) "These definitions will be revised, embellished and replaced throughout this book as relationships between personhood and context become more apparent, and spring from my interpretation of the debate over personhood." Although I am very much in favour of allowing contextuality and fluidity in the interpretation of anthropological and archaeological phenomena, the purpose of definitions is to enable communication, by stating clearly which of the myriad of different meanings a certain term will be given in the (con)text of the book. Contextual and shifting definitions defy that purpose. If a definition develops and changes during the course of writing a book, as often happens, then the author should revisit his first chapter and rephrase.

The chapters on the anthropology of personhood in Melanesia and India are very interesting. They certainly provoke rethinking earlier interpretations and a readjustment of the all too often Eurocentric interpretations of identity, contextuality and social relationships. What is missing, however, is a strong archaeological correlate. Fowler tries to illustrate the importance of the archaeology of personhood through his interpretation of Mesolithic Scandinavia. Many examples follow and to pick out one of the weaker ones is perhaps not entirely representative of the effort, but it does clearly bring to the fore where the problem occurs. The discovery, in the lake by the campsite at Ringkloster, of intact skinned bodies of pine marten leads Fowler to the following musings: "Humans were often buried intact in the skin of animals, while pine marten were skinned and their otherwise intact bodies discarded." (p. 147). Drawing upon circumpolar ethnographies, Fowler suggests that these discarded bodies could perhaps be considered votives, deposited at the water edge. This action could be considered as a spiritual engagement with animals but could also illustrate the need of furless humans to protect themselves against the cold by skinning animals. Based on this particular archaeological deposit, the interpretation of human social relations and human attitude towards other creatures can range from spiritual to functional. An alternative interpretation to the discarded bodies as votives could be to consider the deposit as the reflection of a consumptive attitude in which the skinned bodies are simply the waste of the hunt. The meat of the pine marten could also have been considered inedible, unsuitable or impure. Or the sources of other meat could have been particularly abundant, so that the trouble of eating the pine martens was not considered worth while. With the presented archaeological evidence there is not way of telling which interpretation has more weight. This problem is not new in research that draws upon ethnographical sources. The correlation between past and present is always problematic when combining anthropology and archaeology. Using a well-designed ethnoarchaeological research method sometimes provides a solution, but the more vague the notions we propose, the less tangible are the traces of possible correlations.

Fowler justly asks attention for personhood, but even though the book is only 161 small sized pages, it could perhaps have been done with less words, and in a more clearly formulated style. As Fowler says in his conclusion (p. 156) "Since personhood is heavily entangled with other factors of identity, there can be no single definition that applies to all contexts, nor any single process through which personhood is attained. For these reasons I have not advocated a separate archaeology of personhood, but rather suggested that the trends through which personhood is produced form a central piece in the puzzle for our theoretical struggle with past identities". What the book certainly does is provoke contemplation and discussion and it is without doubt a worthwhile addition to the corpus of archaeological theoretical publications.

Fowler, C. 2004. *The archaeology of personhood. An anthropological approach.* – London/New York, Routledge. 192 pp. ISBN 0415317223. Price £12.99 (paperback).

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