This book is the product of an emerging concern in bioarchaeology: the conceptual status of the human body and its parts in the past—notably, whose heads and skulls were given special treatment and why, whether as ancestor or enemy, as insider or outsider, as adult or child, or as male or female. Ancient human groups collected, buried, enshrined, disinterred, modified, and decorated entire bodies as well as selected portions, paying special attention to the human head (e.g., see Bonogofsky 2006c; Chacon and Dye 2007; Knudson and Stojanowski 2009; Rakita et al. 2005). After over a century of research, we now understand that treatment of the body was dependent upon a network of political, social, economic, and religious concerns. These concerns intersected with the biological characteristics and constraints of the body in diverse but finite ways. For archaeologists, evidence of these complex networks comes primarily in the form of cemeteries, tombs, burials, and human skeletal remains. However, as the authors in this volume demonstrate, documentary sources, iconography, and ethnographic analogy, along with bioarchaeological and biochemical analyses conducted on human remains, help us to contextualize the treatment of the body and provide more nuanced interpretations, such as whether the individuals are local or nonlocal residents (e.g., see Forgey this volume; Montgomery, Knüsel, and Tucker this volume).

Our understanding of the body is significantly informed by the now firmly established approach of bioarchaeology, which integrates biological data and archaeological context, stressing the interaction between biology and behavior of modern populations from archaeological sites (Larsen 1997, 2007). Twenty-first-century researchers are increasingly recognizing the advantages of such an integrated approach and putting it into practice in a variety of temporal and spatial contexts. Such endeavors present significant challenges for researchers, however, because they demand the study and synthesis of the evidence on
several conceptual levels—that of the individual body and associated artifacts; that of the tomb, mound, or cemetery context; that of the regional landscape; and that of the larger sociocultural context. The advantage of dealing with the human body on several levels is that it provides us with the most complete picture of ancient life—from the embodied experience of the individual to the culturally mediated context of deposition and finally to the physical, cultural, and historical contexts in which individuals lived; negotiated their ages, statuses, roles, and sexualities; ritualized their beliefs and actions; and ultimately died, with their body parts collected, curated, and brought back into the community. Contributors to this volume approach the study of a specific body part—the human head—and its context through analyses based in skeletal, DNA, radiographic, isotopic, documentary, and iconographic evidence as well as in the more traditional study of material culture. In some contributions, the head itself is viewed simultaneously as a biological object—the product of physical processes—and as an object of material culture (Sofaer 2006) to be manipulated in various ways. Implicit in this approach is the recognition that body parts (the head or skull in particular) are objects vested with immense symbolic, social, religious, and political value.

Ethnographers at the forefront of the postmodern focus on gender, identity, ethnicity, and personhood, have produced compelling research that situates elements of the human body within both indigenous cultural contexts and colonialisit discourses (e.g., Hoskins 1986; Rosaldo 1980; Taylor 1993). Bodies and their parts function within political economies of power and prestige and serve as social markers for family and ethnic groups. The consumption of the body, for example, can consolidate distinctions between kin groups, as among the Wari of Amazonia (Conklin 1995, 2001). Their postmortem treatment provides an arena for the display of resources and the negotiation of social relationships. However, archaeology reveals that consumption of the body can occur for completely different reasons, as among the Anasazi in the American Southwest, who butchered and cooked nearly thirty men, women, and children for their bone marrow around AD 1100 (White 1992) before abandoning their Colorado location. Bodies and their parts also take their places within mythological and ideological systems—in the reenactment of origin stories, in the dramatization of cosmological events, and in the materialization of the divine.

Individual body parts, notably the head or skull, may take on the role of the body entire, as in the symbolic phenomenon of *pars pro toto* (e.g., Bienert 1991) or may be imbued with an altogether different sort of meaning. The head (Hoskins 1986; Rosaldo 1980), hair (Leach 1958), internal organs (Lock 2002; Scheper-Hughes 2001; Sharp 1994), and various other body parts have been
treated in detail (see examples in Chacon and Dye 2007; Hillman and Mazzio 1997) by ethnologists and sociologists, who have illustrated how the body can serve human interests on several social and cultural levels. Bioarchaeologists, who have long viewed the human skeleton as a source of information about the past, are now for the first time addressing how specific parts functioned within sociopolitical networks (e.g., see chapters in Chacon and Dye 2007 for Amerindian studies). This volume deals with what is almost certainly the most archaeologically visible and symbolically loaded body part—the human head.

Treatment and Deposition of the Head

The head or the skull, regarded in many societies as the seat of personhood, ancestorhood, or the soul, is most familiar to archaeologists as a highly salient object recovered in burial contexts. On occasion, burials will be excavated in which the head is missing, as with the early Nasca in Peru (e.g., DeLeonardis 2000) and during the Natufian and Neolithic periods in the Levant and Anatolia, where the cranium, or even the entire skull, was often removed after decomposition of the interred body (e.g., Bienert et al. 2004; Bonogofsky 2001b, 2004, 2006a; Kenyon 1981; Rollefson 1983: 30). Unlike the smaller and more easily overlooked bones of the hands and feet, cranial elements are rarely missed in archaeological contexts unless preservation is exceedingly poor. Ethnographic research allows us to identify several reasons that skulls might be missing from interred bodies: for example, the head may serve as a trophy taken by victorious warriors, as a memento of the deceased recovered by kin, as a political symbol of power and terror, or as a modified object for daily or ritual use.

When re-created, the face of the trophy head or loved one is one of the most concrete images of social personhood (George 1996: 91). Ethnographic examples of mortuary rituals abound in which the skull, usually after soft tissue decomposition, is retrieved from an interment, often for use by relatives or members of the same ethnic group (e.g., Arnold and Hastorf 2008: 163–166; Bonogofsky 2001b: 16–35; Bonogofsky and Graham this volume; Goodale 1985; Keesing 1982). At an early Lapita burial site in Vanuatu, in Melanesia, each interred individual was missing his or her skull, with one exception. This individual was interred with three skulls on his chest. Strontium and oxygen isotope analysis of tooth enamel further singled out this individual as a recent immigrant to the island (Bentley et al. 2007). In this case, we may be looking at an individual with a special social status—that of immigrant—which is marked in burial through the inclusion of skulls.

Sometimes the skull was manually defleshed using special tools before
decomposition of the soft tissue, as it was during headhunting rituals in British New Guinea (e.g., see Bateson 1932: 408, 1958: 141) and the Torres Strait Islands (Bonney and Klegg this volume). Similarly, from the other end of the temporal spectrum, are three crania recovered from archaeological contexts in the Middle Awash Valley, Ethiopia, that had been intentionally manipulated, polished, cut, and scraped with sharp stone and obsidian tools when the head was still fresh. This early (but not earliest) evidence of defleshing of the human head dates to the intersection between the Acheulean and Middle Stone Age, 160,000–154,000 years ago (Clark et al. 2003). The three crania—belonging to an adult male, a probable adult male, and a juvenile, with clear evidence of cutting, decorating, and polishing (Clark et al. 2003)—are reminiscent of postmortem modifications found on skulls from New Guinea (White and Toth 1991). However, the earliest solid evidence for intentional defleshing of a human ancestor, offering research avenues for the investigation of the beginning of this mortuary practice, involved cut marks made by stone tools to the Middle Pleistocene Bodo cranium from Ethiopia when the bone was still fresh (White 1986).

Regardless of whether the skull was removed following soft tissue decomposition or whether the head was severed before burial, the head becomes a form of material culture—a commodity in some cases—taking on a life history of its own and entering the sociopolitical economy of the living (Appadurai 1986; Hoskins 1989; see Valentin and Rolland this volume for examples from Polynesia). In some cases, the skull may be used without alteration or decoration (Bonogofsky 2006a). More often, humans engage in extensive cultural and physical modification such as plastering, modeling, painting, and adorning with a variety of materials including lime plaster, clay, animal collagen, ochre, shell, and fiber. Sometimes these decorative materials were removed, at times leaving behind damage to the cranium in the form of striations, which can be viewed microscopically, if not macroscopically (e.g., Bonogofsky 2001a: fig. 1, 2001b: pl. 5h). The decorative materials in turn may inform on methods of preparation. For example, at Neolithic 'Ain Ghazal in Jordan, three lime plaster “masks” were found broken away—and buried separately—from the three crania over which they had been modeled (Griffin et al. 1998). Although the corresponding skulls were not found, imprints in the plaster indicated that the cranial cavities had been stuffed with grass and that a few teeth were intact in the maxilla at the time of modeling.

Examples of cranial plastering and modeling are known as well from Jericho (figure 1.1) and eight other Neolithic sites in the Middle East (Bienert 1991; Bonogofsky 2001b, 2003, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b; Özbeck 2009), most recently at Yiftah’el in Israel (Gedalyahu 2008) and at Tell Aswad in
Syria (Stordeur and Khawam 2007). The skulls from these sites continue to be interpreted by many of their excavators and other researchers as evidence of an ancestor cult (with an attendant mythology, discussed and refuted in Bonogofsky 2001b, 2002, 2003), while overlooking evidence to the contrary (e.g., Bonogofsky 2001a, 2001b). The ancient practice first made famous by Kathleen Kenyon in the 1950s has now been documented among several cultures of Eurasia (e.g., Kaiser 2003, 2006; Shishlina 2006; Vadetskaia 2006), among the early coastal inhabitants of Chile (Arriaza 1995), and among Middle to Late Woodland period burials in the Great Lakes region of North America (e.g., Clark 1984; Ossenberg 1964, cited in Wyckoff 1978; Speal 2006: fig. 9; see also Aufderheide 2009 for additional examples from around the globe).