In the X-files episode ‘Never Again’ (s4e13) a man becomes mentally controlled by his recently made pin-up girl tattoo named Betty. He is convinced that Betty is talking to him and forcing him to murder anyone who threatens her position as ‘his’ girl. As the show progresses we learn that there are no supernatural forces at play, but that the man’s violent and delusional behaviour was due to a hallucinatory substance in the colouring pigment added by the tattooist.

Although fictional, the theme of the episode shares a number of aspects with the real world of tattoos. Such imagery is not simply attached to the body to enhance appearance, but can also be considered integrated with the body and the self. A tattoo is something internal as well as external; it is both a materiality (the pigments) and an image. It is a part of the perception of the self but is also on public display, changing the appearance and affecting relations with other people. Thus, tattoos cannot be regarded as possessions in the same sense as an earring or some other object that is kept close to the body. They may share many aspects of such personal belongings, but by being a part of the body and difficult to remove, tattoos are often experienced as more personal and integrated. The materiality of the skin, the ‘canvas’, plays an important part here. The skin is not only a surface enclosing the body, but acts as a membrane, leaking from the
inside and absorbing from the outside. A tattoo can therefore work as a portal: a way to reach into the body and affect the psyche and organs as well as allowing the inside to transgress the body’s physical boundary.

From an archaeological point of view it is virtually impossible to identify who really owned or possessed an artefact in prehistory. Even in burial contexts with grave goods it is never certain what actually belonged to the deceased. The grave goods may be offerings or gifts placed in the graves by others and even the most intimate bijouterie may have been specially chosen for death and burial with little or no relation to the life of the individual (Fahlander 2003:72-86; 2009). Aside from the bones of the dead, body imagery is something that can be tied to a specific individual. Although tattoos are a rarity in the archaeological record, they are an interesting point of departure for discussing ownership and possessions of the body and its ‘second skin’: the materialities with which we surround ourselves.

In this text I will explore the possibilities for studying body imagery from a relational approach, which emphasizes the magical and agential aspects of body imagery and the materiality of the skin. This perspective will be explored drawing upon examples from the tattooed Iron Age bodies of the Pazyryk culture in southern Siberia.

**Relational possessions**

Possessions and ownership are by no means easily defined terms. There is an almost infinite range of ways to claim ownership (e.g. Earle 2000; Strang & Busse 2011; Relaki & Catapoti 2013). It does not have to be based on personal manufacture, kinship, or birthright. Ownership can also be claimed from dreams or visions, or submission to nonphysical entities such as the dead, spirits, or gods (Glaskin 2011). Some things are not considered possible or necessary to control or possess. Air and airspace, for example, became attractive to own only when flying machines became increasingly employed during the early twentieth century (Simonsen 2009). Another example concerns ownership over water and fish. Such questions became urgent only recently due to globalization processes and the need to regulate who and how much a nation or a group is allowed to harvest from the oceans. Because fish do not respect borders and sea water cannot be contained or controlled such questions have posed great difficulties
Modern global perspectives often collide with traditions of small scale societies that work with other types of ownership which can be based on knowledge, identity, aesthetics, and emotional attachments to place - as well as with imaginative and physical engagements with the environment (Strang 2011). To put the problem briefly: to possess, own, and control are not aspects that can be easily discussed in absolute terms of ‘to have and have not’.

One way to avoid the problems in archaeological context is perhaps to approach the question from a relational perspective rather than from a binary point of view. Marilyn Strathern (1991), Bruno Latour (2005), Tim Ingold (2006), and many others have pointed out how the human and the material tend to form nested relationships which blur questions of agency, power, and who owns whom. Things are not simply tools and means in social practice but have varying potential as mediators to initiate or alter a course of events (Fahlander 2008; 2012a; Carlile et al. 2013; Alberti et al. 2013). From a relational perspective we may thus investigate how relations between people, land, and materialities are constituted and maintained instead of focusing on who owns what. One interesting example is Allerton’s discussion of the Indian *sarong* (2007). The sarong, she argues, constitutes a grey zone between the self and the material world and is something more than simply a piece of clothing. With its capabilities to wrap, protect, and hide, it accentuates the properties of the skin and becomes integrated with the body and the self, almost like a ‘super skin’ in a cyborg-like manner (cf. Grosz 1990; Haraway 2008). There is obviously a tension here between the personal and the material on the one hand, and between the personal and the social on the other. From a general point of view, the body can be viewed as a nexus in this field of tension in which the skin, intimate clothing, and body imagery occupy special roles. Tattoos are interesting in these questions since they take part in a number of relationships – between body and self, between individual and group, between the material and immaterial, and between individual and ideology.

**Branding the body: tattooing and body modification in the past**

Contrary to popular belief, the Western tradition of tattooing is not only a result of encounters during the colonial period, but is a continuously employed practice throughout history (Caplan 2000:173;
Kuwahara 2005:51). Some indications of tattooing and branding in the past are indirect, for example in the form of adorned ceramic figurines from Palaeolithic Germany (40,000 BC), of the Jomon culture (10,000 BC–300 BC) in Japan, in the Arctic (c. 1500 BC), and from the Jama Coaque culture in Ecuador (500 BC – 500 AD), to mention a few (Schildkrout 2004:326; Kuwahara 2005:24). There are also surprisingly large numbers of mummified bodies with preserved tattoos from the past. One of the best known is probably the Bronze Age man Ötzi found in the Italian Alps, but tattooed bodies are also known from Ancient Egypt and Nubia, in Iron Age Asia and China, and from eleventh-century Peru (e.g. Gilbert 2000:11-17; Tassie 2009; Krutak 2013; Samadelli et al 2015). Written sources also inform us about the practice of tattooing among for example the ancient Chinese, the Greeks and Romans, and possibly also the Picts and Vikings (e.g. Gustafsson 2000; Jones 2000).

In modern Western practice, tattoos are associated with expressing personal identity or group membership (Steward 1990). In archaeology, tattooing has also mainly been discussed in terms of social and emblematic identity (e.g. Rudenko 1970:112-3; Polosmak 1999; Tassie 2009), but also to mark ownership and subjugation of slaves, criminals, and prisoners of war (Caplan 2000; Reed 2000:364; cf. Russel 2012:6; Beasley 2012). There is an interesting tension here between what is voluntary and forced on the one hand, and between ownership and submission on the other. For instance, even when tattooing is not used as a mark of ownership it may still be a sign of submission. It was probably not a coincidence that the early Christian pilgrims going to the Holy Land employed a practice used on prisoners and slaves when they chose to tattoo themselves to express their devotion to God (Jones 2000:29-31). Also certain Roman soldiers tattooed themselves to accentuate their allegiance to their commander or legion. The branding of the body can thus involve a degree of masochism, self-discipline, and subordination. Alfred Gell (1993:9) argues that tattooing works as a technology for the creation of political subjects and a material reproduction of social structures. In that sense tattooing is a typical exercise in ‘microphysics of power’ and shows how the body is directly involved in the field of ideologies (Foucault 1979:25; cf. Gell 1993:3).

From a social perspective tattoos can also carry more intricate esoteric aspects. In some traditions tattoos are believed to be
therapeutic. One example is the suggestion that Ötzi's tattoos marked spots for acupuncture therapy analogous to later Chinese traditions (Renaut 2004; Mallory & Mair 2000; Krutak 2013). Tattooed imagery can also be articulations of sympathetic and apotropaic magic (Tannenbaum 1987:693; Krutak 2000:180). In Thailand, Inuit and Burmese societies certain motifs are tattooed for protection against both real and supernatural dangers or as a means to enhance the body by 'borrowing' powers from elsewhere. In some Polynesian and Buddhist traditions it is argued that certain motifs protect against disease, attacks by animals, stroke, and cuts - even against bullets. This type of tattoo is perceived as a form of body armour (Tannenbaum 1987; Cummings 2012).

Similar ideas of esoteric magic are also found in the tattoo culture of modern sailors. A tattooed swallow, polar star, or compass rose is believed to help the person find their way at sea. The popular text 'Homeward bound' - often in combination with an illustration of a ship - is supposed to secure a safe homecoming (Clerk 2011:39-40). A classic apotropaic motif among sailors is to tattoo a pig and a rooster on each foot or on the calves, which was supposed to protect from drowning (Steward 1990:78). What is particularly interesting here is that the choice of animals has nothing to do with their natural properties or symbolism. They were chosen because in premodern times they were kept on board in wooden cages, which floated in the water and thus often survived a shipwreck. By tattooing these two animals on the body and alluding to this fact, the motif was considered to increase the chances of surviving if an accident should occur. The example is especially interesting because of the link between body imagery and the actual material circumstances in which they occur. It also exposes the limits of the iconological method towards imagery based on representation and symbolism.

The materiality of imagery: non-representational aspects

As both archaeologists and anthropologists have emphasized, we need to understand how things work in a particular social setting to be able to understand the roles they play (e.g. Henare et al. 2006; Watts 2013). It does not matter if the magic actually works or not, the main point is if it is believed to work. However, as the pig-rooster example underlines, a strictly iconographic approach is not always
suit to understanding the practice of tattooing and the materiality of the imagery. The actual pictures of a pig and a rooster do not help us to understand the meaning of the tattoo. We also need to discuss how imagery works on non-representational levels, and what the practice of inscribing the body can say about a particular society.

Traditionally, imagery of the past is often interpreted in terms of symbols and representations of something else. Recently, however, iconological and iconographical approaches have been criticized from non-representational standpoints for reducing imagery to merely a reflection of something ‘real’. Non-representational theories do not constitute a homogeneous project but focus on slightly different aspects of human practice (Anderson & Harrison 2010). In human geography, for instance, the point is to capture a wider range of all the embodied activity that goes on by humans and non-humans that cannot be fully captured by linguistic representation (Thrift 2007; cf. Lorimer 2005). In actor-network theory, non-representationalism is about preventing actual events from being translated into generalized sociological concepts and metaphors, such as ‘social forces’, ‘culture’, ‘structure’, ‘family’, ‘nation-states’, etc. (Latour 2005:4, 45, 174). In art history, a non-representational perspective means that imagery is not only viewed as a representation of a ‘real’ object, but is considered a materiality itself that does not necessarily borrow symbolism or properties from something ‘original’ (Mitchell 1996; Jones 2006; Fahlander 2012a). Even though the focus of non-representational theories differs, they all aspire to involve a greater sensibility for the non-verbal, embodied, and seemingly innocent materialities in the social process. Such a perspective fits the case of tattooing well because of the special circumstances behind body imagery discussed above.

To employ a non-representational stance towards tattoos means not primarily to view them as images of something, but as material articulations in their own respect. This involves taking the material aspects of the tattoos (the pigments and tools) and the ‘canvas’ (the skin), as well as the practice (puncturing), and spatial-temporal dimensions (place and sequence) into account. Even the sensuous aspects of pain can be of importance in order to understand the meaning of a certain motif (Gell 1993:33). Strictly materially, tattoos consist of pigments integrated in the skin. The pigments may, as described in the X-files episode above, involve ingredients that have
direct consequences. For instance, it has been suggested that some tattoos are actually the result of placing therapeutic substances in the wound to cure pain (van Dinter 2005:26; Krutak 2013). An example of an unintended effect of inking is the outbreaks of syphilis and other diseases occasionally instigated by contaminated ink and needles during the early days of tattooing. Somewhat ironically, there was also a widespread belief that tattoos actually protected against syphilis since red pigments often contained spirocheticide (mercuric sulphide), which is an old remedy against syphilis (Steward 1990:82). In reality the pigments gave no protection whatsoever against the disease, but the fact that it was believed to work, certainly affected the bearer in a way that is similar to magical logic (cf. Cummings 2012; Krutak 2013:32).

From a non-representational perspective, imagery is considered directly involved in social structuration and may, like any other materiality, comprise a potential to affect the course of events (Fahlander 2008; 2012b). This socialness of imagery can be viewed from different angles. Most well known is perhaps Gell’s (1998) discussion on secondary agency, that is, how the power of the artist can be prolonged through works of art. In Gell’s perspective secondary agency is about magic. It is believed, he argues, that a particularly well adorned canoe prow somehow ‘stores’ and prolongs the range of the artist’s powers. The same is true for the images on the body (Tannenbaum 1987:703; Gell 1993). Some motifs and styles are believed to carry ‘power’ and consequently affect the status and importance of the bearer (cf. Benson 2000; Cummings 2013).

Besides this ‘stored’ power of the artists, certain imagery can also be considered powerful in itself. Recently anthropologists and archaeologists have emphasized how things and imagery in other ontologies may not necessarily be seen as belonging to a sphere separated from the human domain (Henare et al. 2006; Alberti & Bray 2009; Alberti et al. 2011; cf. Ramos 2012). Hoolbrad (2006), for example, discusses the problem of understanding a certain powder, aché, which among Cuban diviners does not simply represent or symbolize ‘power’, but actually is considered to be power. In order to understand how materialities may work in such animist ontologies, he argues, we need ‘… to stop thinking of concepts and things as self-identical entities, and start imagining them as self-differential
motions’ (2006:219). Similar qualities can also be attributed to imagery. For instance, Gell argues that the tattooing of the godling Etua among the Marquesans was not a representation of a deity, but rather a ritual performance to bring the spirit into being – it was not an image of Etua, it was Etua (Gell 1998:191). A tattooed body is thus not necessarily only a decorated, branded, or subjected individual, but rather a body that is merged with, or accompanied by, subsidiary beings or spirit selves (Tannenbaum 1987; Gell 1993:8; Reed 2000:371; Schildkrout 2004:321).

To depict (create) something can also comprise a way of controlling something. Gengenbach’s (2003) study of tattooing in the Magude District of southern Mozambique, is an interesting example of this. The women’s tattoos, she argues, expressed an engagement with the colonial economy by incorporating images of modern objects such as scissors and flowerpots in the traditional motifs. These objects of modernity, he argues, were felt to be possessed through their representations on the skin (Gengenbach 2003:115).

Aside from actual representations of tangible objects, a similar line of reasoning can also be applied to the magical tattoos where entities and spirits are ‘trapped’ in the skin and tied to the body. This ‘materiality’ of imagery is thus not separable from the materiality of the canvas, the skin. Indeed, when it comes to tattoos, the medium is obviously a vital part of the message.

The materiality of the skin

The skin is a complex materiality (Benthien 2002). It is a wrapping that serves to protect the internal organs, but it also hides or conceals the real constitution of the body. As pointed out by Slavoj Žižek, most of us prefer not to think about the bone, blood, muscles, fluids, organs of varying viscosity under the skin (2007). The psychoanalyst Dieter Anzieu (1989) has worked along similar lines with the double-sided nature of the skin as interface between psyche and body and self and others. To Anzieu the skin is not really a seal; it contains several cavities (eyes, mouth, ears, anus etc.). The porous nature of the skin makes it less of a boundary, but is perhaps better seen as a membrane that leaks and absorbs fluids. From a material perspective the skin can thus be seen as a medium in which the inner self and the world outside communicate (cf. Benthien 2002:62).
Gell argues, partially based on Anzieu, that tattooing, which punctures the skin, can be viewed as a way of creating additional entrances into the body (1993:9). These material aspects of the skin are important to the practice of tattooing and how body imagery can be understood. It should be evident now that tattoos are not simply something exterior, something added to the body surface like a piece of clothing. Since tattoos consist of puncturing or cutting the skin, they can be considered facilitators or portals through which the inner can be reached and affected from the outside (cf. Anzieu 1989; Benson 2000:249). As Gell puts it: ‘The basic schema of tattooing is thus definable as the exteriorization of the interior which is simultaneously the interiorization of the exterior’ (1993:39). The ‘therapeutic’ tattoos found on Ötzi may have worked in this way rather than as simply marking important spots for acupuncture.

According to ethnographic accounts, the location of the tattoo may also prove informative about its primary purpose (cf. Gell 1993:35; Iwe 2013:92). Terence Turner has written about the body modifications of an indigenous group in the Amazon. In this particular case extremities such as hands and feet that come in contact with the ‘outer world’ are contrasted to other parts of the body (trunk, major muscles, etc.) that are more closely associated with the interior of the body and its organs. Consequently these different body parts are painted in different colours (Turner 1980:123). In Polynesia, Gell has recorded ideas of appropriate places for different tattoos. The neck, for instance, is a special place between the head and the body and tattoos placed here can work as to ward off evil spirits entering the head (1993:225). Gell also noted that sensitive areas of the body are not necessarily avoided, but rather the contrary; the intensity of the pain is an important aspect relative to the power of the tattoo (1993:33). Although it is not possible to make any general statements of the placement of tattoos from a few anthropological accounts, it nonetheless follows the logic put forward by Anzieu and others and may be interesting to pursue further. The location of the tattoo may perhaps offer a hint of their main purpose as, for example, portals between inside and outside or as enhancers of certain organs and limbs. I will illustrate some of these aspects here by briefly discussing the meaning and materiality of the Siberian Iron Age Pazyryk visual culture.
Ownership and relations in Pazyryk visual culture

Much of our knowledge of body modification is for obvious reasons based on historical texts and contemporary studies. The relevance and feasibility of investigating the more esoteric aspects in an archaeological context are less explored (but see Parker Pearson 1999:64-5; Joyce 2005:145; Knappett 2006). In the remainder of the text I wish to discuss some of the ideas mentioned above concerning relational aspects and ownership, drawing on the tattoo practices of the Pazyryk of the Altai Mountains area of southern Siberia. The Pazyryk are a loosely defined collective that was a part of a larger group of mountain pastoralists from the sixth to third centuries BC (see e.g. Parzinger 2008 and Davis-Kimball 2000 for a general background). The name Pazyryk does not sustain critical scrutiny as an ethnic label, but will suffice here for convenience of the discussion.

The Pazyryk culture became known worldwide after excavations by Sergei Rudenko (1970) during the first half of the twentieth century. Five large barrows, or kurgans, were uncovered. These kurgans consisted of buried log-built chambers covered by stone cairns. The majority have been disturbed and looted, but despite that they have produced impressive finds. Due to the permafrost much of the organic material was preserved, including textiles, leather, and wooden objects, and even a number of bodies with visible tattoos. One of the best preserved burials excavated by Rudenko is kurgan 2, which contained a tattooed man accompanied by ten horses and a wealth of objects. The burial is dated to between c. 350 - 250 BC (Rudenko 1970:83). Subsequent excavations have increased the numbers of preserved bodies, of which the so-called ‘Ice Maiden’ of Ukok is the best known (e.g. Polosmak 1999; 2001; Francfort et al. 2006; Dashkovskiy & Usova 2011).

From the preserved bodies it appears that both men and women were tattooed, primarily on arms and legs – with a few exceptions of motifs that stretch out over the chest and the back. The most common tattoo motifs were fantasy creatures or composite ‘monsters’ combining the bodies of felines and birds (fig. 1). The man in grave 2 is tattooed on both arms and one leg (the other leg is in a poor state of preservation). His right leg shows what appear to be a fish and a row of four running goat-like animals (Rudenko 1970:112-3). The tattoos on his arms consist solely of griffins and fantasy creatures.
Fig. 1. The tattoos of the man from kurgan 2 (a), the so-called ‘Ice Maiden’, Ak-Alakha 3-1 (b), and a man from Verb-Kaldzbin 2-1 (c).
(Source: Polosmak 2001: 229.)
This individual also has markings on his back that are similar to those found on Ötzi, which may have functioned as portals for therapeutic means (Rudenko 1970:112; Krutak 2000:184). Women were tattooed in a similar manner, as shown in the case of the ‘Ice Maiden’ from Ukok (fig. 1). Unfortunately neither of her legs are preserved and her right arm is in a poor state, but on her left arm similar fantasy creatures are found, most notably a deer-like animal with a griffin’s beak tattooed on her shoulder (Polosmak 1999:153). From the preserved textiles in the burials it is evident that both men and women wore clothes that covered most of the skin except for hands and face. The fact that the woman also has a tattoo on her thumb is interesting since it is the only currently known example of a tattoo which remained visible when the person was fully clothed.

The Pazyryk visual culture has generally been approached from a culture historical perspective in terms of origins and influences. The meaning and symbolism of the imagery has been discussed largely from an art historical perspective drawing inferences from other better known cultural contexts (e.g. Cheremisin 2009:92). The tattoos have thus mainly been seen as representative, displaying mythological thought or functioning as social and emblematic markers. For example, Kondarov suggested in the 1920s that reindeer and bulls were totemic, lions and griffins military insignia, and that birds represented the souls of dead people (Cheremisin 2009:87). More recently, Gala Argent has suggested that some motifs, especially those depicting struggles between animals, are direct representations of actual events (Argent 2010:168-9). She also re-interpreted some of the tattooed fantasy creatures as ‘masked horses’ (2013).

Such a representational and symbolic perspective may, however, mask some interesting aspects of Pazyryk visual culture. Pazyryk imagery found on rock panels, textiles, leather, and wooden objects is in general naturalistic, consisting predominantly of animals (interpreted as deer, lions, goats, roosters, fish, and so forth). The majority of the tattoos, however, although stylistically similar, mainly depict fantasy creatures and monsters such as griffins, of which some are exclusively seen on the skin (cf. Trishina 2003:40). This distinction, taken together with the probability that clothes normally covered the tattoos, suggests that the tattoos probably were not primarily meant to be seen by others. Even if there were instances when the tattoos were exposed, it is nonetheless reasonable to assume that their
main function was not as ethnic markers or military insignia (but see Iwe 2013). Instead, these special non-realistic motifs of hybrid creatures indicate that the tattoos may have more to do with esoteric magic. The griffins, for example, may have been charged with apotropaic and/or animist powers in order to protect, help, and assist the tattooed individual while fighting or hunting (cf. Parker Pearson 1999:65; van Dinter 2005:28). In Gell’s Polynesian examples, tattoos were often placed where it was considered most beneficial. The siting of the tattoos mainly on arms and legs may thus support a magic-related interpretation. It is also interesting that the type of tattoos differs depending on its placement on the back, arms, or legs. The arms are covered with fantasy creatures while the legs also include naturalistic motifs. One interpretation of the ‘naturalistic tattoos’ on the legs of the Pazyryk bodies can be viewed as an attempt to ‘borrow’ properties of the animal being portrayed. For instance, the large fish and the series of running goats on the right leg of the man in burial 2 may have been intended to borrow powers while swimming and climbing/running. The location of the Pazyryk tattoos on arms and legs seems to exclude a function as portals and ways to communicate with interior organs as discussed by Anzieu and Turner (with the exception of the possible therapeutic lines tattooed on the back of the man in kurgan 2). Pain is always a part of tattooing, but in this case there is no evidence that especially sensitive areas have been chosen.

**Among horses and men: Hybrids and cross-species transformations?**

There are some interesting associations between the tattoos and the decoration of the horse equipment with which the some Pazyryk individuals were buried. In addition to the naturalistic motifs on the cloth and saddle-bags (one shows a type of fish that is very similar to the one on the man’s leg in kurgan 2), some of the horse harnesses are covered with the same type of fantastic beasts and eagle- and lion-griffins motifs as on the tattooed bodies (Rudenko 1970:233, 256-7; Cheremisin 2009:89, fig. 2). Since the griffin motif is mainly found in these two contexts, it suggests some sort of intimate relation between the two species. In this case the shared imagery of humans and horses may shed a little light on how we can interpret the burial interments as gifts or possessions, or something that expresses relations.
The horse in Pazyryk culture is not just any animal. Argent (2010; 2013) has recently discussed the special status of the horse in Pazyryk culture. Based on general experiences of riding and training of horses, Argent emphasizes the intersubjectivity in the human-horse relations and how riding and breeding inevitably leads to personalization and individualization of horses (2010:161). Horses are products of their experiences and tend to develop different personalities over time, which the rider needs to acknowledge in order to control the animal. These reciprocal relationships and shared experiences made the horse more of a participant in the co-creation of the Pazyryk culture and identity. Consequently, she argues that the many horses in the Pazyryk kurgans should not simply be seen as burial gifts from other chiefs or allies as suggested by e.g. Francfort et al. (2006:122-3), but as individuals partially analogous to humans. Her argument is supported by the way each horse has been buried with individual gear and adornments. In the Kurgan 1 burial, where ten horses were

Fig. 2. Griffin details from horse harnesses found in kurgan burials of the Altai region. (Source: Cheremisin 2009: 89.)
interred, no two had the same equipment. Argent makes a strong point here in suggesting that this could have been viewed as a mutual relation in which the one species supported the other. Apparently, these horses were cared for and perhaps regarded as co-participants in the Pazyryk community.

The griffin motif shared between horses and humans thus adds yet another dimension to the human-horse relation of the Pazyryk. One possibility is that the horse may have been perceived as a hybrid creature in a manner similar to the way the tattooed creatures added spiritual powers or entities to the body. In fact, there are indications of such cross-species transformational ontology in the Pazyryk material and visual culture. Apparently both the human and the horse could transform into a third horned entity (cf. Francfort et al. 2006:123). In a wall-hanging from one of the graves, a human is depicted with antlers and one of the horses in the burial was equipped with fake horns (fig. 3). Although we should not take these illustrations as directly
representational, they nonetheless hint at less of a binary ontology between a human and an animal sphere or distinctly separate species. The griffins and the horned attributes suggest that the idea of transformation across species was by no means foreign or strange in Pazyryk culture (cf. Losey et al. 2011; cf. Carrithers et al. 2011). This particular shared ability of shapeshifting thus strengthens Argent’s hypothesis that the horses cannot easily be dismissed as burial goods – owned by the buried man or given to him by other ‘chiefs’. However, no matter what status the horses had in Pazyryk culture, they were nonetheless killed by a blow on their head and put in the graves of humans. The relation between people and horses may have been intimate, but there can be little doubt that horses were a subordinate species, even if they possessed individual personalities. Nonetheless the special type of imagery and transgressional powers they seem to share complicates the nature of the human-horse relations in Pazyryk culture. In short: horses could be owned, but were not necessarily regarded as possessions.

The Pazyryk example thus illustrates many of the points discussed above about the esoteric and magical dimensions of body imagery as well as the difficulties concerning ownership and submission. The shared visual culture of horses and humans may not be simply symbolic markers emphasizing their intimate relation; perhaps the tattoos and horse gear actually made such hybrids possible on an ontological level. Why should the griffins otherwise need to be tattooed (integrated) onto the skin and not simply added to the clothes? Kondarov may thus have been correct in principle when suggesting multiple functions for the imagery – although not only on a symbolical level. It is nonetheless important to add that the non-representational perspective promoted here does not entirely replace iconographical and symbolic approaches. After all, it is quite impossible not to interpret imagery at some level. There is, however, a difference in perceiving a figure as e.g. a zoomorph on the one hand, and to specifically interpret it as a deer or a horse on the other. It is interesting that Argent has reached similar conclusion about the hybrid relations between Pazyryk horses and humans from an iconographical standpoint. A difference is that her interpretation hinges on the credibility of the representational re-interpretation of some motifs as ‘masked horses’, while the argument in this paper is based on a less anthropocentric perspective that involves both material and figurative relations.
Viewing the body imagery from a non-representational and material perspective makes it possible to discuss the meanings of the practice and the choice of motifs on more intricate levels and to trace different types of relations between the human and the non-human.

Summary

This paper has explored the boundaries between the body and the outside world from the concepts of possession and ownership focusing on body imagery. Tattoos may at first seem like a clear-cut example of appropriation and ownership on the one hand, or expressing identity and ethnic affiliation on the other. However, upon closer inspection, the relation between the body, the self, and the imagery becomes complicated. The dual function of the skin as both a wrapping of the internal body and a social canvas involves it in a range of different relations between the body, the psyche, and the outside world. The tattooed skin can be seen as a superskin in a manner similar to how Allerton views the sarong: an intimate, yet social, surface of the body. However, as Anzieu, Gell, Schildkrout, and many others have noted, tattoos can also work inwards to the body interior and the psyche. In addition, tattoos are both material (pigments and scar tissue) and have a pictorial content, which makes them a quite special materiality in contrast to clothes or any other personal items. The intimate-social double-sidedness of tattooed skin makes it difficult to discuss body imagery in simple terms of ownership and possessions. They are always a bit of both: the social canvas can be imposed on the bearer either by brute force (branding) or seemingly voluntarily by ideology and tradition (emblematic). Even in cases of personal choice, the lifelong durability of the tattooed imagery makes the bearer inevitably subjected to the imagery. Even though the imagery may be covered and hidden, the knowledge of its presence makes it difficult to ignore. Body modification in terms of tattooing emphasizes the conundrum of whether you really own your body or not, emphasizing how ownership is fundamentally relational, emerging from relations not only between individuals but also with non-human entities.

It is also argued that nothing about tattoos is ‘just for decoration’: body imagery is always in some way or another related to something else. By approaching body imagery from a non-representational
perspective, the relation between pictorial and material content is further complicated. From an ontology where the human and the non-human are not considered a dichotomy, imagery may, along with things, be considered ‘powerful’ or animated. Such an aspect of body imagery is exemplified here by the visual culture of the Iron Age Pazyryk nomads. The Pazyryk tattoos are argued to have multiple functions and effects. They may have worked as to signify ethnicity (emblematic) or emphasize social distinctions, but also as esoteric devices offering apotropaic properties, as well as providing a bridge between different species. The tattooed imagery on (in) the bodies was thus not only made to illustrate or represent relationships, but may actually have been portals for enabling relations in order to create a hybrid and fluid relations between different bodies and species.

References


