

ENGENDERING ARCHAEOLOGY

Women and Prehistory



Edited by
Joan M. Gero and Margaret W. Conkey

Engendering Archaeology

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and Margaret W. Conkey*



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List of Contributors

Elizabeth M. Brumfiel, Department of Anthropology & Sociology,
Albion College, Albion, MI 49224, USA.

Cheryl P. Claassen, Department of Anthropology, Appalachian State
University, Boone, NC 28608, USA.

Margaret W. Conkey, Department of Anthropology, University of
California, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA.

Joan M. Gero, Department of Anthropology, University of South
Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208, USA.

Russell G. Handsman, American Indian Archaeological Institute, Box
260, Washington, CT 06793, USA.

Christine A. Hastorf, Department of Anthropology, University of
Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA.

Thomas L. Jackson, 740 East Bel Mar Drive, La Salva Beach, CA 95076,
USA.

Henrietta L. Moore, Department of Social Anthropology, London
School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC2, UK.

Susan Pollock, Department of Anthropology, S.U.N.Y. Binghamton,
Binghamton, NY 13901, USA.

Janet D. Spector, Department of Anthropology, University of Minnesota,
Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA.

Ruth E. Tringham, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA.

Patty Jo Watson and Mary C. Kennedy, Department of Anthropology, Washington University, St Louis, MO 63130, USA.

Rita P. Wright, Department of Anthropology, New York University, New York, NY 10003, USA.

Alison Wylie, Department of Philosophy, University of Western Ontario, London Ontario, N6A 3K7, Canada.

"I would like to know what life was like ten thousand years ago," Pepe was saying. "I think of it often. Nature would have been the same. The same trees, the same earth, the same clouds, the same snow falling in the same way on the grass and thawing in the spring. People exaggerate the changes in nature so as to make nature seem lighter." He was talking to a neighbour's son who was on leave from the army. "Nature resists change. If something changes, nature waits to see whether the change can continue, and, if it can't, it crushes it with all its weight! Ten thousand years ago the trout in the stream would have been exactly the same as today."

"The pigs wouldn't have been!"

"That's why I would like to go back! To see how things we know today were first learnt. Take a *chevreton*. It's simple. Milk the goat, heat the milk, separate it and press the curds. Well, we saw it all being done before we could walk. But how did they once discover that the best way of separating the milk was to take a kid's stomach, blow it up like a balloon, dry it, soak it in acid, powder it and drop a few grains of this powder into the heated milk? I would like to know how the women discovered that!"

John Berger, *Pig Earth* (1979)

Preface

A volume using explicitly feminist social theory in archaeological research is long overdue. By the mid 1980s it was no secret that archaeology was lagging far behind our sister disciplines in getting even exploratory research about women onto our analytical and interpretive stages, where women are explicitly sought as sociocultural subjects. Conkey and Spector's call for an archaeology of gender ("Archaeology and the Study of Gender"), a call that had been circulating in manuscript form for some years prior to publication in volume 7 of *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory* (1984), was recognized both as compelling and timely, and it seemed certain, after so forceful an agenda had been set, that articles, chapters, and books would begin pouring out to introduce gender as a fundamental social construct. Surely archaeologists would now begin to inspect gender dynamics in different socio-historical contexts, to recognize androcentric concepts and their role in keeping women out of prehistory, and to populate the past with engendered women and men. We were amazed that these vacuums still existed three years later when the editors of Basil Blackwell's "Social Archaeology" series approached us to work on such a piece.

In fact, the enormity of the task of compiling the first such volume was immediately obvious. There was simply no archaeological literature to cite as contributions, nor was there any defined circle of experts to fall back upon. The same troublesome assumptions that incited Conkey and Spector's critique were still being used unquestioningly in the formulation and interpretation of archaeological hypotheses. A tiny smattering of literature identified the *existence* of women in prehistory, or determined whether (all?) women's status was "high" or "low" in different societies, at the same time that the popular but essentially unsubstantiated idea of powerful neolithic goddesses was gaining popularity outside the canon of professional archaeological research. Women's roles in biosocial,

evolutionary change during hominization received some attention (though not from archaeologists), but by and large prehistory was still a largely unchallenged male territory, inhabited by "populations" who, when sexed, continued to play out contemporary gender roles (women quietly fulfilling domestic obligations; men visibly taking on the rest of what people did in prehistory). The situation clearly called for help. If an archaeology of gender were to emerge, it would necessitate learning how to make women (and by implication, engendered social life) an object of archaeological study, as well as familiarizing ourselves with the theoretical and epistemological resources available to this endeavor.

We recognized the need for a collective effort to take on these challenges, and in 1986 began organizing a research conference, inviting researchers who had a solid and demonstrated working knowledge either of specific classes of archaeological data (e.g. ceramics, botanical remains, shellfish) and/or of particular perspectives in prehistory (e.g. complex hunter-gatherers, early agricultural societies). Participants all agreed to become involved in restructuring their own data, or data with which they had long familiarity, or in reformulating familiar research questions along radically new lines (although many confessed they hadn't a clue as to how to begin). The emphasis was deliberately placed on *prehistoric* analyses rather than on ethnoarchaeological, historic, or ethnohistoric studies since prehistoric contexts presented the greatest methodological challenges to our androcentric thinking, and all researchers were charged with producing tightly focused case studies in which gender was an explicit analytic category.

We have much gratitude to express for the success of the "Women and Production in Prehistory" conference, held at the Wedge Plantation in Georgetown, in the South Carolina low country, in April 1988. Both the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the National Science Foundation supported the costs of travel and of our five days together; Basil Blackwell publishers contributed additional support to make our stay nicer. Our discussants, Henrietta Moore (Cambridge University), Irene Silverblatt (University of Connecticut), and Peter White (University of Sydney) were superb teachers and critics, generously introducing us to new literatures and perspectives, gently reminding us when we slid back to old ways of thinking.

Our gratitude also goes to the University of South Carolina for allowing us to use the Wedge facilities, to the helpful staff at the Wedge, and to Robin Burke and Kimberly Grimes who made enormous contributions to arranging the travel and the hospitality at the Wedge. Pat Watson deserves special praise and hallelujahs for her salvation address. Our days of intense exchange, isolated in the sultry spring of the

South, proved intoxicating and invigorating beyond expectation: we left with our heads ringing and our imaginations stretched.

The fact that many chapters in this volume are substantially different from the drafts read at the Wedge suggests how much we learned in the course of this endeavor. There are also two papers read at the Wedge that we are sorry not to be able to include here: Doug Price's contribution on gender differences in bone chemistry as a result of diet was the only paper that proceeded directly and entirely from empirical sex differences in skeletal materials; the time conflicts that prevented its inclusion here are regrettable although related material is partially covered in Hastorf's chapter on food. Likewise, we are sorry not to include Prudence Rice's chapter on pottery, and applaud Rita Wright's willingness to attempt her pottery chapter without benefit of the Wedge conference and discussion.

Many of us read updated versions of our "Wedge papers" in a 1989 symposium at the 54th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in Atlanta and felt the profound changes in the year that had passed: now we could see an audience for our ideas, and we could recognize how far our theoretical, epistemological, and methodological thinking had evolved in our reworkings of our papers. The comments of SAA discussants Tom Patterson and Linda Cordell were another source of inspiration for the final versions of these papers.

We hope that some of our excitement can be felt in these pages which could not have come about without yet another support team. Dorothy O'Dell and Deannie Stevens in the Department of Anthropology at the University of South Carolina helped with numerous administrative details, both for the conference and the volume, and Kathy Bolen worked tirelessly on the details of getting the volume into shape and especially hard on the index, which we greatly appreciate.

Finally, thanks are due to Stephen Loring and Les Rowntree for their active and tacit engagement with this project and their contributions to household production and management; even without typing the manuscript for us, their support was palpable.

Joan M. Gero
Margaret W. Conkey

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Part I

Considerations for an Archaeology of Gender

Tensions, Pluralities, and Engendering Archaeology: An Introduction to Women and Prehistory

Margaret W. Conkey and Joan M. Gero

The open future rests on a new past.

Donna Haraway, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (1978)

The title of this volume is *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory*; the chapters are intended to contribute to the study of gender systems in both prehistory and the practice of archaeology. Although both men and women have gender, we have chosen to focus on women as a means to engender the past because we believe that to take one – and one previously neglected – sex/gender as an entry point into the study of past human societies is particularly effective, challenging, and supported by a now substantial interdisciplinary literature.

In the past two decades, feminist thinking has profoundly transformed the study of sociocultural subjects in virtually every field it has touched, even where researchers have not all embraced a feminist perspective. The development of critical traditions and scholarship has impacted both the content and method of social and historical knowledge, grappling with what has been recognized (Westkott 1979: 424–5) as an appalling absence of concepts that tap women's experience, a limited and limiting view of women as an unchanging essence, and a deeply permeated narrowness to the concept of the human being reflected in limited ways of understanding human behavior.

The transformation of the social and historical sciences because of feminist-inspired critiques and scholarship (cf. Farnham 1987) has proceeded rapidly, and encompasses a multiplicity of approaches and studies. In anthropology alone there are studies that recognize and detail androcentrism and male bias (e.g. Ardener 1975; Scheper-Hughes 1985);

studies that reclaim women not merely as objects but as subjects (e.g. in Reiter 1975); and critical reworkings of the category "woman" and a reorientation of research towards the study of gender and difference (e.g. Lamphere 1987; Moore 1988). Within anthropology, sociocultural anthropologists have successfully employed gender as an analytical concept throughout these 20 years (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1986; Ardener 1977; Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Dwyer 1978; Friedl 1975; Gailey 1987b; Goodale 1971; Kessler and MacKenna 1978; LaFontaine 1978; Lutz 1988; MacCormack and Strathern 1980; Ong 1988; Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Reiter 1975; Rogers 1975; Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Sacks 1979; Sanday 1981; Silverblatt 1988; Strathern 1972; Weiner 1976; Yanagisako 1979).

Archaeology is now in a position to benefit greatly from these developments. All along, inquiries into prehistoric human social life (e.g. Slocum 1975; Tanner 1981; Tanner and Zihlman 1976; Zihlman 1978); and into archaeological subjects and contexts (e.g. Barstow 1978; Rorhlich-Leavitt 1977) have figured prominently in the framing and elaboration of feminist critiques, even without the involvement of practicing archaeologists. Questions about "origins" (of sexual divisions of labor, of gender asymmetries), about historical trajectories (women and the rise of states), about transformations of gender relations (e.g. with colonization) have figured prominently in the literature, even if archaeologists themselves were not addressing (or even framing) such questions (e.g. Cucchiari 1981; Etienne and Leacock 1980; Gailey 1987a, b; Leacock 1981, 1983; Rapp 1977; Silverblatt 1987). Between the literature of popular culture (e.g. Davis 1971; Eisler 1987; Morgan 1972), which quickly stepped in to do what archaeologists themselves were not doing (after diLeonardo forthcoming), and the implicitly gendered (and gender-biased) archaeologies (see Conkey and Spector 1984; Conkey with Williams, forthcoming) that have been put forth, there is a diverse but problematic corpus of views on women and men in prehistory and on what constitutes an archaeological perspective on gender.

But archaeology can now take up the challenge of engendering the past in explicit and theoretically informed ways, given, for example, a developing body of theory that addresses such questions as the centrality of gender to class formation (e.g. Ryan 1981), to the workings of political power (e.g. Scott (1988), to the organization of production and units of production (e.g. Hartsock 1983), or to the uses of space (e.g. Ardener 1981; Moore 1986) and the development of technological systems (e.g. McGaw 1982, 1989). As Wylie (this volume) so cogently argues, the general theoretical resources exist to make women and gender explicit foci of archaeological study, and, as well, we are in a position to draw from and contribute to emergent theoretical developments within