



RESEARCH FRONTIERS IN ANTHROPOLOGY

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Introduction to Archaeology

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Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458
Simon & Schuster Custom Publishing
Needham Heights, Massachusetts 02194

CORE Anthropology Series Editor: Eric M. Kenney
CORE Anthropology Series Production: Kari Callaghan Mazzola
Cover design and artwork: K.E. Roehr



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A Simon & Schuster Company
Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0-536-02283-6

Prentice-Hall International (UK) Limited, *London*
Prentice-Hall of Australia Pty. Limited, *Sydney*
Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., *Toronto*
Prentice-Hall Hispanoamericana, S.A., *Mexico*
Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited, *New Delhi*
Prentice-Hall of Japan, Inc., *Tokyo*
Simon & Schuster Asia Pte. Ltd., *Singapore*
Editora Prentice-Hall do Brasil, Ltda., *Rio de Janeiro*

PREFACE

Usually when we hear or read about research, we find out about the results—what researchers think they have found out, what they think they now know. Rarely do we get to understand the process. Where do ideas come from? How does an idea get transformed into a research project? What was exciting? What was disappointing? What is the person like behind the process?

The purpose of the *Research Frontiers* series is to make research more alive for students like yourself who are just beginning to get to know anthropology. Our section on “Researchers at Work” includes some pieces that are quite autobiographical and others that focus on research projects. We left it up to our authors to choose what they wanted to write about. After all, we want you to get a feeling for how researchers vary, not just how research varies, in anthropology.

Our section on “Controversies” also tries to convey a feeling for the research process, but each piece is focused on an important controversy rather than on an individual researcher. We have asked our contributors to deal with the following questions: What are the different theories or opinions in this controversy? What is the evidence, if any, for each side? In their opinion, what kinds of new research might resolve the controversy? Or what rethinking might resolve it? By choosing controversies, where obviously there is no agreement as yet in the research community, we hope to convey a feeling for the dynamics of research and the excitement of controversy.

Our section on “Social Problems” suggests how anthropology has been used, and may be used, to understand and solve some of the important social problems that afflict our world today. Some of the problems we know more about than others. We have asked our contributors to try to suggest what we know and don’t know about the global dimensions of the problem, the variation from society to society or from region to region, the possible causes and consequences of the problem, and what new research or rethinking might be done.

In these ways, we hope you will come to appreciate what anthropology does, and what it can do.

Carol R. Ember
Melvin Ember

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GENDER AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Cheryl Claassen

As I entered college in 1971, the Women's movement was generating much activity on campus and in the field of anthropology, my major. As I read my archaeology books I began collecting ways to identify women in the archaeological record. The sexing of skeletons was one obvious way in which archaeologists were able to identify women. Vitamin C storage is higher in women's vertebrae and this difference had been used in a European study to sex poorly preserved skeletons. The types of grave goods could also suggest the sex of those buried. Further, ethnography suggested that the size of the house pattern indicated if a community was matrilineal (the new couple lived with the family of the wife). And archaeologists argued that spatial clustering of design elements on women's or men's tools could differentiate matrilineal from patrilineal societies (inheritance was transmitted through either the mother or the father). My advisor in graduate school told me that comparing the chemistry of children's teeth with those of adult women and men in a burial population could tell us which parent married in and which parent was resident in the region from birth.¹

I presented all these possibilities for identifying women in the classes I taught as a graduate student in the late 1970s. During this time I contemplated the difference in learning atmospheres I encountered during my schooling. At the University of Arkansas during the early 1970s most of the graduate student assistantships went to women, the state archaeologist was a woman, several of the affiliated field archaeologists were women, the crews often had as many or more women than men, and many of the graduate students were women. At Harvard in the mid-1970s through the early 1980s—my graduate school years—there was one woman archaeologist on the faculty and about five women graduate students. It was only later that I learned that it is typical to find more women in state universities than in private ones. Ironically, my undergraduate mentor was a man and my graduate mentor a woman.

As I considered the relationship of gender to the current field of archaeology, I worked on a research project that explored the relationship of gender to archaeological study. In the mid-1980s I was working on a particularly pesky problem in the prehistory of the eastern United States. About two thousand to seven thousand years ago there was a phenomenon known as the Shell Mound Archaic, in which freshwater shells were often mounded on the landscape along the Green River in Kentucky and the Ohio, Tennessee, Savannah, and St. John rivers. These mounds are striking not only for their size and the high density of artifacts but also for their use as cemeteries. Why were these mounds begun and

why had shell mounding ceased? The traditional explanation was that this mounding behavior began because shells were available during that time but not before seven thousand years ago nor after two thousand years ago.

But I had my doubts about this explanation. Freshwater shellfish occur today in hundreds of rivers, streams, and lakes and they have been intensively commercially exploited since 1891, first for the shell button industry and now for the Japanese cultured pearl industry. If the shell mounds were simply food debris and the timing of the shell mounds was simply because of the presence of shellfish in the rivers, why had these mounds not appeared along hundreds of rivers in the eastern United States? I found a few other explanations in the literature of the 1950s and 1960s—humans had harvested all the shellfish, or people migrated out of the Green and Tennessee river valleys. Again the question arose as to why these people had not moved to other rivers and resumed shellfish harvesting there.

In 1985 I had one of those cherished moments in science when a totally new awareness of my research problem came to me—the environmental explanation, the overharvesting explanation, and the migration explanation all implied the same social consequences. Assuming, as do most archaeologists, based on ethnographic examples, that women and children did the shellfishing, these three explanations meant that the end of shellfishing impacted the schedules and workload of women and children. What if shellfishing and shell mounding stopped not because of environmental reasons but because of social reasons? What if women and children *decided* not to harvest shellfish anymore?

This simple change in thinking from women and children being passive to women and children being agents of change in the course of prehistoric events freed my imagination. New hypotheses based on stereotypical concepts of gendered activities flowed easily. Why would women stop shellfishing? Could domesticated plants now be taking women's time, providing an equivalent source of nutrition? If men were the shellfishers, why would men stop shellfishing? Maybe shellfish flesh was used as fish bait and they changed from baited fishing techniques to unbaited techniques, such as nets. There were other hypotheses as well. In each hypothesis it was not the gender of the actor that needed further research but rather the implied activity—what was the evidence for the presence of domesticated plants 3,500 years ago, when most of the mounding activity ceased along the Tennessee or Green or

Savannah rivers? What was the evidence for fishing technology 4,500 years ago and 3,000 years ago? Thinking about gender was key in this process for it forced me to conceptualize real people—their decisions, their workloads, their communities, their activities. I imagined that not all women were shellfishers, that some simply did not like the food and spent their time in other activities while other women and children excelled at it, earning the respect of their neighbors and kin.

In tackling the research problem I have just described, as well as in any other research endeavor, imagination is a key element for the scientist. The point of the various academic degrees in anthropology is to bring the student to a common understanding of the culture history, the key pieces of research, the contemporary ideas. While this academic training has many merits, it also has the unwanted side effect of standardizing the hypotheses, theories, and references we use to solve research problems. Sexism has a similar impact: It standardizes the way we view women and men, now and in the past. While sexism has an immediate, often painful impact on men and women in our modern societies, there is a subtler influence on scientists: Sexism limits our imaginations. Once the imagination is freed, new hypotheses and theories will emerge to shake loose entrenched ideas and tabled problems.

Thinking of women and children as agents of cultural change—in fact, thinking of men as agents of cultural change—was out of fashion among most archaeologists from about 1970 until the mid-1980s. During those years most archaeologists thought that the dominant factor in culture history was the ecosystem—that the changes and challenges brought by the physical environment could and did explain everything that we saw in the archaeological record. But beginning in the 1980s a noticeable number of archaeologists began positing that people could and did cause change—in their own kin groups and in their communities. Gender, class, and ethnic struggles have assumed a new level of respect from archaeologists.²

For some archaeologists the task at hand has been to make women in the past visible, or to devise methods whereby gender can be deduced from objects.³ But many feminist archaeologists want the enterprise to result in more than the reclamation of past women. Feminist archaeologists have the goal of exploring past social relationships, specifically those between social groups that differ in age, gender, status, occupation, class, or ethnicity.

Increasingly, feminist archaeologists are concerned with our modern relationship to our voluntary audience and to the descendants of our subjects. Feminist archaeologists are striving to be more inclusive of past and present peoples, particularly in how they write about the past.⁴

The impact of feminism and gender studies on the discipline has been startling but mirrors that on every other academic field. Feminist positivists—those who believe that there is a knowable past if one correctly employs the scientific method—have exposed biases that not only inhibited the scientist's imagination but resulted in the obstruction of the work of science, even to the point of having obscured basic research simply because the data were collected by a woman. Feminist poststructuralists—those who view humans primarily as symbol makers and users—have questioned the Western privileging of words over signs and the automatic acceptance of the male/female opposition. Postprocessual feminist archaeologists—those placing social interactions, particularly involving gender, as central to understanding cultural changes in the past—have done serious damage to the tenets of ecological determinism and even to postprocessual analyses generated by men who have ignored gender issues.⁵ Feminist research has shown that every form of social organization archaeologists have typically used—class, tribe, state, sex, egalitarian, craft specialist, etc.—needs to be redefined incorporating gender and the conclusions drawn from their application reexamined. And the endeavor is growing.⁶

While some people would say that gender is a new topic in archaeology, in fact, gender has always been present. Book and article titles talk about man the hunter, the evolution of man, man the inventor, and archaeologists occasionally mention woman the child-keeper, woman the cook, woman the plant gatherer. What is new in archaeology is an explicit examination of gender, the use of gender to test theories, to develop hypotheses, to set up research problems. The pivotal paper in the history of both gendered and feminist archaeology, "Archaeology and the Study of Gender," was written by Margaret Conkey and Janet Spector in 1984. Since that time, numerous symposia on gender have been organized at regional and national archaeology conferences (some of which were published), courses have been offered on gender and archaeology, and several conferences exclusively addressing gender have been held.⁷ Not since the early 1970s has there been such a flurry of intellectual activity in archaeology as now surrounds the topic of gender.

ENGENDERING THE PROFESSION

What are the gendered research questions being tackled by scholars in archaeology? The area of inquiry attracting the most attention so far is that of the structure of the discipline of archaeology itself. Surveys of archaeologists have found that women more often have nontenure track jobs when affiliated with universities, that a larger percentage of women archaeologists teach at state universities (versus private universities or government entities) than men archaeologists, that women working in contracting companies and in cultural resource management are paid less than are men at the same rank, even after holding the position longer and having more education.⁸ Surveys have found that in proportion to their membership in professional organizations, women submit papers for publication less frequently than do men, their writings are cited less often, their books are reviewed less often, and they act as reviewers less often than do men.⁹ Women feel less confident about their field skills or may actually learn less than men in field schools, they are given fewer chances to teach as graduate students, and they are more likely to drop out of the field after graduation.¹⁰

I have already pointed out that sexism hurts the scientific process by limiting the imagination of scientists (as does racism, heterosexism, ethnocentrism, and the professionalization process). Sexism has other, more obvious impacts on the practice of archaeology. Because of the nature of elementary and secondary education, girls are usually less prepared and less comfortable with mathematics and hard sciences. When these girls become archaeologists, they continue to stay away from statistical tests and useful techniques such as archaeometry (physics of dating techniques), chemical studies for sourcing raw materials and studying diet and environmental change, and simulation modeling. Our cultural equation of boys associated with weapons, military items, rocks, and dirt and girls associated with tidying, sewing, and cooking have translated into adult research domains: Men numerically dominate the study of military archaeology, nautical archaeology, lithic tool replication, metallurgy, and geomorphology, while women numerically dominate the study of buttons, foods (particularly floral analysis), weaving, and are more often found in archaeological laboratories.

Biographies are beginning to appear about specific women archaeologists, and several individuals have begun researching

women's roles in specific archaeological organizations, specific long-term field schools, historical eras, states, countries, and university programs. Women have participated in the work of archaeology in a much broader range of ways than have men.¹¹ Lacking education or career time, women have resorted to volunteering on digs, recording and collecting at sites on weekends and vacations, buying sites, establishing and running archaeological and historical societies and preserves, working in museums, performing analyses at home, funding expeditions, donating collections, and editing archaeological newsletters and journals. Women also assisted professional men (not their husbands) by leading them to sites, hosting conferences in their homes, editing men's papers, and housing them while in school. Virtually all of these women were white but black women excavated several sites in the South during the Works Progress Administration program.¹²

Writings about theoretical issues are very popular in the effort to engender archaeology. Women, in particular, believe they have something to say about gender and many women archaeologists have appropriate theoretical backgrounds via their own participation in the Women's movement to contribute to this discourse. The large number of theoretical papers addressing gender contradicts the impression from our professional journals that women are not engaged in theoretical discussions. It suggests instead that there is a social network surrounding journals that few women can penetrate, that the theoretical issues discussed in professional journals are of minor interest to women archaeologists when compared to their interest in gender, or a combination of both these factors. One of the striking aspects of the body of literature addressing gender in archaeology since 1989 is the large number of new authors.

ENGENDERING THE PAST

Theoretical discussions about gender in the past have focused on topics such as mothering, the number of genders, origins of division of labor, expedient stone tools versus formal stone tools, gender negotiations as a cause of social change, landscape, architecture, pottery, style change, colonization, class and state formation, household archaeology, activity areas, methodology, etc. The usefulness of burial data has attracted much attention.¹³

Gender is often defined as a cultural category and sex as a biological category. It is customary in Western society of the twentieth century to view gender as determined by biological sex. Most people, anthropologists included, go so far as to assume that at other times in the history of Western society, gender has always followed from sex, or from soft tissue. Mary Ellen Morbeck, for instance, states that "Gender traditionally has been defined as classification by sex."¹⁴ In fact, the tradition referred to by Morbeck, the determination of gender from genitalia, has a short history in Western thinking. In the Middle Ages, sex was not limited to two categories, but gender was. During the Renaissance, "there was no privileged discourse that could even claim to establish a definitive method by which one distinguished male from female," for the heats of the body could alter genitalia.¹⁵ Until the eighteenth century, and present in the culture of the writer of the Book of Deuteronomy some three thousand years earlier, gender was determined by dress and consequently chosen by the individual. Gender display was used to determine the sex of the one viewed.¹⁶

Gender was and is attributed among many Native American groups on the basis of both dress and behavioral display.¹⁷ Visions the child recounts and the activities and objects the child is drawn to instruct the relatives as to which gender the child has assumed. In iconographic and glyphic studies of the Maya, dress is the basis for assigning gender because primary sexual characteristics are usually omitted from the depiction. Apparently the Maya viewer was to determine gender from dress.¹⁸

These examples suggest that prior to the ascendancy of biological and medical discourse, many of the world's cultures may have used dress and behavior—rather than biology—as the means by which gender was deduced. Twentieth-century archaeologists, products of a worldview that privileges biological discourse, derive gender in the distant past through the sexing of recovered skeletal material. The trouble with that route is that the two sexes are thought to be synonymous with two genders.

Not all feminists or anthropologists agree that sex is simply biological, distinct from cultural influence or cultural definition, however. In the burial setting, sex is certainly culturally created. Consider the following example: Sex is assigned to a complete adult skeleton using either an implicit or explicit set of observations. Examples of female traits are more gracile bones, U-shaped mandibles, broader pelvises, wide sciatic notch, etc. After examining the skeleton, the archaeologist tallies the traits within the

male range of variation and the traits within the female range of variation; whichever percentage of traits is greater is used to determine a sex for the skeleton. That a body should be and must be assigned a sex is cultural baggage carried by the investigator. That statistics are used for deciding a sex is cultural baggage. Sexing a skeleton is a cultural act built on observations of the distribution of sexual characteristics in Western skeletons. Even within Western skeletal populations, systematic error favoring the label "male" has been uncovered.¹⁹ Furthermore, contemporary sexing criteria are particularly suspect when applied to other hominid species. For instance, the australopithecines were quite small and their heads may not have required an enlarged birth canal for passage. In the next several million years, while the female pelvises were widening, the male pelvises may have been narrowing. For chimps and gorillas, more accurate sexing of skeletons is achieved with dental traits and crania than with pelvises.²⁰

These errors of culture aside, archaeologists, following the Western convention, assume that gender follows from sex. Such an equation of sex with gender is probably wrong and denies past individuals the choice of gender they may well have had. Additionally, it homogenizes people into two genders, the same two as are found today in U.S. society. There might be some research questions for which we would need to know sex rather than gender (such as how often did sex and gender not equate in a particular culture) but they have not been the subject of study by archaeologists to date. Instead, the unanimous concern so far has been with gender. Skeletal data lead us astray unless we want to make the simplistic and ethnocentric assumption that sex has always equaled gender.

Artifacts are one possible way to address gender and circumvent the problem of sex. Burials often contain artifacts. Objects in graves, however, are not simple reflections of who the person was in life. Objects in and on the grave as well as the grave itself can convey information about the deceased, the kin group, the mourners, and the community. Artwork, particularly iconography, may be the most direct expression of gender available to archaeologists. For this reason, the icon-rich highland Mexico and Maya worlds have been fruitful arenas for archaeologists investigating gender relations.²¹

Just which sex or gender made a particular fishhook or invented pottery or established a fishing camp probably cannot be known. But our inability to assign gender to artifacts need not keep

us from asking questions about gender in the past. When in the past did sex become gendered?²² What has been the relative social status of the genders “man” and “woman” in different past societies? Several archaeologists expect different social functions for gender in different societies and further expect gendering to function differently within the same society at different points in its history. What is the social function of gender? Contrary to a concept of a changing function for gender is one that the function of gender has always been to mark sexuality.²³ A very interesting question that follows from either perspective is: “When, and under what conditions, are gender distinctions emphasized and when are they relaxed or nonexistent?”²⁴

Several studies have posited reasons for why an ancient society had more or less concern with gender. Margaret Conkey posited that public gatherings would call forth more concern and attention to gender than would small group household interaction because spouses would be drawn from the larger groups. As the number of public occasions increased in the Upper Paleolithic as population and group size grew, there was a greater social concern with gender and the public and material display of gender.²⁵ Ian Hodder found that as domestication intensified in central and eastern Europe and the Near East four thousand to six thousand years ago, the elaboration of domestic symbolism—female figurines, in houses and ovens; miniature sets of women, houses, ovens, and pots; pottery decoration; and architecture—increased.²⁶ When the Catholic leadership sought to separate itself from the laity in the tenth through the twelfth centuries, it equated sexuality, flesh, menstrual blood, and women with sin, thus emphasizing differences not only between celibate priests and their congregations but also between women and men.²⁷ These examples should make it clear that there can be no universal relationship between gender and either the material expression of gender concerns or the form the concern will take. In fact, one can argue that as concern with gender increases in a society, the material expression of gender could either increase or decrease.

North American Past

To make the discussion of gender more tangible, I will briefly summarize thinking about the North American past generated by gendered research.²⁸ To organize information, archaeologists have