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# Introduction to “Binary Binds”: Deconstructing Sex and Gender Dichotomies in Archaeological Practice

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## Abstract

Gender archaeology has made significant strides toward deconstructing the hegemony of binary categorizations. Challenging dichotomies such as man/woman, sex/gender, and biology/culture, approaches informed by poststructuralist, feminist, and queer theories have moved beyond essentialist and universalist identity constructs to more nuanced configurations. Despite the theoretical emphasis on context, multiplicity, and fluidity, binary starting points continue to streamline the spectrum of variability that is recognized, often reproducing normative assumptions in the evidence. The contributors to this special issue confront how sex, gender, and sexuality categories condition analytical visibility, aiming to develop approaches that respond to the complexity of theory in archaeological practice. The papers push the ontological and epistemological boundaries of bodies, personhood, and archaeological possibility, challenging *a priori* assumptions that contain how sex, gender, and sexuality categories are constituted and related to each other. Foregrounding intersectional approaches that engage with ambiguity, variability, and difference, this special issue seeks to “de-contain” categories, assumptions, and practices from “binding” our analytical gaze toward only certain kinds of persons and knowledges, in interpretations of the past and practices in the present.

## Keywords

Sex; Gender; Sexuality; The body; Binaries; Intersectionality; Practice

*The dyad is an achievement, not a presupposition.*

*Judith Butler (2004: 146)*

The interpretation of sex and gender in archaeology has long been contained by the social polarity of “man” and “woman” as well as the confinement of sex in biology and gender in culture (Joyce 2008; Sofaer 2006; Yates 1993)—what we term the “binary binds.” The aim of this special issue is to critically engage with and move beyond the limitations of sex and gender dichotomies in archaeological narratives, with an emphasis on developing approaches that respond to the complexity of theory in practices. The

articles emerged from the Archaeology and Gender in Europe<sup>1</sup> (Dommasnes and Montón-Subías 2012: 374, 382) sponsored session at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists in Istanbul, Turkey. Contributors were challenged to rethink the analytical categories that frame archaeological reconstructions of sex, gender, and sexuality, exploring how binary starting points and methodological practices condition and constrain interpretations of sex and gender variability.

We recognize that a call to critically interrogate sex and gender dichotomies is not new. The binary binds and their hierarchical confinement of biological and social difference have been loci of contestation since the emergence of gender as an analytical category in archaeology (*e.g.*, Claassen 1992a; Conkey and Spector 1984; du Cros and Smith 1993; Gero and Conkey 1991; Spencer-Wood 1995; Walde and Willows 1991). In the past three decades, gender archaeology has made significant strides toward deconstructing the imperatives of these dichotomies, informed by poststructuralist, feminist, and queer theories (*e.g.*, Butler 1990, 1993; Conkey and Gero 1997; Foucault 1978; Geller and Stockett 2006; Grosz 1994; Halperin 1995; Laqueur 1990; Wylie 1991, 2007). Nevertheless, the antiquity of the binary binds has not neutralized their polemic (Fuglestedt 2014; Geller 2005, 2009a; Joyce 2008; Sofaer 2006, 2013; Marshall and Alberti 2014). Essentialist approaches to masculine and feminine subject positions have remained difficult to uproot, with either/or categories still pervasive as the underlying assumptions behind identity configurations (Back Danielsson and Thedéen 2012a: 9; Bolger 2013b: 6, 13; Brumfiel and Robin 2008; Geller 2009a; Schmidt 2002: 159–160; Weismantel 2013: 322). Furthermore, the value for archaeology of the sex/gender system—the distinction between sex as biological and gender as culturally constructed—has remained a contested analytical domain (Joyce 2008; Moral 2016; Sofaer 2006), with several recent contributions tackling the ontological implications of this conceptual divergence (Alberti 2013; Fuglestedt 2014; Marshall and Alberti 2014). Such tensions between method and theory have continually prompted scholars to call for empirical applications capable of engaging with the conceptual fluidity of theoretical frameworks (Alberti 2013: 90; Arnold and Wicker 2001b: ix–x; Claassen 1992b: 6; Croucher 2005: 611; Geller 2009b: 67; Sofaer 2006: 101–102, 2013: 228–231; Sørensen 2000: 44–45; Voss 2000: 186, 2005: 60–61; Wicker and Arnold 1999b: 1).

This special issue is situated within wider research trends that foreground epistemic elasticity and question archaeology's ontological foundations, including the Cartesian division between material and discursive domains, and the implications of this dualism for the locus of meaning, explanation, and the constitution of personhood (Back Danielsson and Thedéen 2012b; Fuglestedt 2014; Joyce 2008; Marshall and Alberti 2014; Meskell and Joyce 2003; Sofaer 2006; see, *e.g.*, Alberti *et al.* 2013). In this introduction, we isolate the key limitations of the binary binds, examine approaches for deconstructing their assumptions, and explore some of the lingering debates and tensions with which the participants in this special issue engage. To frame these responses, we review the history of the binary binds in gender archaeology, focusing on three areas in which these issues have been particularly salient: the division of labor, mortuary analysis, and the body (for recent reviews of gender archaeology more generally, see Back Danielsson and Thedéen 2012a; Bolger 2013a; Dommasnes *et al.* 2010; Nelson 2006).

It has not been our intention to develop a specific heuristic tool for all of our participants to deploy. Rather, we wish to highlight ongoing tensions regarding the epistemological and ontological status of sex and gender as analytical categories, pointing the way forward toward other ways of engaging with difference. Although we explore a diversity of approaches, many of the arguments and controversies addressed by our participants orient around the following central issue: the binary binds lay claim to a particular configuration of sex, the body, gender, and their interrelationships, containing how we understand the constitution of

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<sup>1</sup> Archaeology and Gender in Europe (AGE) working group of the European Association of Archaeologists: [www.archaeology-gender-europe.org](http://www.archaeology-gender-europe.org)

social subjects as well as how we confront multiplicity and ambiguity. While methods and analysis unavoidably enact boundaries on data, inquiry, and interpretation, our contributors explore how we can “de-contain” our categories and practices from the exclusionary assumptions that “bind” inquiry toward recognizing only certain kinds of persons, ways of being different, or processes of knowledge production.

## The “Binary Binds” and their Contestation: the Becoming of Sex and Gender

*Inadvertently, many analysts have naturalized certain contemporary cultural values, which are not without problems themselves—particularly the ideas that sexual dimorphism provides the most important biological indicators of social differences and that socioeconomic organization is characterized by monogamy, heterosexuality, sexual division of labor, and patriarchal nuclear families.*

*Pamela Geller (2009a: 512)*

The binary binds might be understood in two ways: One bind is the “two-sex/two-gender” model (Joyce 2008: 18), which relies on the assumption that men and women constitute either/or—and the only normative—social subjects. In this model, status as a man or woman is presumed to be a primary and categorically coherent axis of identity. The second bind is the “sex/gender system” or social constructionist position, which makes the distinction between sex as biological and gender as cultural.

### The “Two-Sex/Two-Gender” Model

The confinement of gender relations to a man/woman oppositional dyad is based on the principle that subjectivities develop into two kinds of social persons determined by biological sex—defined by genitalia and corresponding differential reproductive function—which is understood as a binary condition. This assumption locates gender as a cultural dichotomy emergent from an anatomical dichotomy perceived as a natural, static, and significant arbiter of sexual and social differences. The presumed linkage between reproductive anatomy and social identity as well as the associated privilege accorded to the sex–gender dimensions of identity has permeated methodological and interpretive imperatives in archaeological discourse on the division of labor, mortuary analysis, and the body. Early approaches often followed a “signature” framework (see Joyce 2008, *e.g.*, 39–40, 93, 123–124) in which archaeologists sought to isolate artifacts, activities, and roles along the lines of sexual difference.

Traditional narratives of socioeconomic organization normalized a division of labor rooted in physiological differences between women and men, prioritizing procreative capabilities as determinants of gender roles. Spheres of action associated with women were consigned to the margins of cultural significance, while men and perceived masculine activities—such as tool making, hunting, and farming—served as the vehicles of historical agency (Díaz-Andreu 2005: 27–35; Geller 2009b: 67–69; Seifert 1991: 1; Spencer-Wood 1995: 119–120). Women’s role in childbirth assumed a universal prominence in configuring feminine identity and female bodies (Joyce 2008: 8–10), relegating women to “passive” societal contributions such as domestic burdens and plant gathering (Watson and Kennedy 1991: 255–257). The “Man the Hunter” myth (Washburn and Lancaster 1968; cf. Dahlberg 1981; Slocum 1975; see Bolger 2006: 456–463; Zilhman 2013: 26–30)—where men are seen as culturally active procurers and providers of extra-domestic resources for women and children—exemplifies these early premises. The emphasis on biologically deterministic sex roles and ideology naturalized a heteronormative configuration of sexual and social

organization, assigning differential reproductive status a transhistorical centrality (Geller 2008: 122–124, 2009a: 507–508; Joyce 2008: 42–43).

In mortuary and bioarchaeological contexts, researchers have often started analysis with the expectation of two sexes correlated to two gender categories, with sex estimated through a scoring system of morphological, quantifiably dimorphic indicators—notably the pelvis—static in the skeleton (Geller 2005: 598–599). In this framework, the visibility of gender emerges through categorically consonant clusters of artifacts and corresponding social roles, with gender identity derived from consistent associations of material signatures and osteological sex. This association assigns sex to either/or essentialized gender identities, which are often expected to accord with modern Western ideologies (Doucette 2001; Weglian 2001). The uncritical adoption of these stereotypes has, in many cases, resulted in reductive correlations between objects, the body, and social identity, ignoring the destabilizing potential of the material evidence in favor of normative and broad categorical constructs (Jordan 2016; Stratton 2016); unexpected configurations of grave goods and osteological sex have often been explained away in order to reaffirm known gender ideologies (Arnold 1991, 2012, 2016; Díaz-Andreu 2005: 38). Doucette (2001), for example, evaluating past scholarship on atlatl burials at two Archaic-period sites in the eastern Woodlands of North America, demonstrates how past interpretations of atlatls “bound” artifacts and roles to *a priori* expectations of gender and gendered spheres of action. Before atlatls were recognized as hunting tools, the occurrence of these implements with both osteologically male and female skeletons was uncontroversial. The association of hunting tools with female skeletons, however, created a conceptual problematic for researchers who expected that such items would be reserved for use by men.

Thus, the attribution of sex and gender in mortuary and bioarchaeological analyses has often relied on the following assumptions: (1) that gender-marking grave goods and burial attributes could be isolated to one or the other osteological sex, clustering in groups that aligned with traditional Western expectations of masculine and feminine gender roles, and (2) that these features contained gender association as the primary aspect of their social import, excluding dimensions of difference that confounded normative categorization of “woman” or “man.” The engendering of the grave inclusions absorbed the skeletal body into this masculine/feminine discourse, with the skeleton reduced to a passive and static marking of sexual difference. The contextual experience of lived bodies remained subordinate to the projection of universal sexual taxonomies onto the past.

## The Sex/Gender System

The “two-sex/two-gender” model confined social variability to biological constraints, naturalizing and containing social roles in transhistorical either/or categories (Geller 2008, 2009a). In wider social and medical science scholarship, including second-wave feminist discourse,<sup>2</sup> the sex/gender system<sup>3</sup> (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 3–4; Oakley 1972; Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Rubin 1975; Stoller 1968; see de Beauvoir 1989 [1953]) sought to challenge this conflation of biology and culture, separating sex and gender into distinct domains with different ontologies and epistemologies:

*“Sex” is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible differences in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. “Gender” however is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into “masculine” and “feminine” ...*

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<sup>2</sup> See Gilchrist (1999: 2–9), Stockett and Geller (2006: 3–11), and Bolger (2013b: 5–10) on the waves of feminism and their relationship to archaeological research on sex and gender. See also Conkey (2003), Conkey and Gero (1997), Engelstad (2007), Spencer-Wood (2011), and Wilkie and Hayes (2006) for reviews of feminist theories in archaeology.

<sup>3</sup> See Fuglestedt (2014) for a recent review of the sex/gender system (also Voss 2005: 57–58).

*[wherein the] constancy of sex must be admitted, but so also must the variability of gender.*  
(Oakley 1972: 16)

In this framework, sex is accepted as a dimorphic biological fact; gender is understood as the interpretation or symbolic construct—socially, politically, economically—of the body’s physicality. This distinction highlighted the cross-culturally variable ways that people could make sense of anatomical difference, extricating social subjectivities from biological determinism (Bolger 2013b: 6; Geller 2009b: 71–72). Walker and Cook (1998), for example, contend that the conceptual division between sex and gender allows researchers to explore the interrelationship between biology and culture, rendering the investigation of gender possible rather than reducing it to a thesaurus for sexual dimorphism. Rather than bound by biology to transhistorical roles and ideologies, the social statuses of men and women emerge as historical and changeable. Such approaches in archaeology have accepted dimorphic biological sex read from the skeleton as a significant factor but have resisted the reduction of gender variation to deterministic sex categories (e.g., Weglian 2001; Whelan 1991).

### **Practice and Performativity: Destabilizing Sex, “Doing” Gender**

The “two-sex/two-gender” model and the sex/gender system locate sex as a dimorphic condition *a priori* in the body’s biology. While the social constructionist position opened up avenues for engaging with gender variability, scholars working from a background in poststructuralism, third-wave feminism, and queer theory have challenged the assumption of biological sex as a static and universally salient point of reference around which identity and variation revolve. This research highlights the problematic polarization between sex as natural and ahistorical and gender as sociocultural and situational (Bolger 2013b: 6–7; Gilchrist 1999: 13–14; Gowland and Thompson 2013: 16–22; Joyce 2008: 44; Sofaer 2006). For example, philosopher Judith Butler’s (1990, 1993) concept of gender performativity has been especially influential in recent archaeological thought (Alberti 2001, 2005, 2013; Bolger 2013b: 6; Geller 2008; Joyce 2004; Moral 2016; Perry and Joyce 2005; Spencer-Wood 2011: 18; Voss 2005: 59–60, 2008: 328).

Butler’s approach rejects gender as an interpretation of an unproblematic—*i.e.*, evident *a priori*—sex. Rather than the cultural expression of an already recognized biological difference, gender is understood as an ongoing production within the context of hegemonic discourses, coming into being through reiterative citational practices. The “doing” of these norms coheres in the body, drawing the natural into a cultural field. Sex itself in this framework is implicated in regulatory cultural mechanisms that materialize what counts as bodily difference and whose bodies matter (see also Foucault 1978; Grosz 1994). The body, in a performative approach, gains legibility through cultural interaction rather than as an ontologically prior reality:

*If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.*

*It would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category. Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex... [because] gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. (Butler 1990: 7)*

Recognizing the cultural construction of sex has called into question the universality of a two-sex model (Laqueur 1990; Moral 2016) as well as the validity of dividing sex and gender by an external biological fact (Nordbladh and Yates 1990). Thus, challenges to the man/woman normative and sex/gender system have

sought to destabilize the transhistorical potency of sex from a foundation in static biological indicators, foregrounding the cultural construction of both sex and gender.

## Destabilizing the Binary Binds: Approaches to Difference

*The comfortable notion is shaken that man is man and woman is woman and that the historian's task is to find out what they did, what they thought, and what was thought about them.*

*Thomas Laqueur (1990: 13)*

Whether or not archaeologists have followed the challenge posed by Butler and others to the social constructionist position of the sex/gender system (see Bolger 2013b: 6, 13), appealing to the contingency of both concepts has shifted focus to plurality, fluidity, and the regulatory practices that constitute difference (Geller 2009b). Many scholars now approach sex and gender as a continuum (Arnold 2002: 239; Fausto-Sterling 1993, 2000; Geller 2005: 598), emergent in practice (Gilchrist 1999; Sørensen 2000), and potentially variable throughout the life course (Gilchrist 2004; Hollimon 2000; Sofaer 2006). Such research has problematized: (1) the transhistorical prominence assigned to either/or hierarchical axes; (2) the orientation of gender around a fixed starting point—*i.e.*, dimorphic procreative anatomy; and (3) the exteriority of the body as a biological given.

For example, the way of knowing the body through traditional skeletal analysis is culturally implicated—the skeleton does not necessarily compel assignment into fixed either/or sex categories as the most salient dimension for understanding social experience, and the criteria for those categorizations, as well as the degree of uncertainty we accept, are furthermore invested in cultural value systems and standards of authority (Claassen 1992b; Geller 2005, 2008, 2009a). Intersexuality and the variation of biological characteristics (*e.g.*, chromosomal, hormonal, and anatomical; see Fausto-Sterling 2000) further complicate fixing sex to discrete taxonomies. We cannot necessarily assume which biological experiences were thought to be significant in the past (Joyce 2008: 45), and genitalia do not necessarily emerge as the most significant points of reference for social recognition as a man or woman (Hollimon 2000, 2006; Weglian 2001: 150–151; Yates 1993: 48–52). While gender may be tied to biological sex, this is not a universal feature of identity (Crass 2001: 108; Hollimon 2006: 435–436, 440), nor do biological sex or a concept of gender always act as core aspects in the production of personhood (Alberti 2013: 92; Crass 2001: 108; Geller 2008: 129, 2009a: 512; Voss 2005: 65–67; Voss and Schmidt 2000: 16; Weglian 2001: 150–151). Beyond the dyad, scholars have opened inquiry to the possibility of non-binary genders (Hollimon 2006), with the recognition of multiple gender categories (Hollimon 1997, 2000; Prine 2000) demonstrating the variety of factors and configurations that invest the body, practice, and identity with significance. The categories of “man” and “woman” cannot account for all potential personhoods and lived experiences (Delphy 1993).

Moving away from hierarchical trajectories and fixed biological starting points, research has trended toward approaches that examine the intersection of sex and gender with other aspects of social identity (Bolger 2013b: 10–11; see Sterling 2015)—such as age, status, class, and race—prompting more nuanced insights into the organization of labor, mortuary analysis, and the body. Problematizing the androcentric narratives of man the toolmaker (Bird 1993; Gero 1991; Owen 2005: 37–39; Sassaman 1998), man the hunter (Doucette 2001; Jarvenpa and Brumbach 2006a, b, 2009), and man the farmer (Robin 2002, 2006; Watson and Kennedy 1991), various studies of the division of labor have demonstrated that task division

does not inevitably align with sex or gender, potentially exhibiting complementary, non-dichotomous, fluid, or intersectional arrangements (Brumfiel and Robin 2008; Cobb 2005; Crass 2001: 109; Geller 2008: 122–124, 2009a: 507–508; Gero and Scattolin 2002; Hendon 2002; Hollimon 2000; Jarvenpa and Brumbach 2006a, b, 2009; Joyce 1992; Levy 2006; Preston-Werner 2008; Rotman 2006; Stockett 2005). Rather than hierarchizing contexts of action and domains of inquiry according to value-laden assumptions about gender, researchers are placing greater emphasis on how such spheres intersect in multidimensional and multiscale ways (Cobb and Croucher 2016; Ferrer 2016; Spencer-Wood 2013).

In mortuary and osteoarchaeological contexts, analytical focus has unsettled the confinement of gender to a masculine/feminine dyad, calling attention to the diversity of possible social configurations as well as the historicity of sex (Arnold 2002, 2006, 2016; Arnold and Wicker 2001a; Claassen 1992b; Geller 2005, 2008, 2009a; Hollimon 2011; Joyce 2008; Sofaer 2006, 2013). Less essentialist approaches to material culture and identity have come into practice, pointing out that sex and gender might not have been the most prominent dimensions structuring the meaning of grave inclusions or burial attributes (Arnold 2016; Crass 2001; Jordan 2016; Stratton 2016; Weglian 2001: 142–153).

Geller's (2005, 2008, 2009a) and Sofaer's (2006) work at the interface of osteology and interpretive archaeology has been influential for resisting the localization of sex or gender in stable metrics. Geller maintains that interrogating difference and doing justice to biology do not necessitate sex as a primary means of categorization, nor as a fixed dichotomy rooted in procreative function. She advocates remaining open to possibilities of bodily variation beyond the bimodal, theorizing a bioarchaeology that foregrounds the cultural contexts in which the body becomes socially resonant.

Also eschewing the body as a static starting point, Sofaer's approach to the "body as material culture" reformulates the variation of the skeleton as a context for the investigation of process. She directly confronts the nature:culture dichotomy that results in what we term a "corollary" of the binary binds: the fracturing of the body into material (scientific) and discursive (theoretical) domains, each of which prioritizes and holds authority over certain components—in essence, the uncontroversial ("dead") physical body of osteology and the contested ("living") cultural body of social theory. She argues that in traditional osteological practice, physical bodies reside external to the kinds of interpretive approaches characteristic of material culture-based inquiry. However, since bodies are plastic, the skeletal body forms in the process of lived human action. Rather than pinned to a fixed attribute of anatomy, gender materializes in the skeleton as a process of bodily formation.

In the context of Butler-inspired approaches, the body's ontology has emerged in recent years as a domain of interrogation. A focus on embodied experience has dislodged the body as a neutral ontological fact, orienting inquiry to performative engagement, relational intersections, and "lived lives" throughout the life course (Alberti 2001, 2005; Belcher 2016; Borić and Robb 2008; Fuglestedt 2014; Geller 2009a; Hamilakis *et al.* 2002; Joyce 2000, 2004, 2005, 2008; Meskell 1996; Meskell and Joyce 2003; Rebay-Salisbury *et al.* 2010; Sofaer 2006). Case studies have indicated that the anatomical configuration of the body does not guarantee a trajectory toward man/woman as either/or (Joyce 2008; Yates 1993), highlighting the contextual emergence of bodily difference, ability, and corporeal boundaries (Arwill-Nordbladh 2012; Matic 2016; Meskell and Joyce 2003) and disrupting the ontological stability of a naked "sexed" body in the absence of performative deployment (Alberti 2005).

These challenges to the instantiation of *a priori* bodies and persons highlight another corollary of the binary binds: a reliance on a normative:non-normative axis in categorizing identity and difference. A focus on procreative anatomy has tended to align this normal on a heterosexual, or heteronormative, correspondence between binary sex, two genders, and opposite-sex sexual desire (Dowson 2000b, 2009a; Geller 2008). Queer theory (*e.g.*, Butler 1990, 1993; de Lauretis 1991; Giffney 2009; Halperin 1995;



Jagose 1996; Sedgwick 1990) and archaeologies of sexuality (Schmidt and Voss 2000; Voss 2008; Voss and Casella 2012) have offered positionalities counter to the hegemony of the binary normative, resisting the heterosexual naturalization of past sexual practice (e.g., Weismantel 2004) as well as the stabilization of essentialist subjects—i.e., the binary and others (Alberti 2013; Blackmore 2011; Dowson 2000a; Croucher 2005; Cobb 2005; Geller 2008, 2009a, b; Jensen 2007; Marshall 2000, 2013; Matic 2012, 2016; Moral 2016; Schmidt 2002; Terendy *et al.* 2009; Weismantel 2013). Such research has stressed the variety of possibilities and loci of significance for the embodiment of difference, and a variety of ways that sex, the body, and gender can be related in the constitution and valuing of personhood.

## The Binary Binds as Starting Points? Ongoing Tensions

*Womanhood is historical, but this variability does not stop these people from being women ... The gender concept does not bring us closer to the phenomenon of being a person. Rather, by its obsession with sexuality, it leads us in quite the opposite direction, which is straight to the two extremes of either “normativity” or deviance.*

*Ingrid Fuglestedt (2014: 68)*

While the approaches discussed above have contributed a range of insights on sex, gender, and identity, adopting critical conceptual frameworks has not always led to a methodological interface that engages with the complexity of theory (Arnold and Wicker 2001b: ix–x; Sofaer 2006: e.g., 101–105, 2013: 228–231; Spencer-Wood 1995: 125; Wicker and Arnold 1999a). Some of these tensions have been particularly salient in the bioarchaeological and mortuary spheres. Here, we explore the relationships among starting points, material patterning, and knowledge production practices within the context of the “corollaries” of the binary binds: the material:discursive division of the sex/gender system and the normative:non-normative standard for understanding difference. In both cases, we find ongoing tensions—e.g., between category and evidence, the normal and other, and the mainstream and the margins—containing how variability is accommodated and recognized.

### Material:Discursive Tensions in Category—the Constitution of Sex and Gender

A key issue is the exploratory potential of sex and gender as categories of personhood in the first instance. The heuristic utility of a commitment to biological:social externality between sex and gender remains a site of contestation, particularly regarding the body’s materiality and its status at the interface between the skeleton and social identity. While bioarchaeological approaches have acknowledged the contingency of the body and the significance of historical context for understanding its points of significance, several researchers (Arnold 2006: 157; Gowland and Thompson 2013: 21, 113; Matic 2012: 6; Voss 2005: 60, 71; Sofaer 2006: 96, 2013: 231; Stockett and Geller 2006: 10) have commented on the tendency of mortuary archaeologists and osteologists to maintain the physical:social divide of the sex/gender system (e.g., Arnold 2002, 2016; Sofaer 2006; Stratton 2016). This is often due to the centrality of the material remains of the skeleton in these analyses. Challenges to the physical:social dichotomy as well as an emphasis on anti-essentialist ontological process, characteristic of sexuality and performativity studies, have been more readily implemented in contexts where textual or iconographic data are available (e.g., Alberti 2001, 2005; Joyce 2000). Although inquiry has moved away from an either/or reduction of sex to biological fact and gender to malleable construct, Butler-inspired approaches have also been criticized, with some archaeologists claiming that the discursive emphasis neutralizes the material vitality of the corporeal and

insufficiently historicizes the somatic context of bodily becoming (Alberti 2013: 100–102; Fuglestedt 2014; Sofaer 2006:*e.g.*, 64–69, 90–105).

For example, while Sofaer (2006) seeks to methodologically integrate the skeletal body with the kinds of theoretical insights applied to material culture, she is hesitant to close the ontological gap between matter and discourse. Concerned that prioritizing the discursive creation of sex elides the significance of observable osteological variation, she ultimately affirms an ontology of sex as a material reality (Sofaer 2006: 96) as well as a “reality of male and female” in the body (Sofaer 2006: 101), maintaining that the spectrum of sex expression primarily clusters into two categories (Sofaer 2006: 92; see also Fuglestedt 2014: 66, 71; Sørensen 2000: 49). In Sofaer’s (2006: 104) view, “both sex and gender require anchoring in the materiality of the body.”

Some archaeologists, emphasizing continuous processes of becoming, have been more apt to depart from committing to an *a priori* ontological divide between material and discursive domains. Marshall and Alberti (2014), for example, in a direct engagement with Sofaer, argue for the mutual constitution of material and discursive registers in the processes of bodily production, blurring the gap between evidence and representation. Following physicist Karen Barad’s (2003) concept of “inherent ontological indeterminacy,” they argue that the category of sex, rather than rooted to the reality of the physical, emerges in the relational configuration of practitioner, material elements, and measuring apparatus contingent to the moment of research practice. Discursive categories and types of bodies—human or artifactual—exist in the relations that bring them into being; sex or bodies as material and real achieve a semblance of stability through iterations of these configurations rather than always “travel[ing] with” (Marshall and Alberti 2014: 28) particular properties.

### **Normative:Non-normative Tensions in Practice—the Containment of Personhood**

These ongoing tensions between non-essentialist goals, categorical boundaries, and material variability highlight the difficulty of reorienting a deeply entrenched terminological, ontological, and methodological reliance on either/or domains of substance and meaning, especially in the bioarchaeological or mortuary sphere (Sofaer 2006: 89). Continued reliance on binary starting points has tended to direct interpretation around an assumed coherence of either/or masculine and feminine categories (discussed by Fuglestedt 2014; Joyce 2008). Despite the acknowledged caveat that reproductive anatomy might not provide the most salient reference point for social identity, archaeological methods tend to orient a social concept of gender around sex dichotomies defined along anatomically dimorphic lines (Sofaer 2006: 101–105; Stratton 2016). A common result of this practice is the elision or dismissal of “unsexable” skeletons (Stratton 2016) and “neutral” burials—*i.e.*, those that do not easily sort into either/or masculine and feminine patterns of grave-good distribution (Arnold 2006: 152)—from examinations of gender configurations in mortuary contexts.

Eliminating or downplaying data that cannot be evaluated against a linkage between sex and co-variant attributes potentially polarizes patterns not necessarily evident in the whole spectrum of evidence (Stratton 2016). Moreover, framing gender variability as anomalous to a correlation between dimorphic sex and corresponding (gender) patterns reinforces procreative anatomy linked to discrete and unitary either/or social categories as the normative production of personhood (see Alberti 2013: 91–92; Back Danielsson and Thedéen 2012a: 9; Epple 1998; Fuglestedt 2014; Matić 2012; Moral 2016; Towle and Morgan 2002). This prioritization of either/or commonality privileges categorical closure rather than intersectionality, reducing gender to an essentialized masculinity and femininity that take precedence over other ways of distinguishing difference, often excluding ambiguities as deviants or alternatives to normative types (Fuglestedt 2014; Joyce 2008; Moral 2016).

The exploration of non-binary and multiple genders (*e.g.*, Ardren 2008: 3–4, 8; Crass 2001; Hollimon 1997, 2000, 2006; Looper 2002; Mandell 2015; Prine 2000; Weglian 2001) has expanded the scope and complexity of perspectives on variability. However, we must also be careful how we frame the conversation on gender diversity and how that diversity is constituted through methodological practices. For example, third or fourth genders will not necessarily be distinguishable methodologically by a disjunction between biological sex and bimodal patterning of material culture (Claassen 1992b: 3; Hollimon 2000: 192)—indeed, assuming that non-binary genders will only or primarily be visible through sex/gender disjunction predetermines the number and kind of gendered persons allowed into existence (Claassen 1992b: 3). We cannot always presume that difference and variation would have been a matter of distinct gender categories (Fuglestedt 2014) rather than sex (Geller 2008: 124) or an intersection of multiple aspects of social identity (Moral 2016; Voss 2005: 65–67). Within-category variability does not necessarily make one less of a man or woman, in either a “deviant” or “categorical” sense (Fuglestedt 2014), nor does statistical aberration from the bimodal inherently signal cultural deviance or social abjection (Alberti 2013: 93; Klein 2001: 184; Voss 2005: 67). Such insights highlight the need to continually revise and assess sex and gender categories in context, since the binary binds do not only predetermine what counts as standard, but also regulate the type and range of variability in ways that might reaffirm the logic of heteronormativity (Matić 2016; Moral 2016).

We are not arguing against multiple sex and gender categories; we are arguing for their emergence within a historical context rather than their *a priori* consignment to non-normative aspects external to a binary universal. We must allow ambiguity and fluidity, but at the same time be careful what we mean by such designations. What appears ambiguous through the lens of the binary binds might not have been so in the past (Matić 2016). Likewise, acknowledgment that gender can be fluid and variable throughout the life course does not mean that identity is not regulated in accordance with norms and practices that include and exclude certain kinds of bodies and persons, even when they transcend a binary system. What is at issue, then, is not only the constitution of sex and gender, nor the number of sex, gender, or sexuality categories. Also at stake is the circumscription of the ontologies of personhood and our means to recognize what kinds of bodies and identities come into existence, in the past and the present (Cobb and Croucher 2016; Matić 2016; Moral 2016).

Thus, the *a priori* expectation of either/or coherent categories exteriorizes patterning contradictory to a masculine/feminine standard, excluding other ideas of what a standard might be and foreclosing the possibilities for other kinds of embodiments. While the sex-as-biological/gender-as-cultural binary frames the concept of gender as variable and fluid, its parameters in practice do not necessarily avoid the reductionist biases of the either/or, masculine/feminine bind. Echoes of the binary binds tend to implicitly orient analytical processes toward a concept of personhood in which sex anchors any kind of social difference, compelling patterns from the evidence that can be explained according to this reference point. Some have pointed to intersectional and relational approaches to reframe questions of identity and difference (*e.g.*, Arnold 2016; Blackmore 2011; Marshall and Alberti 2014; Matić 2016; Moral 2016; Spencer-Wood 2011; Sterling 2015). Challenges to the hierarchies of contemporary disciplinary practice, knowledge production, and pedagogy (*e.g.*, Cobb and Croucher 2016; Conkey 2005; Dowson 2009a, b; Franklin 2001; Sterling 2015) can aid in both encouraging diversity in the professional profile of archaeologists and fostering approaches that engage with gendered persons in their situated experiences and complexity, long advocated for by researchers with feminist commitments.

If we are to reconfigure questions and assumptions as well as results, remaining open to different ontologies of bodies, terms of identity, and practices and politics of knowledge production, at what point in the analytical process, and with respect to what properties, should the scope of sex, gender, and sexuality categories be bounded, unraveled, and related? How should the conceptual distinction between sex and

gender be approached, and at what point would variation and ambiguity “stop” someone from being a woman or man (cf. Fuglestedt 2014: 68)? Who and what are being included and excluded through disciplinary norms?

## “Unbinding” the “Binds” in Practice: Special Issue Themes and Organization

*To open up our thinking about past gender it is necessary to begin by not beginning with men and women.*

*Yvonne Marshall (2013: 210)*

Several tensions have thus been evident in the history of gender archaeology surrounding (1) the ontological and epistemological status of sex and gender as categories (*e.g.*, material/discursive, stable/volatile, coherent/multidimensional); (2) the ontological and epistemological positioning of sex and gender in relation to each other and other aspects of social identity (*e.g.*, dependent/independent, essential/intersectional, continuous/exterior); (3) the contents, salience, and viability accorded to sex and gender categories as analytical access points to past social configurations; and (4) knowledge production practices that constrain the visibility of past identities and the diversity of voices in the construction, valuing, and legitimizing of those pasts. To challenge ontological and epistemic commitments (see Engelstad 2007; Wylie 2007), we need to examine the categories that “bind” bodies into particular kinds of sexed and gendered persons, reconfiguring how disciplinary practices constitute and articulate people, objects, and difference—theoretically, methodologically, pedagogically, and politically.

In this special issue, contributors confront how we enact exclusionary practices on our data through the analytical categories we deploy to make the past known to us. This entails interrogating how assumptions determine what is primary and significant in constituting bodily and social differences. We hope to explore approaches that (1) do not require patterns to align in a particular way in order for us to make sense of them and (2) resist the normalization and containment of variability around a closed categorical standard. In this project of “de-containment,” we question the emergence of bodies and persons rather than projecting a particular configuration of sex, the body, and gender onto the past (see Matić 2016). If we begin with “men” and “women” as complete and inviolable subject positions, we run the risk of stabilizing the priority of certain factors in identity formation and circumscribing ways of being different and recognizing difference. Beyond other ways of being men and women, we open possibility to other ways of being persons and differentiating persons.

So the questions remain: Where *do* we begin? Where do binary assumptions remain implicit in methodological practices? We are not calling to elide men and women or osteological sex categories from archaeological inquiry, but to confront directly the challenge of reconfiguring archaeological practices and interpretations along axes and contexts of difference that compel the binary binds—and their containment of ambiguity and contradiction—to account for, rather than stabilize, their claims. More specifically, we ask the following:

1. *How do the binary binds as presuppositions condition the variability we see archaeologically, and what ways of doing “otherwise” (Marshall and Alberti 2014: 33) are there?*

In this special issue, Moral (2016) and Matic (2016) both draw on queer theory as an impetus for inciting new questions and perspectives on variability in context. Moral foregrounds intersectionality as well as the contingency of sex and gender, arguing that sex and gender cannot be conceived as always mapping to a particular set of features, no matter the number of categories permitted. Exploring the implications of both foundational (*e.g.*, Butler 1990, 1993) and recent contributions to the ontological and epistemological status of sex and gender, including both English- and Spanish-language literature (*e.g.*, Fuglestedt, Hernando, Marshall and Alberti, Moragón Martínez, Sofaer), Moral's paper encourages a dialog among views that have not always been put into conversation with one another, drawing focus to potentially productive points of articulation—or discontinuity.

Matic's paper on representations of Egyptian female king Hatshepsut indicates that sex and gender can be binary without identities or sexualities being bound according to the terms of heteronormativity. Because social categories and bodily possibilities may have been configured differently, we cannot *a priori* assume what kind of variation would have been seen as sex/gender ambiguity or crossing gender boundaries. Matic argues that integrating a queer approach with Actor Network Theory (*e.g.*, Latour 2005) holds potential for new ways of understanding how agency, material culture, and corporeality intersect in the enabling of varied identities and embodiments beyond what is delimited by heteronormative restrictions.

2. *Do the binary binds doom us to a specific process of personhood, or can they be deployed to help reveal or point to terms of engagement that are markedly different from the binds' underlying premises? For example, in mortuary or bioarchaeological contexts, how do we reconcile the complexity of theory with dimorphic sex categories as a starting point (see, e.g., Geller 2005, 2008, 2009a; Sofaer 2006, 2013; Marshall and Alberti 2014)?*

These tensions are brought to salience by the three authors engaging with mortuary analysis. Advocating for intersectional approaches to account for the multiple dimensions of social life, they draw out how expectations of dichotomous patterns have masked the diversity of social configurations in their case study areas. Revisiting an Early Iron Age mortuary data set from southwest Germany, Arnold (2016), for example, notes that items buried exclusively in either biological male or female graves may not have been equivalent in their meaning or relationship to the person, warning against expecting that individuals of all ages or statuses can be lumped together into one coherent gendered group.

Similar to Arnold, Stratton (2016) re-evaluates a cemetery population—Neolithic and Copper Age Durankulak, Bulgaria—previously defined by binary gender categories. The analysis uses multivariate statistics to engage with more complex and dynamic patterns than could be revealed by starting with an assumed sex and gender binary. Critically, Stratton's analysis incorporates non-confidently sexed individuals, demonstrating techniques for exploring variation in cemetery contexts that do not depend on sorting by discrete osteological sex categories.

Connecting to the issues addressed by Arnold and Stratton, Jordan's (2016) paper on Iron Age mortuary traditions in Britain foregrounds the potentially multiple points of significance in any burial assemblage. Jordan also points to a number of complicating binds, including the scale of the mortuary program. The Cornwall case study shows how reductive interpretations of gender may result when the evidence is already expected to accord with patterning at a particular scale of analysis.

3. *Are we imposing our problematic relationship with the binary binds onto the past? How do we enact more inclusive disciplinary practices?*

Several of the authors dealing with material culture and practice address the persistence of binary and hierarchical concepts of agency, the body, and knowledge. Ferrer's (2016) paper counters the legacy of colonialist and androcentric narratives of first millennium BCE Sicily, which confined agency to certain actors

and spheres in a hierarchically ordered binary structure—*e.g.*, colonizer vs. colonized, elite vs. commoner, man vs. woman, ritual vs. domestic. Ferrer’s analysis of items often ignored in traditional accounts of communal celebrations carried out in Sicilian *acropoleis* considers the agency of some women as well as the continuity between the political, ritual, and everyday.

Belcher’s (2016) object-biography methodology traces the corporeal and affective interactions between Halaf figurines and the people who used them. The new figurine typology emergent from the evidence represents a spectrum of embodiments where preoccupation with gender binaries does not appear to have been the primary concern.

Finally, Cobb and Croucher (2016) address contemporary gender and sexuality binaries among practitioners of the profession, arguing that incorporating an assemblage theory approach (*e.g.*, DeLanda 2006) can transform fieldwork and pedagogical hierarchies in ways that promote diversity within the discipline and its reconstructions of the past.

Some authors offer theoretical (*e.g.*, Matic, Moral) and methodological (*e.g.*, Belcher, Cobb and Croucher, Stratton) frameworks that could be adapted in various contexts, and others present grounded case studies or point to previously overlooked domains of evidence that renew ability to think differently (*e.g.*, Arnold, Ferrer, Jordan, Matic). While the contributors demonstrate various commitments to sex and gender categorization, we find a common attempt to resist predetermining the types of persons we expect to see. Since normative assumptions delimit the range of what is standard and also what is variable, the contributors to this issue have sought to engage with variability, including what counts as ambiguity in the first place, to open up possibilities for other kinds of identities and bodies, which may involve other kinds of (non)binaries.

## Conclusions

*We must begin with the notion of the need to theorise gender, not accept it as a “given” category.*

*Catherine Roberts (1993: 19)*

*It is an open question whether, or in what form, gender will prove to be a relevant axis of difference in any given domain of inquiry; these are questions that can only be settled through systematic empirical inquiry and probing conceptual analysis.*

*Alison Wylie (2007: 213)*

We have not attempted to pose a specific commitment to sex and gender for our participants to follow; rather, the authors extend the boundaries of epistemological viability in the context of their own case studies. The heuristic utility of the biological:social divide, particularly in mortuary contexts, will likely continue to act as a site of contestation—*theoretically, methodologically, and politically*. Nevertheless, a salient trend among our contributors is an emphasis on allowing variability and difference to emerge, destabilizing the analytical priority of two main legacies of the binary binds: (1) an insistence on either/or categorical coherence and claims to closure and (2) a discouragement of contradictory variation. A claim to the categorical coherence of identity tends to create an impetus to re-establish the normative rather than to re-interrogate it, naturalizing sex and gender as closed contexts that account for the core of personhood and

dismissing any variation that might resist accordance with this standard. The issue with binary starting points is that they so often become stopping points around which variability deviates, rather than catalysts for dynamic ways of thinking and doing. Continuing to question the binary binds and their monopoly on conceptual constructs, normativity, and spheres of inquiry opens up opportunities for exploring the ontological possibilities of sexed and gendered subjects as well as personhood more broadly.

This opening up of inquiry calls for a “de-containment” of categorical residue. The binary binds pose a knowability of the subject: that we know what was significant for past people in the construction of sex, gender, and sexuality; that we can already identify how these categorical groupings related to and influenced each other; and that we already understand their salience for the constitution of personhood. Such a priori determinations naturalize a transhistorical containment of and correspondence among sexual difference, gender identity, and sexuality. We wish, rather, to “de-contain” the necessary links posed by the binary binds among sex, gender, and sexuality, re-focusing attention onto their constitution instead of their assumed interrelationships, boundaries, and social effects. In other words, we wish to highlight not only variable persons, but also variable processes of personhood. The search for difference must go beyond isolating deviance in the interstices of a binary normative.

The problem, then, is not as much with the binary as it is with the binds (see Matić 2016; Moral 2016)—the confinement of difference and variability to only certain persons, contexts, and processes. In addition to engaging with non-binary identities and framing sex, gender, and sexuality as complex and contingent, the papers in this issue have attempted to approach binaries, where they may have existed, in ways that do not automatically bind them according to a universal (modern Western) standard. Thus, we do not attempt to universalize the non-binary, but to (1) destabilize the mandates posed by the binary binds about what difference looks like and how it emerges, (2) contribute to the corpus of intersectional literature that situates gender and the body in relational contexts, and (3) challenge normative assumptions that remain implicit in methodological approaches, reconfiguring representations of the past and practices in the present. Reaching new insights entails asking new questions (Geller 2009a: 510–511; Spencer-Wood 2011; Sterling 2015), exploring possibilities for the body and identity that move beyond the instantiation of or aberration from normative categories (Fuglestedt 2014; Matić 2016; Moral 2016). Following appeals to contend with, rather than explain away, ambiguities as the way forward to conceptualizing difference (Conkey 2007; Gero 2007), we respond to sex and gender as questions—“troubling, unresolved, propitious” (Butler 2004: 192).

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