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## Review of *Women in Ancient America* by Karen Olsen Bruhns and Karen E. Stothert

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Women in Ancient America.** Karen Olsen Bruhns and Karen E. Stothert. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999. xvi+343pp. Figures, notes, references, index. \$34.95 cloth (ISBN 0806131691).

It is well known that the role and contribution of women to prehistory has long been ignored or undervalued. Because women represent approximately one half of humanity, have done so in the past, and make a contribution by sheer numbers alone, this book is a necessary attempt to remedy the shortcomings in the writing of American prehistory as it pertains to women and gender. The authors state in its preface that their book is “an introduction to the study of women in the American past.”

The first chapter lays out the method for the study of women and gender in archeology, the authors stressing the diversity of women’s roles and values in non-western societies, a theme often repeated. The next three chapters look at women from the first Americans (Paleoindians), through the Archaic, to women in food-producing societies and their contribution to the evolution of food production. The next five chapters evaluate women’s participation in various social institutions: households, production and specialization, religion, power, war and conquest. These chapters rely heavily on women in state societies, but provide a glimpse of women’s participation in a temporal cross-section of societies. Although this organization works, it creates repetition, the same societies and specific women being used as examples in several chapters (such as the two Denzante women discussed in chapters on both power and war).

This necessary and useful volume serves as an antidote to most of American prehistory. The authors provide a focused view of women and gender across the continent and rely on a broad range of regional literature. Some will undoubtedly object to the lack of in-depth treatment of specific regions or the exclusion of some data. In that regard I hope the authors do not recoil, but bring out a revised edition. This is a book that should be on every archeologist’s shelf.

The Great Plains provide a number of examples of women’s roles. Most of these are well known to regional specialists; the authors, however, supply a cross-cultural context for examples such as the “manly hearted women,” placing this institution in a broad arena of women’s roles in warfare.

The volume is not without its faults. While Paleoindian big-game hunter enthusiasts, and particularly George Frison, are criticized, readers should know that Frison is perhaps most responsible for deconstructing the “Man the Hunter” depictions, such as in Figure 2.1 (p. 26). Problems exist with the juxtaposition of deconstructed Paleoindian big-game hunters (p.27) and unquestioned Archaic broad spectrum foragers (p. 49). The authors often rely on “women at home” scenarios to see or interpret women in prehistory, especially in hunter-

gatherer societies where few data exist on women's roles and methods for examining prehistory differently than in the ethnographic record are scarce. The volume leaves unclear whether the focus is on women alone or gender (at least women and men). Men and gender processes play prominently, but little mention is made of any but male and female. Although easy to read, the lack of internal citations and the relegation of chapter notes to the end of the volume make the search for sources a nightmare and the evaluation of statements by looking up references problematic. Finally, while the authors claim they "tested" (p. 274) ideas about women, no testing exists, only a narrative (though in fairness the authors intend to present their volume in the narrative mode).

Despite these flaws, this is a useful volume for all prehistorians, including those of the Great Plains, either as text for a "Women in Prehistory" course or a good source book. Students will enjoy mining it for ideas and hypotheses about women, women's roles, and gender processes. **Marcel Kornfeld**, *Department of Anthropology, University of Wyoming*.