

2001

Review Essay: Reading the Reading of Gender in Archaeology

Katherine Howlett

Follow this and additional works at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha>



Part of the [Archaeological Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Howlett, Katherine (2001) "Review Essay: Reading the Reading of Gender in Archaeology," *Northeast Historical Archaeology*: Vol. 30-31 31, Article 14.

<https://doi.org/10.22191/neha/vol31/iss1/14> Available at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha/vol31/iss1/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Northeast Historical Archaeology by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

Review Essay

Reading the Reading of Gender in Archaeology

Katherine Howlett

IN PURSUIT OF GENDER: WORLDWIDE ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPROACHES edited by Sarah Milledge Nelson and Myriam Rosen-Ayalon 2001, *Gender and Archaeology Series 1*, AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek California. 416 pages, ill., maps, \$34.95 (paper); \$85.00 (cloth).

GENDER AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF DEATH edited by Bettina Arnold and Nancy L. Wicker 2001, *Gender and Archaeology Series 2*, AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek California. 198 pages, ill., maps, \$26.95 (paper); \$69.00 (cloth).

When reviewing the literature on gendered archaeological research, one finds few monograph-length case studies using gender as a primary or integrated focus. Instead, most of the studies are found in edited volumes of articles or papers, often drawn from thematic conference sessions. As a consequence of the prevalent format, most case studies or critical analyses are either brief, generalized overviews or very narrowly focused interpretations of isolated datasets. These formats are very limiting for the treatment of a cultural concept as large and complex as gender.

This past year, AltaMira has produced not one but *two* books in their *Gender and Archaeology* series, both edited volumes of papers presented at thematic conferences. This format is unlikely to draw in those skeptical of the utility of gender studies. For those who are already drawn in, the brevity and contradictory interpretations presented can be very frustrating. At the same time, these publications make a positive contribution by adding to the corpus of work and existing dialog on gender. Furthermore, the two volumes are enormously informative when read from a historiographic perspective. Together they provide a good sense for where gender studies in archaeology originated, how that starting point has affected current research trajectories, and the strengths and weaknesses of existing approaches. If you are looking for a single methodological model or a supportive bit of evidence, go straight to the table of con-

tents and select specific articles to read. If you are looking for the bigger picture on gender studies, read all of them, because the two volumes represent different ways of “packaging” or conceptualizing the way to read gender archaeologically.

The current status of gender studies is neatly summed up in Nelson and Rosen-Ayalon’s introduction to *In Pursuit of Gender* as “experiencing growing pains.” There is a surprising level of discomfort evident in this overview. Ordinarily an editor’s job in introducing a published group of papers is to stress continuity, complementarity, cohesion. Here, the diversity of methods and frank disagreement of interpretation are quite apparent. While initially hard to take, I came to understand that multiplicity is a characteristic of a growing discourse, and the disagreement is, well, honest. We just do not often see it in print in this fashion. For example, in a section summary Nelson discusses John Parkington’s interpretation of South African rock art, “While it is somewhat troublesome... it is not a requirement of gender archaeology that our results be politically correct—they do need to consider possible alternative explanations and to demonstrate that even given androcentric ethnographies in the past, the proposed explanation is the best available” (p. 13). Ouch. Do you think she liked his paper?

With eighteen articles and twenty-four authors from around the world, it is inevitable that there will be disagreement, although it is

indirectly expressed, as these authors are not actually engaging one another. The articles cover a fairly wide geographic range, with slightly more Asian studies, but coverage also of Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, North America, and one lonely entry from South Africa. The authors' origins are less varied with fully half of them from the United States.

The disparity among the papers is most evident in methodology. A fair number of studies rely very heavily on an empirical, statistical basis, which I started to think of as the Feminist New Archaeology. Like the New Archaeology of the 1960s and 1970s, which sought to define broad patterns of human behavior (Trigger 1989), these studies would like to find mathematically predictable, formulaic means for identifying gender. It is in part a reactionary response to the criticism that gendered archaeology stems from a political agenda and as such is not evidence-based (Wylie 1992). While it is rather important to assure that these case studies are actually grounded in evidence, often they run into the same difficulties of the broader New Archaeology movement and are decontextualized, dehumanized, long on technique and short on meaning. For example, Nelson *et al.*, "The Impact of Women on Household Economies: A Maya Case Study," conducted statistical analyses of ethnoarchaeological observations collected in San Mateo, Guatemala, coding contributions to household economy, markers of wealth, wage income, and evidence of spatially discrete work areas. The idea was to assess if any correlations existed between poverty and women's contributions to household economy through craft production and/or wage labor, and if craft production in the home by women meant evident separate (read: gendered) workspaces. While conceptually the authors are onto some interesting ideas, especially tracking ties of gender to class and material signals of gender, the execution is overwhelmed. For as many variables as were collected (an exhaustive coded list was included), nothing in the study design spoke to men's economic contributions. I think it is difficult to fully interpret gendered response to economic conditions when we do not know anything about half the adult popu-

lation. I am also a little uneasy with the implied hypothesis. If they are testing the proposition that women become more visible in worsening conditions, does this mean that conversely, under the best of conditions, women are invisible? And why are they only considering the utilization of cash potential to be meaningful? I am sure that it was not the intention of the authors to suggest such a model, however it is easy to lose that level of meaning when asking your multivariate statistical analyses to show you the answer. "Even efforts to classify 'objectively' by searching for 'natural' clusters of attributes within large data matrices are subjective to the extent that the listing of attributes is based on the archaeologists' knowledge and sense of the significance of the material they are analyzing" (Trigger 1989: 383). Notably, no significant correlations between increased craft production and spatially distinct working areas could be discerned. The distressing conclusion of the authors is not that they need to revise their study or questions, but rather that gendered household production is all but invisible materially.

In contrast, Gero and Scattolin, "Beyond Complementarity and Hierarchy: New Definitions for Archaeological Gender Relations," present their case study of household production using a contextualized interpretive approach. The first section of this paper is a critical review of gendered interpretations. The authors warn against the use of simplistic, nearly Boolean or binary frameworks, suggesting that the complex construction of gender at both the level of individual social identity and broader social interaction cannot be encapsulated under generalized systems of inequality versus complementarity or egalitarianism. Next the authors present a case summary of features, artifacts, and trace element analyses from several excavated house floors in northern Argentina from the early Formative period. These data show that in at least two of the households there is evidence of copper working occurring in the same space as major food preparation activities. Using this evidence as an example, they discuss the implications for gendered production on material and spatial levels, rejecting dichotomous interpretive strategies including

hierarchy versus complementarity and domestic versus specialized labor. Their argument is similar to the ideas of hegemonic discourse used primarily in assessing expressions of socioeconomic class (e.g., Beaudry, Cook and Mrozowski 1991) but also as applied to gender as negotiated power (Nelson 1997). It emphasizes the fluid nature of gender identity by representing the complex ties to intra- and extra-household production without isolating a single group of producers or measures of productive capabilities.

These two articles are good examples of the range of methods you will find in *In Pursuit of Gender*. Some studies draw on huge datasets with conclusions benchmarked on *chi*-squared tests. Others have rather limited evidence and are highly speculative, interpretive accounts. But this is not an either-or proposition. Hassan and Smith, "Soul Birds and Heavenly Cows: Transforming Gender in Predynastic Egypt," combine quantitative analysis of graves with an extensive interpretation of mythology. Furthermore, they spend much of their introduction describing and qualifying the nature of the data, defining and relating sex and gender, and anticipating what the data can and cannot tell us. It is wonderful to see research drawing on such a broad range of evidence and interpretive strategies, though the imperative to include so much nearly overloads the presentation.

Another point of diversity to consider is data source. Quite a few studies make use of mortuary contexts with other lines of evidence. The combination allows for a more contextualized approach than simple associations of grave goods with biologically sexed skeletons, and burials are mostly used as secondary, mitigating or comparative evidence. For example, Rubinson, "Through the Looking Glass: Reflections on Mirrors, Gender, and Use among Nomads," challenges prior interpretations of gendered use and meaning of mirrors in non-mortuary contexts by comparing them to the occurrence of these items in burials. Another popular data source is various forms of iconography, including rock art, figurines both inside and outside of burials, and architectural art. Discerning gendered representations sometimes leads to explicit description and quantification of anatomy, though the

alternative makes for a fairly weak interpretation. Consider Shoocongdej, "Gender Roles Depicted in Rock Art: A Case from Western Thailand," whose method for determining gender is never defined, though given the frequency of the word "possibly" one may suspect that possibly the author is not quite sure. On the other hand, Parkington, "Men, Women, and Eland: Hunting and Gender among the San of Southern Africa," presents a detailed description of representational human elements and their correlation with the depicted activities in rock paintings. He compares these depicted gender roles to ethnographic records of San cosmological myths and social practices. Despite the warning in Nelson's introduction and the offending suggestion of male dominance, I found this to be a thought-provoking study of cognitive structures expressed in rock art.

Burials and iconography are popular sources of information about gender because we believe them to be conscious expressions of identity, which in theory make them easily read. The performance of gender, the ways in which our daily activity is affected by this identification (often thoughtlessly), is encoded in other types of contexts, integrated with all the other strands of cultural directive. Seeking this information in habitation or workplace sites (and sometimes these are the same) we have to deal with a less conscious (re)presentation of these identities. Several authors undertake this investigation of gender-as-lived, for example in the household analyses discussed earlier. Other contributions utilize middens (Cooper, "The Enigma of Gender in the Archaeological Record of the Andaman Islands"), ethnohistoric documentation of trade (Bacus, "Accessing Prestige and Power: Women in the Political Economy of Protohistoric and Early Historic Visayan Polities"), and evidence of health, diet, and musculoskeletal wear (Claassen, "Mothers' Workloads and Children's Labor during the Woodland Period").

Interestingly, when one considers the interpretive frameworks used in these studies some common elements are evident. Most assume some critical stance, wherein the results of the case study are set against precedent studies of either gender in general or the context type in

particular. Quite a few include a justification for the examination of gender and discussion of gender bias in archaeology in an introduction. The American and western European researchers seem less defensive and more comfortable with the gender focus. In contrast, some researchers from other regions include research backgrounds in which the influence of national history and politics clearly set the agenda, or where the issue of gender never made it to the table. Even among western researchers, there are still some in the stages of recognizing and/or acknowledging women in the archaeological record. It is promising, though, to see that many have also moved forward to look at complex cognitive perspectives on gender, or the intersection and integration of gender with class, age, and ethnicity. Claassen, for example, makes a very good case for age being an influential factor in the division of labor in emergent agricultural societies. Lindruff, "Women's Lives Memorialized in Burial in Ancient China at Anyang," presents a great case study for looking at class and gender in Anyang elite women who were valued for their skills as military leaders. Another intriguing avenue is the investigation of "third" genders or gender mutability; Arnold, " 'Sein und Werden': Gender as Process in Mortuary Ritual," provides a well-supported argument against assuming ties between biological sex and gender in the mortuary record. She notes a number of ethnographic examples in which such mutability of identity is expressed materially. Arnold is one of the editors of the other book under review here, so it is not surprising that these ideas are more thoroughly incorporated in *Gender and the Archaeology of Death*.

Overall, *In Pursuit of Gender* paints a portrait of the current state of gender studies in archaeology. It is a family portrait. The lack of paradigmatic unity might make the family look dysfunctional, but many new subfields in the social science look the same. In fact, the one bit of widely accepted gender theory the book tries to hold up—by having sections for Ideology, Roles, and Relations—fails, because the studies cannot be neatly stuffed into these categories. The point is made, albeit indirectly, that these categories cannot be addressed sep-

arately. While the quality of the cases ranges, it is oddly refreshing to have the disagreement, the uncertainty, and the process, if you will, open to public scrutiny.

The second volume under review here, *Gender and the Archaeology of Death*, has many of the same issues at stake. While it is also an edited volume, encompassing a wide geographic range, and using a diversity of methods and analytical foci, the common use of mortuary contexts makes this volume more coherent. The introduction by its editors, Arnold and Wicker, acknowledges that "emerging awareness of the importance of gender as a component of archaeological interpretation has so far tended to ghettoize its practitioners, a trend to which this volume regrettably contributes by singling out gender as a 'special' area of inquiry" (p. vii). Further implied in their discussion is the notion that mortuary studies are also ghettoized, at least in the United States. Just as gender studies are incomplete when only used to see isolated, previously underrepresented groups, mortuary data alone provide an incomplete and static portrait of social identity, and ought to be routinely compared to other sources of information whenever they are available. Fortunately the authors in this volume demonstrate that while women, gender, and burials are the common elements, they are not the only elements under discussion.

As Arnold and Wicker note, the best studies are those done in conjunction with written records, though how those records are used varies considerably among the authors. Scott, "Killing the Female? Archaeological Narratives of Infanticide," argues, for example, that the widespread assumption that all infanticide seen in the mortuary context indicates selective preference of males is based in part on a poor reading and inappropriate extrapolation of historical records. Stalsberg, "Visible Women Made Invisible: Interpreting Varangian Women in Old Russia," also notes the failure or misuse of written documentation on women. In these records, women are virtually absent, while in the burials they are not only present but possibly overrepresented, as women's markers of Varangian ethnicity (metal brooches) preserve well where no com-

parable marker of men's ethnicity survives. Stalsberg must balance both sources of incomplete information against one another.

On the other hand, it is also fascinating to see two readings of gender in burials with no comparable historic or ethnographic information. These studies should encourage prehistorians not to ignore this facet of identity. Hamlin, "Sharing the Load: Gender and Task Division at the Windover Site," looks at a Florida Early Archaic pond burial site to assess gender roles through distribution of grave goods by functional category. The occurrence of these categories was compared to the determination of biological sex and age (adult, subadult, or infant/neonate) of the individual. While the functional groupings are subjectively defined, and therefore debatable, the model is an interesting one with some provocative results. For example, subadults tended to be associated with categorically "domestic" items and items associated exclusively with adult females, suggesting that children shared the workload of adult women. Claassen's study, discussed earlier, reaches these same conclusions. This is an exciting twist to the interpretation of socially organized labor or production that has not been given enough attention. Perhaps because we are so accustomed to looking for divisions of labor, in the classic terminology, we often overlook the relations of labor for which we can probably all find modern analogs.

Dianna Doucette's study, "Decoding the Gender Bias: Inferences of Atlatls in Female Mortuary Contexts," also uses exclusively mortuary data. She compares burials at the Indian Knoll site, and the interpretation of atlatl inclusions, to a single burial at Annasnapet Pond. Archaeologists at Indian Knoll found that a significant number of individuals interred with atlatl components were female. They interpreted this, not as a sign the women used the weapons, but as an indication that the inclusion was a symbolic. The Annasnapet Pond remains contained the inorganic elements of two atlatls, positioned in such a way that suggested that the entire weapon shafts were buried. Whereas previous estimates of the dart shaft's length were much longer, these shafts were of a length usable by individuals of varying physical size. In other

words, it is possible to imagine women as atlatl hunters, and believe an atlatl in a woman's grave meant the same thing as an atlatl in a man's grave. Doucette handily deconstructs much of the gender bias built into the archaeological knowledge and literature surrounding these weapons.

The most interesting work in this volume comes from those authors seeking to push us out of the two-gender rut. Of course it is much simpler to be guided by the biological evidence when looking at human remains; however, several authors point out that a sex-gender disjunction represented in a burial is far more common than you might believe. Weglian, "Grave Goods Do Not a Gender Make: A Case Study from Singen am Hohentwiel, Germany," compares biological determination of sex to body positioning and grave goods, and finds that there is a significant degree of crossover in the physical sex and cultural expressions of identity. Crass, "Gender and Mortuary Analysis: What Can Grave Goods Really Tell Us?," discusses the difficulties in using mortuary data to interpret gender using Inuit burials as an example. The ethnographic evidence of Inuit gender systems, which have a high degree of mutability, suggests that neither grave goods nor biological remains can be taken at face value when assessing gender identity. Furthermore many processes can alter the original context and skew interpretations, including differential preservation, looting, historically poor excavation and documentation, or even political pressures. She concludes that reading gender in the mortuary context can only be done by using evidence of all these processes. Our dynamic, lived gender identity does not become fixed in death, as external processes continue to alter the portrait. One of the post-mortem processes is our own reexamination and reinterpretation of archaeological evidence. This is demonstrated by Holliman's review of biological data, "Warfare and Gender in the Northern Plains: Osteological Evidence of Trauma Reconsidered," in light of ethnographic documentation of *berdache* or two-spirit individuals.

So, where does this book leave us? The tighter theoretical and methodological focus gives this volume greater depth and sophisti-

cation, while *In Pursuit of Gender* has greater breadth. *Gender and the Archaeology of Death* is a more coherent and unified volume that successfully increases our understanding of the possible uses of mortuary data. However, mortuary contexts alone fail to adequately inform us on gender. Once again, it is a reflection of the current nature of social science that each answer often yields new questions. These studies highlight the complex nature of gender research and the need to consider intersecting identities, multiple lines of evidence, archaeological formation processes, and our own knowledge construction.

To return to the historiographic questions on the archaeology of gender, where did this line of research begin and where is it headed? Researchers began by leveling critical charges of gender bias against mainstream archaeological interpretation, and I believe that the legitimacy of those charges has been well established. Since then, we have sought to correct the imbalance of representation, exploring a range of methods, including exclusive focus on women, exclusive focus on burials, iconographic representations, ethnohistory and ethnographic analogy, statistical analyses, and biological data. We have found that none of these are sufficient in isolation. We have become increasingly adept at critically reviewing the work of others, which in turn has made us more aware of the subtleties, exceptions, and mitigating factors evident in the case studies we try to construct. Even the internal structure we have used to define gender (ideology, roles, and relations) is in fact a set of mutually inclusive categories. It is increasingly apparent that if we are to discern gender we need to recognize that it is one part of socially derived identity, embedded with many others. This recognition must form the basis for future approaches. I hope, and most of these authors seem to see, that we will move towards more fully contextualized and integrated analyses of single or multiple related sites, disseminated in a format that allows the expression of this fuller picture. I do not doubt that when this happens these volumes will be cited as part of the ground-work.

References

- Beaudry, Mary C., Lauren J. Cook, Stephen A. Mrozowski
1991 *Artifacts and Active Voices: Material Culture as Social Discourse*. In *The Archaeology of Inequality*, ed. by R. McGuire and R. Paynter, 150–191. Blackwell Publishers, Oxford UK and Cambridge USA.
- Nelson, Sarah Milledge
1997 *Gender in Archaeology: Analyzing Power and Prestige*. AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek, California.
- Trigger, Bruce G.
1989 *A History of Archaeological Thought*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK.
- Wylie, Alison
1992 *The Interplay of Evidential Constraints and Political Interests: Recent Archaeological Research on Gender*. *American Antiquity* 57: 15–35.
- Katherine Howlett is a project archaeologist with the Andrew Fiske Memorial Center for Archaeological Research at University of Massachusetts Boston. She recently completed her M.A. in historical archaeology with a thesis on gendered interpretations of lithics from a Contact Period Native American site. Her current work focuses on the Sylvester Manor site, a 17th-century provisioning plantation on Shelter Island, New York.
- Katherine Howlett
Andrew Fiske Memorial Center for
Archaeological Research
University of Massachusetts Boston
100 Morrissey Boulevard
Boston, MA 02125
katherine.howlett@umb.edu