

Archaeologists' interpretations of sex and gender



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How have archaeologists' attempts to interpret sex and gender relations in the past changed?

Gender, as a point of request in the investigation of prehistoric studies, has not been of essential enthusiasm until late history. It has just been as of late in the last thirty or forty years that the investigation of sex and gender relations as far as examining it in archaeological revelation has been a point that archaeologists have been truly seeking after. The subject of gender has still not been argued to the degree that which we need it to be, the sub topics considered a detail of investigation as opposed to the core interest. One of the obstinate conclusions on this theme is on account of it is for the most part accepted that the patriarchal society has been the prevailing social structure all through the current societies, along these lines to study sexual orientation relations is to summon a similar outcome through numerous social orders (Bettina and Wicker 2001). However, this is the centre issue with the path in which societies have been celebrated internationally through western conviction frameworks hence making suppositions about the way that sex and sex are considered inside those social orders subject to present day gauges of understanding it is imperative re-evaluate the way of social structures that have been resolved through one-sided suspicions keeping in mind the end goal to better build a photo of an antiquated social orders.

In the last 40 years or so, Feminism has become one of the key influences for archaeologists, especially the post-processualists. Feminism was also one of the driving forces behind the interest in practice, meaning and identity in archaeological theory. It originated when women questioned why there was

an absence of women in archaeological fields and also from the past that archaeologists wrote about. For instance, there were only a small number of fields that were run by women and although, there are usually more women that study archaeology than men, after they graduate, more men decide to get a job in archaeology. There is a drop off in number of female archaeologists with age. You could ask, why does feminism matter in archaeology? Some people would say that it is just about diversity, when it comes to feminism, allowing more equality between men and women. However, it is not just about this. It is also about the potential of archaeology as a subject. Many statements or 'stereotypes' made about gender and sexuality are still presented as timeless; Women care for children, men are superior leaders, etc. However, it can be argued that, the time depth of archaeology gives us the chance to modify these views and instead offer different narratives for the history of gender and sexuality. To show that it is not always the same, that it has changed through time and space. It is because archaeology is a potentially powerful subject that we have to think about these issues in the long term.

In order to tackle the issue of gender, we must discuss what gender is and whether there is an absolute biological difference. One of the standard definitions of bodily identity is the classic biological description which is of two genders dictated by chromosomes, with females having XX chromosomes and males XY. The traditional biological view that sex defines gender was criticised by Simone de Beauvoir who showed that the ideas of what a woman should be were not natural but cultural, "*I was not born, but rather, became a woman*". People were expected to behave in certain ways.

The idea that girls like pink, that they play with dolls not guns and that they're passive quiet and submissive. Those classic ideas about what a woman was, particularly at the time Beauvoir was writing are not at all natural but in fact cultural that are learned, that society placed upon us. In the New Archaeology, there was no consideration of gender. There was always the constant use of 'man' and a failure to engage with gender meant that there were essentially no roles for women in the past, and even if there were a role, it would most likely be secondary work and usually based on assumption rather than evidence. A particular example would be the idea that man was the hunter and woman the gatherer.

Feminism had a huge impact in archaeology in the form of three waves which challenged the status quo. The first wave asked simple questions such as; where are the women in the past? Why aren't there that many female archaeology professors? Why do men receive more benefits than women? Meg Conkey and Joan Gero who wrote the book *Engendering Archaeology*, which was the first active attempt to think about what the role of women in prehistory was. A lot of first wave feminism comes out of these two archaeologists (Gero and Conkey 1991). The second wave of feminism is even more concerned with the role of women and the sense that archaeologists have always presumed that men did all the important stuff (Nelson et al 1994). Janet Spector's book *What This Axl Means* thinks about the role of women in Dakota Village. As a result of all this, we get an increasing emphasis on the study of past gender relations. So, it is not just about what women are doing but about what the relationship between men and women in the past. The third wave of Feminism begins to critique the

other waves by asking whether the gender categories are universal, why do we assume that categories such as men and women have any meaning in the past? It also began to ask about transgender people, alternative genders and also different histories of sexualities. It is about thinking in a more complicated way and by this point, were not basing upon basic categories about men and women. Mary Louise Sorensen's book *Gender Archaeology* focuses more on gender archaeology rather than feminist archaeology, thinking about the different gender combinations and how it all plays out.

At this point, it can be argued that it is not just about women now.

Archaeologists have taken a huge interest in masculinity, asking questions such as; How were male identities constructed in the past? How has the role of men changed? A solid example can be found in the works of Paul Treharne on the bronze age in Europe where he is looking at the idea of a warrior identity which we see in some of the graves in central and eastern Europe. This idea that there was a particular role in society and that they also had a particular look.

The traditional sex model suggests that sex is biologically determined, that its clear genetically but also through sexual characteristics and the idea that sex is universal and natural. Opposed to this, we get the concept of gender, and gender in this sense is culturally determined, the product of our own experiences and the society that we grow up in as well as demonstrating through clothing, behaviour and possible bodily alterations. If we argue that that this is what it is about, if its sex being biological and gender being cultural, then isn't this just a nature/culture divide. In a sense, no. It is a lot more complicated; XX and XY are just two of eleven different possible

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chromosome combinations. Some people can be genetically XX but have male characteristics and vice-versa. In fact, the two-sex model, the idea that sex is just these two opposed identities is just a particular product of the way that we have thought about science in the west, in the same way that gender is a construction and that we are easily willing to accept that. We see it as culturally determined, the product of the society we grow up in.

Judith Butler looked at what we call Gender Performativity which was the attempt to move beyond the nature culture divide in our thinking about sexuality in the past. She argues that gender and sex are not pre-determined by our biology but something that we produce through practice and performance. Butler argues that there are male and female regulatory ideals and so it is not that we are born male and female but from the very moment we are born, our gender identity begins to be constructed and it is certainly affected by the regulatory ideals that society has for us (i. e. parents etc.). Butler uses the example of “ girling the girl”; this notion that the midwife lifts up the baby and says ‘ it’s a girl’. Begins the process for gender performance. Her argument is that in acting and performing the gendered regulatory ideals, we also sustain the gender performance. Her idea of a regulatory ideal is the idea that there are key concepts of what it is to be male and what it is to be female and that these are very particular and historically constructed and that we often attempt to try and live up to them or perhaps to question them? So, the idea that wearing certain clothes, acting in certain ways, having particular ideas about how one would want their life to work out, the idea that women should want to have children. All of these help us to live up the standards that we can never actually quite

achieve. In doing so, we help to sustain these regulatory ideals. At one point, we can undermine and challenge regulatory ideals. By doing this we can act to shift them.

Butler is often accused of playing the body. We do not choose our genitalia so how can we perform our gender. Butler points out that we are not meant to deny the role of the body but instead to argue that our bodies and biology are caught up in social discourse. We do not live in a world where we can only understand our bodies through brute biology, our understandings of our bodies are also always shaped by our cultural context. You can think about how you think about your own body, whether you think about it as biological, the product of our DNA and genes we inherit from our parents, or whether is it cultural, eat particular foods to look a particular way. Modifications to the body can also be thought about; tattoos and piercing, as cultural things. As a result of this, they are often viewed as superficial.

What is personhood? “*The condition or state of being a person*” (Fowler). Not everyone understands sex, gender or the body in the same way across time and space and equally different cultures understand what it means to be a person differently. Who we recognise as a person, at what point do we recognise a person is different across culturally. In the west, we understand people and personhood to be about individualism, the idea that we are physically determined by our biology, that people have free will and as a result, they are responsible for their own actions and that we think this is the same in all time and space, and we consider the idea of the individual to be a natural state of being. This is a person who is bounded and defined by their skin. When the same way our bodies are not natural, the production of the

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western individual is not natural at all. Our individualism is created and sustained by our technology and culture. So, we have mobile phones, sleep in private beds, have diaries etc. All of these are cultural choices about the way we organise our world. The opposite of individual personhood is relational personhood and in this model a person is defined by the relationships that they have with others. There are differing ideas about free will and personal responsibility. If a person is defined by their relationships and the other people that surround them then free will and responsibility shift. In a more modern view, boundaries of the body, skin and person are viewed as more permeable.

The point is that if personhood isn't the same everywhere today, was it the same everywhere in the past? As a result, should we be walking about individuals in the past? In one sense, yes. People such as Hodder and Meskell would argue that we should be looking for individuals in the past and tell their stories. However, there are other archaeologists such as Thomas and Fowler, who believe that we shouldn't talk about individuals in the past as they are just a concept as a result of western philosophy. We should recognise that although past personhood might have some familiar aspects we cannot assume people in the past were individuals. Personhood allows us to think in interesting ways about what it means to be a person in the past. This stops us universally and presuming that everyone always and everywhere understands what it means to be human in the same way.

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