

*For the men in my life:*  
Hal, Erik, Mark, Stan, Sam, Chad, and Calvin

**GENDER IN  
ARCHAEOLOGY**

**Analyzing Power and Prestige**



1117  
**by Sarah Milledge Nelson**



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or no institution at all, have fewer opportunities to publish, since more time is spent on teaching or otherwise making a living. As noted above, much work on gender in archaeology has been circulated as gray literature, unpublished in professional journals. A compilation of such writings, in addition to new material, was itself created as camera-ready copy on a faculty member's computer, without much institutional help (M. Nelson, S. Nelson, and Wylie 1994), but was criticized for its typos as well as lauded for its content (Cullen 1995). Although I regret the errors, this type of carping indicates a lack of understanding of the substantial handicaps under which women archaeologists still labor, compared to equivalent men. We also lack wives to read over and correct (even perhaps type and edit) our work.

### Conclusions

The structure of archaeology as a discipline has not been welcoming to women. But lessons have been learned, and women archaeologists are talking to each other and offering mutual support. Women are networking in new ways, in spite of considerable risk to careers even now (S. Nelson and M. Nelson 1994). Margaret Conkey notes that organizers of women/gender conferences "are to be congratulated for having a vision and for having the professional and personal courage and energy to realize their goals in a still skeptical environment" (1993:3). A few women are secure enough and high enough on the career ladder to offer a leg up to those on the lower rungs, a boost they give willingly. The climate has improved, though not all the problems in the profession are solved. Jonathan Reyman (1992:77) notes that archaeology has "lost valuable people, and . . . overlooked important data or made serious errors of various sorts by ignoring women's contributions." The most hopeful part is the new energy with which gender studies are being pursued in archaeology. Women and men working in this subfield are beginning to form an "invisible college" (Kelley and Hanen 1988:154). The good news is that there are too many women in archaeology for exclusivity, and too much good work to simply be ignored by the patriarchs of the profession, as the following chapters reveal.

## CHAPTER THREE INTERPRETING GENDER IN THE PAST

### Theories and Strategies



The analysis of the past is shaped by the present; our choice of questions, our selection of evidence, our analyses, all are influenced by contemporary concerns. The reconstruction of the past in turn serves present need, as it clarifies or justifies the contours of present reality.

—Elizabeth Fec (1974:86)

I could accept real male power but found ways of rejecting real female power.

—Ian Hodder (1991a:13)

Interpreting the past is done within the framework of theories, and as we have seen the selection of data to bring to bear on our research questions is constrained by our theories. While engendering archaeology has been attempted within all archaeological paradigms, and I think this is proper and effective, some theories are more welcoming to the study of gender than others. Strategies for revealing gender also need to be considered, as well as the principles which guide the strategies, and the resources available to follow the strategies.

### Gender Implications of Archaeological Theories

For more than a quarter of a century the dominant archaeological paradigm in the English-speaking world was positivist and materialist. This paradigm, often called processualist archaeology, or sometimes "new" archaeology, has been perhaps the least available to feminist archaeology. Agency and values

are particularly important in feminist anthropology (di Leonardo 1991), but both are missing in processualist archaeology. Problems with the lack of space for human agency have been noted more and more insistently. Elizabeth Brumfiel, in describing the limitations of processualist archaeology, stresses that "ecosystem theory focuses on abstract behavior rather than the group of actors that control resources and power" (1992:553). This obscures any sense of who the controllers may be, and allows the assumption that they are exclusively male. George Cowgill critiques processual theory for being "acutely unsatisfactory about social phenomena . . . because it is excessively materialist and drastically underconceptualizes the individual actors from whose behavior large-scale social phenomena emerge" (1993:551). Although Cowgill is not specifically concerned with gender, his viewpoint is entirely applicable to a gendered approach to archaeology.

The notion that science is value-free has been another stumbling block. We archaeologists, being as steeped in our own cultures as other mortals, reflect cultural values related to personal achievement. Few are immune. It is germane that Bruce Trigger ties nomothetic, or generalizing, goals in prehistoric archaeology to the "desire of American archaeologists to conform to a more prestigious model of scholarly behavior, especially as the National Science Foundation became a major source of funding" (1986:201). Alice Kehoe additionally points out that funding became an individual effort under NSF, rather than the cooperative venture that archaeology had been before. She further notes that "discourse in the mode of science was the discourse of power" (1995:21), an observation particularly relevant to this book. Thus the values of science have influenced the values of archaeology, and of archaeologists as well. It is a serious problem that these values contain certain attitudes that are inimical to feminism, as well as to gender studies.

Research questions framed in terms of subsistence, population, or ecology, while they do efface agency, do not necessarily obscure gender differences, even though in practice they have often done so. In the early days of processual archaeology, explicit gender assumptions were made, such as that women made the pottery and that mothers taught daughters (Hill 1968, Longacre 1966, Deetz 1965). These papers, more than any others of the nascent "new" archaeology, drew fierce criticism of several kinds (Allen and Richardson 1971, Stanislawski 1973), which may have helped to push such topics off the agenda.

One way they were *not* criticized (but should have been by current standards) was for essentializing women's roles.

Not all challenges to the hegemony of the ecosystem paradigm have been feminist. Others have arisen from the application of Marxist theory to archaeology (e.g. Kristiansen 1983) and the insistence on the influence of ideology in the past rather than merely material conditions (e.g. Miller and Tilley 1984, Hodder 1992). Still others have examined the constructedness of our archaeological "reconstructions" (e.g. Shanks and Tilley 1987). These viewpoints are sometimes lumped together along with feminist archaeology as "postprocessualism," though they make strange bedfellows. Postprocessualist archaeologies, with their emphasis on agency, on ideology, on power, and on critiques of scientism in archaeology, may open up a space for an archaeology of gender, but they do not automatically motivate archaeologists to explore that space, nor do they necessarily welcome gender studies. Archaeological theory in all its guises has provided little room for feminist views—or even, as we have seen, for women archaeologists.

Margaret Conkey and Janet Spector (1984) began their pathbreaking article by acknowledging the space created for a feminist perspective by critiques of archaeologies that reinforce national mythologies, especially Mark Leone's work a decade earlier, in which he documented some of the ways in which nationalist views had invaded archaeological writings and understandings of the past (1973). This is important ground on which feminists can also stand, in the same way that other perspectives could build on feminist theory. But many postprocessual theorists fail to acknowledge their debt to feminism, and fail to recognize that gender is central to the issues they raise. Daniel Miller and Christopher Tilley (1984), in a devastating critique of archaeological practices, nevertheless focus on diachronic (extending over time) social change without much attention to half the human species. In a later paper, Tilley acknowledges that "theories of the human subject always tend to be simultaneously theories of the masculine" (1993:22), but he nevertheless misses the point of a gendered archaeology, perhaps due to limited acquaintance. "It is quite disgraceful that there is only one feminist book in existence in archaeology," he goes on to say, ignoring all the other published work that had accumulated by that time. In the same year students at the University of Michigan were able to compile and publish an annotated bibliography of almost two

hundred publications relating to gender in archaeology (Bacus et al. 1993). The invisibility and muting of most feminist work in archaeology is all too clear (Kehoe 1992a). The "quoting circles" of all theoretical stripes exclude virtually all gray literature as well as much of what women have managed, against heavy odds, to get into print.

Marxist archaeology, with its interests in "social difference, tension, conflict and negotiation" (Saitta 1992:887), would seem to have much in common with gendered archaeology, and should provide more space for and pay more heed to feminist debate than it has so far. Earlier important exceptions are the papers in *Power Relations and State Formation* (Patterson and Gailey 1987), but for the most part Marxist archaeology has either ignored gender or considered it as another kind of "class." Nevertheless, progress in including gender is evident. "Concrete ethnographic and ethnohistoric work has established the importance of these variables [power, gender, and ideology] in shaping human behavior" (Saitta 1992:888). Marxist archaeology, as so constructed, is a hopeful avenue of research for gendered archaeology, as it has been for gendered anthropology, but it does not guarantee an interest in gender. In practice, the emphasis on power often crowds out gender.

Marxist frameworks have guided archaeological research, including methodologies and interpretations, in a number of communist countries for half a century and more, including the former Soviet Union (Soffer 1983, Tringham 1991:96), China (Pearson 1983, Nelson 1995), and North Korea (Nelson 1995). Some important methodological breakthroughs resulted from this emphasis, including settlement archaeology and closer attention to technological details. But the lack of questioning implicit in the invariant underlying evolutionary framework is a distinct drawback, which hinders a more subtle engendering of the past. The scheme of matriarchal Neolithic society leading to patriarchal complex society is never argued, only stated as fact, based on 19th century works by Lewis Henry Morgan (1877) by way of Friedrich Engels (1881). Gender attributions made within this paradigm are presented in ways that are simply doctrinaire, and as such are unconvincing. Some attention is paid to gender issues in the Morgan/Engels scenario—but the whole scheme is androcentric, gender polarized, and reductionist, assuming simplistic worldwide gender relationships

at each stage. Thus Marxist theory in its several forms does not by itself provide a method for engendering archaeology

Middle Range Theory (MRT) is the name given to a body of ideas for translating contemporary observations about the archaeological record into inferences about past social dynamics. Ethnoarchaeology, experimental archaeology, and other "actualistic" studies are the arenas for building MRT. Researchers with various theoretical orientations have found MRT useful. This "source-side" work (Wylie 1989) helps choose between alternative explanations (Tschauer 1996), but to whatever extent these studies are based on distorted gender assumptions, or ignore gender altogether, they will not advance an understanding of gender in the past. Studies that consider specific types of relationships are needed. MRT could be used in ideological research, as well, to produce a "MRT of the mind" (Cowgill 1993). Application of this suggestion may turn out to be an important avenue for feminist archaeology to pursue, but it is important to avoid universalizing and essentializing gender roles in the process. Feminist archaeologists need to develop our *own* MRT.

While the postprocessualist debate would seem to resonate with the point being made here, for the most part the discussion has not taken androcentrism into account. For example, Ian Hodder (1982) failed to acknowledge feminism as an important source of postprocessual archaeology, though he rectified this oversight in a later publication (1992:84). And in spite of the general inattention to developing feminism, some of the feminist challenges find resonances elsewhere. For example, a direct critique of the role of power and prestige in the archaeological profession contains a statement of a situation known all too well to women: "We want archaeologists to recognise that charisma and social context play far more important a role in academic discourse than is usually acknowledged" (Johnson and Coleman 1990:16). Women archaeologists have been all too aware of this fact, and have discussed it in print (see chapters in M. Nelson, S. Nelson, and Wylie 1994), but the gender issue remains unacknowledged in Johnson and Coleman's paper.

Ecological, scientific, Marxist, postprocessual, and other archaeological theories have of course been critiqued, often by women. In spite of this, more women in the field, and more attention to gender by some archaeologists, has not made gender a central issue in the discipline; it is still

marginalized. The tables of contents of recent collections of theoretical papers in archaeology—at least those edited by men—show that few women archaeologists are included, with little or only passing reference to gender. In a collection of papers titled *American Archaeology Past and Future: A Celebration of the Society for American Archaeology 1935–1985* (Meltzer, Fowler, and Sabloff, eds. 1986), only one author (Watson 1986) even references Conkey and Spector (1984), seen as one of the pathbreaking papers by feminist archaeologists (Watson 1986). In that same volume Patty Jo Watson also cites Gero (1985), another classic paper in feminist archaeology, and again she is the only author in the volume to do so. Even Watson lumps these papers with “critical theorists” who believe that “the past is inaccessible unless we can analyze adequately, and then neutralize or circumvent, the social and political ideologies that bias and shape our understanding of it” (1986:444). While the postprocessualist critique opened possibilities, as noted above, gender issues were not specifically raised.

In *Archaeological Theory: Who Sets the Agenda?*, Norman Yoffee and Andrew Sherratt (1993) published three out of eleven papers by women, thus acknowledging the growing numbers of influential women in the field, but none of the papers address women or gender in the past (though the papers may be grounded in feminist perspectives). Even a book published as recently as 1995 (compiled from a conference that took place in 1992) contained no mention of gender, though it is entitled *Theory in Archaeology: A World Perspective* (Ucko 1995). It is clear that the archaeological male majority worldwide has taken little notice of the feminist revolution, though updated editions of a few archaeology texts show increasing awareness of gender (e.g. Patterson 1993, Thomas 1989). The “lenses” of androcentrism are thus mostly still present, regardless of the archaeological paradigm. If other disciplines have been transformed by feminism, why is archaeology so recalcitrant?

### Some Principles for Engendering Archaeology

As noted by several authors (Gifford-Gonzalez 1997, Conkey and Spector 1984), the problem is not that archaeology has been unaware of gender, but that gender arrangements of the present have been universalized and read back into the past. Therefore, I would like to paraphrase what I have written elsewhere (1997) about some basic requirements for a thoughtfully gendered

archaeology. These topics are elaborated in subsequent chapters, but it is useful to list them together here as a basis for further discussion.

### Essentialism

Gendered archaeology must be firmly based on the notion that differences among gender arrangements are what research should focus on, and we must abandon all attempts to explain gender in the past with reference to “universals” of women's biology or women's experiences. While it is true that all human groups, in order to continue, needed to reproduce, to make women's role in reproduction the centerpiece of an explanation for women's other roles in society is to ignore the variation in those roles. In my judgment, neither biological nor psychological essentialism is a productive place to begin understanding women's roles in the past.

### Division of Labor

A related point is that the division of labor by gender should not be taken for granted. It may not have existed in all societies. Division of labor by gender needs to be demonstrated for a given society, and then considered critically. Are all activities, locations, and artifacts allocated to a particular gender? Where is there comparability, overlap, or flexibility in gender roles?

### The Public/Private Dichotomy

The tendency to create opposites such as public versus private may inhere in Indo-European languages, but it is not wired into our brains, and it is important to begin any search for gender in the past without preconceived notions about women in the household and men in the public arena. Ethnographic examples of women assuming a variety of public roles should open our eyes to the androcentrism inherent in this dichotomy. Instead we should ask what roles were open to both women and men, and which were ungendered roles, and *why*.

### Homogenizing the Men and Women of a Culture

It is important not to begin with the premise that all the women of a given culture or all the men fill the same roles and do the same things. Finding gender does not mean that other categories of difference are not also meaningful or important for separating people into groups for work, rituals, or social events.

### Strategies for Gender Research

Producing real archaeological results is the challenge of current feminist archaeologists. Ian Hodder (1992:1) notes the need to combine theory and practice, and suggests that academic prestige systems have been responsible for the separation between method and theory (p. 3). Alison Wylie (1992a) challenges us to produce useful examples. Several strategies and resources have been noted by Mary Whelan (1995) and Cathy Costin (1996), which are considered and added to here. Strategies such as critiques of androcentrism, ethnographic analogy, and the direct historical approach are necessary first steps in arriving at a gendered archaeology.

### Critiques of Androcentrism

Basic work in becoming aware of the unconscious gendering of the past was necessary in order to begin afresh with *conscious* gendering of that past. While of course it is necessary to go beyond them in finding ways to engender the past that are neither androcentric nor ethnocentric, many topics still need to be critiqued and their biases explicitly exposed before we can move on. For example, my publication on the Upper Paleolithic female figurines pointed out biases based on the way men perceive women in our own culture, as well as in cultural attitudes toward breasts, nudity, and other characteristics of the figurines (1990a). Joan Gero (1993) draws attention to androcentric biases that underlie the study of Paleoindians in the Americas. These kinds of studies are useful for providing a level playing field for future studies of these topics.

### Ethnographic Analogy

Many cautions about the use of ethnographic analogy have been raised (see Duke and Wilson 1995:5-6 for a recent critique of the "tyranny of the ethnographic record")—and rightly so. Awareness of the effects of colonialism, of the bias of the ethnographer, of environmental change, and so forth, is critical, if the ethnographic record is to be of use to archaeologists. We must avoid assuming that past or recent cultures are relics of a stagnant or pristine past, as pointed out by Edwin Wilmsen (1989). However, wide-ranging citations from ethnographies on a particular topic (e.g. Wadley 1997 on women hunters) can open a variety of new possibilities for interpreting archaeological sites. Lyn Wadley found that what is considered

"hunting" varies considerably from culture to culture, and that women's contributions to the endeavor are very widely recognized. Examinations of cultures in similar relevant circumstances (for example, environment, population density, or continuous warfare) can similarly provide models for understanding the past.

Mary Whelan (1995), specifically considering the North American plains, points out the androcentric nature of Plains Indian ethnography, which was also documented in *The Hidden Half* (Albers and Medicine 1993). Whelan shows, too, that a new discovery, such as fragments of net in a Late Paleoindian site in Wyoming (Frison et al. 1986), require rethinking the standard notions of hunting as exclusively gendered male.

Cathy Costin (1996) notes that we need to be aware of the ethnographic data in craft production, but also to *beware* of it. "Perhaps our most relevant lesson from the ethnographic data is that craft production is gendered in largely idiosyncratic, historically contingent ways, making sweeping generalizations and general analogies problematic in many cases" (1996:116).

Thus, ethnographies help us to see alternative possibilities for interpreting archaeological sites, but they should never be applied without careful argument about why it is an appropriate analogy for that particular site.

### The Direct Historical Approach

Following cultures from their early encounters with western researchers into the archaeological past (which presumably contains the remains of their own ancestors) avoids some of the pitfalls of ethnographic analogy from unrelated studies, though it is not without analogous problems. The first accounts of contact might well have been androcentric, and the group could have been significantly changed by contact with colonizers, traders, and missionaries, or even by indirect contact. The reasons hypothesized that a particular part of the culture is believed to have persisted require specific argument.

### Ethnoarchaeology

Asking specifically gendered questions about artifacts and their distribution on archaeological sites is an important step in gendered site interpretation. Susan Kent (1995) has shown how risky some of our assumptions about space and tool use turn out to be. Many ethnoarchaeological studies that purport to explain archaeological patterns may be flawed by pertaining only

to one gender. Lewis Binford's (1986) study of men's disposal of artifacts in a hunting camp may reflect different behavior than disposal when women are along, or in other situations such as long-term occupation of a site. A cartoon by Laurent (1965) speaks to this point: a woman sweeping up in the cave explains to a man that she is preparing a stratigraphical problem.

### Resources for Engendering the Past

Although it may be possible to use any archaeological data to understand gender in the past, some types of data are more easily adapted to this purpose. These include depictions of humans, documents, burials, artifacts, and spatial arrangements of home sites and so forth. Furthermore, any argument is improved by having multiple lines of evidence. The more the following types of evidence can be weighed in the analysis, the more convincing and secure will be the results.

### Depictions of Women and Men

Archaeology is rich in representations of people in many media. They may be in three-dimensional form (portable or not), and made from many materials, painted on ceramics, or painted and pecked on larger surfaces. These are valuable traces of the past, but this rich lode cannot be treated as straightforward records of the past. Chapters in *The Role of Gender in Precolumbian Art and Architecture* (Miller 1988), for example, demonstrate a variety of ways to use such material. The relative attention given to women and men may demonstrate cultural emphasis by gender, while the activities portrayed can be assumed to have been significant in some way for that culture. A common problem of interpretation is that figures for which the gender is not clearly depicted are often assumed to be male (Whelan 1995, Levy 1995), so this potential pitfall must be avoided.

### Written Documents

The usual cautions apply in regard to texts, which cannot be used uncritically. Yet they may provide a wealth of information about details of a culture that can be combined with the archaeological record to learn about gender relationships. Rita Wright (1996) uses texts regarding weavers in the Ur III period in Mesopotamia in the late third millennium B.C. She is able to compare temple policies with those of the state as they impact weaving workshops and the gendering of this technology. She finds that this was a

deeply stratified society, in which social strata were related to occupation. Weavers existed in large numbers to make cloth for both state and temple needs. They were semifree or slaves, and they were all women. Textiles were a major export commodity (also see Barber 1994). The product was highly valued, the producers were not. The fact that textiles were central to the economy worked against women weavers. Class differences among women are thus highlighted with attention to weaving.

Cathy Costin (1996) also suggests the uses of "texts," which she defines broadly as including oral literature, censuses, myths, and so forth. These sources naturally have their difficulties, and can never be used without considering their contexts. Further, women's voices are often absent from them. Nevertheless, Costin points out, the texts are useful for parts of culture that have no obvious material correlates.

### Burials and Human Remains

Analysis of human remains is yet another avenue through which to research gender in the past. DNA analysis has barely begun, but it is now being applied to mummies in both Egypt and the dry western deserts of China's Xinjiang region, and results are eagerly awaited. Through other sorts of skeletal analysis it is possible to learn about differential gender treatment, as well. Changing sex differentials in workload, physical risk, disease, nutrition, reproductive patterns, childhood stress, and mortality have all been inferred from burials. Trauma is recorded in bones as well, and not only can much be learned from the distribution of traumatic injuries by age and sex, but also work in finding patterns (such as which bones are more commonly broken) can reveal models of activities and the distribution of gender-related violence. Increase in warfare may be reflected in wounds made by weapons. Increased trauma to women may indicate wife-battering, implying men's rights over women and a concomitant decrease in status and autonomy, though other explanations are possible. Physical stress and workload may appear in the remains as degenerative arthritis, or as more robust bones. Infection and disease can leave traces in the skeleton, and indications of nutrition in childhood and adulthood are retrievable from bones. All these types of studies can lead to a better understanding of specific gender arrangements (Cohen and Bennett 1993).

Mary Whelan (1995) suggests looking at artifact categories in burials *before* considering the sex of those buried, to avoid the unconscious re-creating of present gender arrangements in the past. She uses Blackdog Cemetery from southern Minnesota as an example (Whelan, Withrow, and O'Connell 1989, Whelan 1991) of a burial ground in use in the first half of the 19th century. Artifact distributions in burials did not suggest a division of labor by sex, though artifact patterning nevertheless was found. Ritual equipment was found clustered, buried with six men and one woman. This suggests that it was possible but less common for women to be ritual specialists. Another artifact distribution that claimed attention was the unequal number of artifact types in different graves. In this, women and men were numerically equal in both upper and lower halves of the distribution, suggesting gender equality in status (Whelan 1995:58).

One important and potentially fruitful way to study kinship is through burials. The social implications of proximity in cemeteries have been teased out in several ways. Ian Hodder explores some of the possibilities of interpreting the communal tombs of the European Neolithic. "European earlier Neolithic societies are usually assumed to be kin-based, especially in areas where burial is in communal tombs. It seems reasonable to argue that kinship and reproduction defined social roles at this time and that women therefore played central roles expressed through female symbolism" (1991a:12). He further suggests, "The tombs of the SOM culture in the Paris basin contain large numbers of human bones and the settlement data suggest that these represent kinship rather than residence units. The megalithic tombs of northwestern Europe generally provide independent evidence about the importance of kinship and communal labor (as seen in the construction of the monumental tombs)" (Hodder 1991a:14). While these do not explicitly engender these societies, further research may be able to do so.

### Artifacts

Combined with other data, such as from text, grave goods, depictions, or the direct historical approach, gendered artifacts may seem to be the best approach. However, caution as usual must be applied. Susan Kent (1995) has observed that even the most gendered of artifacts can be used in

unexpected ways—for example, a woman stirring the cooking pot with her husband's spear.

J. M. Kenoyer finds interesting patterns in Harappan cemeteries. While both men and women were buried with hidden beads, other kinds of pendants, made from black or green stone, are found only in burials of adult women. These special pendants may have marked a social subset of married women. Bangles of various materials also seem to have had some important meaning for women. "Glass bangles came to be used in specific ritual and social contexts as non-verbal symbols of status, marriage, or widowhood" (1995). Thus, attention to the details of ornaments, rather than merely counting them, opens up interesting possibilities for gender studies.

Linda Donley-Reid provides some ethnoarchaeological descriptions that may be relevant to the Harappan case. In studying Swahili society, she found that porcelain, incised pottery, and beads are objects that can be used to protect women against evil outside influences. Similarly, these artifacts can protect *men against women*, as women in Swahili society are perceived to be polluting to men. Both the domicile itself and the inhabitants can be protected in this way. Imported porcelain plates are not merely good luck charms, they are used to absorb evil eye, which otherwise would harm people, bringing sickness and death. Latrines are particularly dangerous places, often protected with a porcelain plate. Even broken plates are valuable, since it is their evil-absorbing properties that caused them to break. Potsherds therefore make effective charms. Thus, plates should not necessarily always be interpreted in an archaeological context as food servers, nor their presence used as indicative of a place where food was eaten!

Glass beads have protective advantages, too, and can prevent evil spirits from attacking women and children. Blue beads and coral beads are best for this purpose. Red beads, worn next to the skin for their medicinal value, are reminiscent of the discovery of hidden bands in the Harappan cemetery. Unlike the Harappan case, however, Swahili men never wear beads, though women and children wear them regardless of class.

Decorated pots are associated with women in Swahili society. Pottery with incised lines, and even earthenware containers, are also believed to absorb evil influences. However, they can also transmit pollution, and since women are polluting, pottery as women's products can be dangerous to men.



Brass pots are safer for those at risk, such as the risk of pollution, but iron is the best of all because it actually wards off evil spirits. Food can be used to rid oneself of pollution, especially if shared with the spirits (Donley-Reid 1990). Clearly, much can be learned about gender relationships from the distribution of these artifacts in Swahili sites.

Other uses of artifacts that can be attributed to women are legion. It is valuable to know that particular types of clothing may be worn differentially according to age and/or gender. Imperishable objects such as buttons or pins can represent the whole of the attire, in many cases. Anne Stalsberg has used the presence of women's objects from Scandinavia, found in Viking graves in Russia, to suggest that families, and not just men, were part of the eastward Viking expansion of the 9th to 11th centuries (1987). If other evidence substantiates the presence of Viking women, it will require rethinking of the historical narrative. There are important implications for women as settlers and colonists, and this topic could be usefully expanded with additional archaeological evidence.

### **Spatial Arrangements and Households**

The organization of space may be gendered or not. Spatial organization within a household may depend on notions of gendered space (Kent 1997), or artifacts may be distributed according to gendered activities. Ethnoarchaeological observations show that what turns up in the archaeological record may not represent activity areas, but rather storage areas.

Another fruitful avenue for the understanding of prehistoric kinship roles is through household architecture. Ruth Tringham, as she began to insert people into prehistoric domestic architecture, found some likely scenarios that can be further refined with archaeological data (1991). People with faces have been turned into actors and agents in archaeologically visible change. Alterations over the life of a building or structure can be particularly telling. For example, Tringham compared houses at various Neolithic sites in eastern Europe. At Opovo they were less well made and occupied for shorter durations, had fewer storage facilities, and contained more wild animal bones. Room functions were simpler than other sites of the same time period. Most houses had no internal divisions, and no formal food preparation areas. This suggests that the entire site functioned differently from other contemporaneous Neolithic sites.

Furthermore, the demise of houses may also reveal aspects of gendered space. Some houses were abandoned and later disintegrated, while others appear to have been deliberately burned with very hot fires. Someone took the time to fill pits and wells with rubbish and debris from the burned houses, level the area, and build again, suggesting deliberate renewal as well as intentional burning. Abandoned houses were renewed in various ways. Opovo was built on a natural mound in a marsh, which possibly restricted the area on which to build, so the mound grew higher, rather than spreading out. Still, differences could be noted between rebuilding on the same floor, building beside the previous house, or constructing a building on higher ground (Tringham 1991). These variations may have gender implications.

Linda Donley-Reid's work on Swahili houses demonstrates that the way domestic space is structured in the present can also be found in excavating houses of the past, providing that the archaeologist is alert to the clues, as she demonstrates with her own work at Lamu, Kenya. Based on her ethnohistoric work, she has been able to identify features of house floors that otherwise would have been elusive and that had previously passed unnoticed. For example, the innermost room of the house is the site of women's rituals related to birth and death. Stillborn infants may be buried in this location, along with placentas, accompanied by iron nails to ward off evil. The pits with iron nails might otherwise be uninterpretable. Women also dig trenches in the floor to dispose of the water that has been used in washing a corpse before burial, trenches that can be detected upon excavation and that may be overlooked if their significance is not known. The way people create their own interior environment both structures their lives and reflects the social structure; this too can be discovered by careful excavation (Donley 1982, 1987; Donley-Reid 1990).

Patricia O'Brien excavated a burial mound and earth lodge at the C. C. Witt site in Kansas and was able to infer domestic activities from the location of remains within the lodge. Most of these were women's activities—grinding corn, processing hide and cutting meat, sewing, and basket-making. However, there is also evidence of making arrowshafts in the lodge; presumably men's work areas are also present. O'Brien (1995) explains the association of various artifacts with men and women based on ethnohistoric work, and looks at a specific site with its distributional data, not overgeneralizing it, but rather examining the details of this site.

Attention to households is not new in archaeology, nor is the idea that space might be gendered. Kent Flannery and Marcus Winter (1969) gave more attention to the economic activities implied by the debris on floors of prehistoric villages in Oaxaca, Mexico, than to gender implications, though they did note the separation of artifacts that often are associated with men and women into the left side for the men and the right side for women's activities. A more explicitly gendered study might be able to tease further strands of information out of the fabric of these distributions.

Richard Wilk and William Rathje focus on households, without giving much attention to gender. However, they do note that larger households may have more flexibility for child care arrangements (Wilk and Rathje 1982). It would be interesting to see whether, following this clue, some traces might be left in house floors that indicate how toddlers were restrained from the hearth—or from falling over the edge of the precipice, as in the cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde.

Ian Hodder (1991b) uses domestic architecture in quite a different way to interpret societies of the early and middle Neolithic in southeastern Europe and southwestern Asia. Houses are elaborate in terms of interior divisions, and highly decorated. Thus, the importance of the household is underscored. One wonders whether this can apply equally to the decorated houses of India and Africa.

### Conclusions

The most effective ways to find gender in the past are to use several lines of evidence together. Tight arguments are needed to gender the past convincingly, and the use of various kinds of analogies always requires specific justification as to how they are applicable in a particular archaeological site or culture.

## CHAPTER FOUR IN THE BEGINNING

### Archaeology, Gender, and Origins



Our search for origins reveals a faith in ultimate and essential truths.  
—Michelle Rosaldo (1980:393)

The categories that we are to look for . . . have already been defined. . . .  
Origins research tends to make decontextualized phenomena seem inevitable.  
—Margaret Conkey (1991:114)

Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*, purporting to explain the beginnings of many features of our world, from the alphabet to the elephant's trunk, are captivating. They satisfy an urge to know (or guess) how familiar things began. Unlike some of Kipling's tales, however, our archaeological origin stories are human-centered, and they are taken seriously because they have the imprimatur of science, implying that they are accurate and well researched. Thus, what our origin stories imply or state about gender can lend a specious air of antiquity, permanency, and unchangeability to present gender arrangements, inserting them into the past with the appearance of perfect plausibility.

Research into the origins of human cultures has been one of the mainstays of anthropology. Just as Darwin began with the physical variation in plants and animals in the time of his historical present as a problem that needed explaining with reference to events in the past, so cultural anthropologists from Darwin's time to today have attempted to explain the evolution of everything from society itself (Spencer 1895) and monotheistic religion (Tylor 1865) to Victorian gender relationships (Bachofen 1861, Maine 1861), to kinship terminology (Morgan 1877), by means of reference to how