

HIERARCHY, HETERARCHY AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SOCIAL COMPLEXIFICATION

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ABSTRACT

One of the fundamental issues in the 'gender in archaeology' movement of the 1980s and 1990s was a response to the widespread perception of the universality of male dominance in human history. Apart from simply adding women to the social stew, research began to focus on the arenas in which female actors wielded power in the past. This paper will explore recent 'discoveries' of powerful women of the archaeological past, and attempt to synthesize the avenues in which women participated in the complexification of ancient societies. In the process, traditional approaches to social hierarchy will be evaluated. Examples will be drawn from a variety of culture areas, but with special attention to Mesoamerica.

I was drawn into debates surrounding gender archaeology when, as a naive graduate student, Randy McGuire asked my opinion of an article he intended to use in one of his survey classes. The year was 1984, an important year for gender studies since it marked the publication of Conkey and Spector's seminal article; and since Meg Conkey was at SUNY Binghamton at the time we paid close attention. The article was *The Aztecs and the Ideology of Male Dominance* by June Nash (1978), and Randy was looking for something that he could use as an example of an engendered perspective. The premise of Nash's article was that women's position in Aztec society decreased to utter subordination with the rise of the state. While there may have been some greater degree of autonomy under "simpler" levels of social organization, the complexification process was integrally related to increased exploitation and domination of women.

I remember being quite agitated by that position, since it didn't reflect my own understanding of the process based, seemingly, on many of the same sources that Nash cited. The idea of such absolute subordination simply did not compute, and it certainly did not fit with the ethnohistorical record with which I was familiar. This agitation led to a research paper for Ian Hodder's seminar, it evolved into my first collaborative paper with Sharisse, and was ultimately published as *Powerful Women and the Myth of Male Dominance in Aztec Society* (McCafferty and McCafferty 1988).

A lot has happened in the 20 years since that first "a-ha" experience. The 1989 Chacmool conference was one of the first international gatherings on gender archaeology, and the conference volume has become a cornerstone of

subsequent inquiry (Walde and Willows 1991). Numerous gender conferences, symposia, articles, and books now make engendered archaeology one of the fastest developing trends in archaeology. GIS (Gender-informed science) has undergone theoretical waves, and spin-offs such as queer and children's archaeologies continue to make this a fascinating and socially relevant field of investigation.

The goal of this paper is to consider how a focus on gender has changed the way that archaeologists interpret social complexity, and the role of women in the complexification process. Realizing that 'complexification' is not recognized by my spell-checker, it nevertheless feels right for describing the process of becoming more complex. I will follow some of the broad developments in this field through the discovery of women in the archaeological record and the roles that they played, to an expanded definition of gender as one among a range of social identities. Examples will be drawn from collaborative work with my wife, Sharisse. I conclude with the question: "has it made a difference?" in which I survey some recent texts to see how gender has impacted the way that gender and especially women are taught in general archaeological surveys.

When I teach gender, I begin with a vignette from the anthropological 'dark ages,' first brought to my attention by Alison Wylie (1991). A forlorn ethnographer standing on the shore laments the fact that *everyone* has abandoned the village, while surrounded by the remaining elders, women, and children. The male bias that to a significant degree still pervades anthropological archaeology is remarkable, and tragically humorous. How an academic discipline

that purports to study humankind in all its diversity could turn a blind eye to major components of that population is incredible. Yet the study of gender is still considered radical (and a little scary) by many in the field, and sexuality and queer theory are downright scandalous. Archaeology is just beginning to recognize the importance of children as social actors, despite the fact that they are a consistently significant slice of the demographic pie, are the principle locus of social reproduction, and likely were prominent producers of archaeological debris.

The earliest anthropological consideration of women in society is credited to von Bachoven who, in the mid-nineteenth century, proposed a transition from matrilineal societies in distant prehistory to patrilineal societies in more 'civilized' societies. Little attention is now paid to this idea apart from some of the goddess proponents, but there remains an undercurrent in the easy acceptance of greater gender equality in so-called 'simple' societies and, conversely, in the idea of male dominance in state-level societies. Subsequent consideration was almost exclusively based on the assumption of a universal male dominance over women, especially in complex societies. The deep seated nature of this belief in anthropological and archaeological literature certainly comes from Western stereotypes, but was projected onto other cultures past and present by indoctrinated scholars. It was this theory of universal gender hierarchy that led to the first forays by feminist anthropologists and archaeologists who questioned the universality of the implicit biological origins of sexual inequality, as opposed to a more social evolutionary scenario in which state-level complexity was accomplished at the expense of female status. While the end result of female subordination remained the same, the complexification process was at issue.

Mesoamerican archaeology offers a refreshing perspective on this topic because it is distinctly non-Western, with the exception of the interpretive framework in which it has been studied. Mesoamerican cultures offer the potential of complex social systems lacking the structures of gender hierarchy that have shaped Western thought. With abundant archaeological, art historical, and ethnohistorical evidence it is an excellent setting for critical evaluations of complex social processes. Consequently, and as demonstrated in this conference, Mesoamerica has been a fertile field for gender-based inquiry.

June Nash (1978) entered this debate in the 'progressive' position that women enjoyed relatively greater status in earlier, pre-state level Mesoamerican societies, but that Aztec Mexico was characterized by an ideology of male dominance. This stance is shared by Maria Rodriguez-Shadow (1991), the leading Mexican voice on the status of prehispanic women, who recently published a historiography of feminist scholarship on prehispanic women (2004). Bolstered by archaeological data, Elizabeth Brumfiel's classic 1991 article presents a nuanced view of changes in women's roles with the advent of Aztec statehood (also 1996, 2001).

Our rebuttal to Nash stemmed from studies of Postclassic Mexican ethnohistory, and a contextual reading of material culture associated with female-dominated textile production (McCafferty and McCafferty 1988, 1991). We had stumbled across an article by Thelma Sullivan (1982) on the goddess Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina, patroness of feminine craft, sexuality, and duality. This led us to an interest in gender complementarity, what Susan Kellogg (1988) terms "structural equivalence." This can be demonstrated on a cosmological level through the concept of a creator pair, Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl; or through the parallel destinies of male warriors who died in combat with the women who died in childbirth; or the dual political offices of Tlatoani, 'first speaker,' and Cihuacoatl, "woman serpent." Careful study of the Colonial sources reveal women in virtually all aspects of Aztec society: as political and religious leaders, merchants, artisans, warriors, and controlling the domestic sphere—not necessarily equally represented but structurally embedded. Essentially, we view Aztec society as one with heterarchical access to status, with males and females having distinct avenues to different arenas of power, and with an inherent dualism that defined how society was conceptualized.

While there may be some evidence to infer a reduction in female participation in certain aspects of society under the Aztec state, we also point out the problems with the ethnohistorical sources, created as they were by *conquistadors* and Catholic priests who were not particularly interested in the social actions of indigenous women. The strong androcentric bias in the documents skews the available data, though detailed study of indigenous sources, including pictorial manuscripts, provides a useful counterpoint to the Spanish texts. An example of a critical interpretation of pre-Conquest vs.

Colonial accounts is presented in our article *The Metamorphosis of Xochiquetzal*, in which we track how this Aztec goddess and her followers were represented in indigenous and Spanish sources (McCafferty and McCafferty 1999; Figure 1). One conclusion was that the Spanish accounts idealized her, creating a Classical goddess on a pedestal that was removed from the daily experience of real women. In contrast, pre-Conquest conceptualizations of the goddess displayed a more earthy side, as seen in the variety of female roles associated with her, such as priestesses, midwives, artisans, and *ahuianime* 'pleasure girls.' Detailed study of the changes to the Xochiquetzal identity reveals much about the prejudices and goals of the chroniclers themselves as they actively reconstituted female identity to suit their own purposes.



Figure 1: Goddess Xochiquetzal in dual aspects of sensuality and authority (Codex Borgia).

Another way that the hierarchical model has been challenged is through the search for, and discovery of, powerful women in the archaeological record. A recent book edited by Sarah Nelson (2003), has considered the role of ancient queens cross-culturally. Her work with the queens of Silla in Korea has significantly challenged gender stereotypes in Asia and led the way for more revealing case studies, to the point where ruling queens are becoming somewhat less exceptional. An important question raised by these studies is the extent to which "queens" were political actors in their own right, as opposed to being simply consorts to powerful male rulers? The recurring answer is reflexive: it depends on the biasing filters of the analyst. The same evidence that might be construed to demonstrate authority if found with a noble man can be twisted to indicate subservience of a noble

woman—if that is the prejudice of the observer. Androcentric biases continue to hamper and distort engendered interpretations.

Sharisse and I engaged in engendering a high status burial in our study of Monte Albán's Tomb 7 (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994a). Arguably the richest burial ever discovered in the Mesoamerica, Tomb 7 was discovered and extensively published by Alfonso Caso (1969), who among other things was fascinated by a suite of carved bones decorated with Mixtec-style iconography and text. Although not identified as to function by the excavator, these are identical in form to weaving battens used with a backstrap loom (Figure 2), and in fact were part of a larger textile production tool-kit along with spindle whorls, spinning bowls, a bone comb, and possible thimbles. Since textile production was diagnostic of female gender identity 'in Postclassic Mesoamerica (Brumfiel 1991; Hendon 1997; McCafferty and McCafferty 1991), and was closely related to gender ideology as well, the association of these artifacts with Individual A of the tomb strongly suggested a female gender identity. Yet the physical anthropologist who studied the skeletal remains clearly identified the bones as being consistently male, even though diagnostic markers were missing and most of the skeleton was fragmentary (Rubin de la Borbolla 1969). We speculate that when the discovery was first made in the 1930s, gender blindness predisposed interpretation of a wealthy burial to be male, regardless of contradictory evidence. Thus a mandible, identified as female in the inventory, was excluded from the Individual A analysis even though the illustration of the burial clearly indicates it in correct anatomical position with the rest of the articulated seated individual. It simply didn't fit the pre-conceived conclusion.

But was this the tomb of a queen? In Nelson's book we questioned this interpretation, using ethnohistorical accounts of early Colonial Mixtec queens as a comparative sample (McCafferty and McCafferty 2003). We conclude that Individual A from Tomb 7 was probably not a royal woman, and the probable function of the tomb was as a shrine dedicated to an aspect of the earth/fertility goddess complex. Mixtec *Codex Selden* (1964), a painted manuscript using a narrative style similar to a comic strip, depicts a supplicant visiting a priestess at Temple of Skull where she is petitioning a priestess (Lady 9 Grass) with a skeletal mandible (Figure 3a). The Aztec *Codex Magliabecchiano* (1983) shows a

similar scene, where a female oracle kneels in front of a deity impersonator to channel information (Figure 3b). We believe that Tomb 7 may have been a shrine to an earth/fertility goddess and a site for oracular consultation with the bundled Individual A.



Figure 2: Carved bone batten from Tomb 7 showing Lady 9 Reed holding batten.



Figure 3a: Supplicant in front of oracle at Temple of Skull (Codex Selden).



Figure 3b: Supplicants discussing with oracle and deity impersonator (Codex Magliabecchiano).

By opening up consideration of the specific social role of the central figure of Tomb

7, discussion expands to more diverse social identities occupied by Mesoamerican women and men. Society incorporates a kaleidoscope of potential identities, selected situationally for performance in specific contexts. An elite woman could also act as high priestess, a king would also be a war chief, a farmer might also provide tribute as an artisan, and a textile producer was probably also a mother and a cook. Sorting through all the possibilities is challenging, and mortuary ritual may fossilize only a single attribute of identity and thus misrepresent other significant aspects of the individual's life experience. But the challenge is a good one, and ever more sophisticated techniques and open-minded interpretations can reveal evidence undreamed of a short time ago.

Art historical analyses also interpret different attributes of gender identity, including possible evidence of cross-gendered activities. Maya art, for example, occasionally represents known male rulers wearing female costume (Looper 2002). A well-known case occurs among the Late Postclassic Aztecs, where one of the highest political offices was known as the Cihuacoatl, literally "woman serpent," and the male office-holder *may* have worn female costume elements (Klein 1992). Other aspects of Cihuacoatl included a cadre of oracle priest/priestesses, and there was also a goddess Cihuacoatl who may have been incarnated by deity impersonators. Parallel personae are found in the Mixtec cult of Lady 9 Grass, an avatar of Cihuacoatl with corresponding complexity (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994a).

Iconographic evidence also suggests that women played a significant role in Mesoamerican warfare (McCafferty and McCafferty 2004). Sharisse and I considered costume elements in relation to polychrome murals from the site of Cacaxtla in the central highlands of Mexico, where two long panels depict opposing groups of warriors characterized by contrasting costume elements (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994b). The jaguar warriors are clearly shown as victorious over the quetzal warriors. The battle is ongoing on the right-hand panel, and the immediate aftermath is shown on the left. We called attention to two standing members of the defeated bird army who wear diagnostic female clothing: a triangular cape known as a *quechquemiltl*, a knee-length skirt and a decorated belt (Figure 4). The degree of woven decoration is a further indicator of female costume, since most male costume is typically elaborated with animal skins. We evaluated several possible

interpretations: that these were males dressed in female costume as a form of humiliation, that these were male office holders similar to the Cihuacoatl who wore female clothing as an insignia of office, and also the radical idea that females could actually have been military combatants and even leaders. Relying on Occam's razor and supporting evidence from other known Mesoamerican cultures, especially the Mixtec, we concluded that these were indeed elite females, exhibiting costume elements to support the idea that they were warriors. We believe that the two women were actually the same individual depicted twice, as she was captured to become the founding queen in a marriage alliance between the two competing groups.



Figure 4: Female combatant from Cacaxtla.

Note that a weakness of both the Cacaxtla and the Tomb 7 analyses was a form of gender blindness on our part whereby we never considered the possibility of third, or alternative, genders. In worrying about this oversight in the years since the *World Archaeology* issue (2000) opened my eyes to queer archaeology, I still don't find any compelling evidence to change our initial interpretations. Nevertheless, that the idea never occurred to us is indicative of the power of ideological blinders. I am red/green color blind, so when I look at color charts there are things that I simply cannot see regardless of how hard I try. I use the term "gender blindness" with this biological premise in mind. There are some who

simply cannot see gender in the archaeological record – fortunately theirs is a cultural condition and hopefully more easily overcome.

Costume can be a sensitive indicator of identity, though direct evidence is rare in the archaeological record. But costume details are relatively common in art historical contexts; in Mesoamerica, Patricia Anawalt (1981) published an extensive catalogue of costume elements from various cultural groups based largely on pictorial manuscripts. Karen Bruhns (1988) and Rosemary Joyce (1993), among others, have taken a more specifically gender-oriented perspective on ancient Maya costume that focused on elite Maya women.

At a recent Chacmool conference, Sharisse and I presented results of a costume analysis based on over 3000 individuals depicted in Mixtec pictorial manuscripts (McCafferty and McCafferty 2000). Our hypothesis going into the study was based on ethnographic analogy, that costume variation would be a sensitive way to distinguish ethnic or regional identities, and that more easily recognizable gender elements could then give us information on how these attributes were inter-related. Frustratingly, the ethnic and regional characteristics did not work out as well as hoped, suggesting that the use of costume differences as a means of identification may not be prehispanic in origin. In fact, some Colonial evidence supports the idea that localized costume variation may have been a Spanish innovation to help control the indigenous population. Nevertheless, gendered costume elements were easily identifiable in all of the codices studied, implying that this was indeed an important cultural identity. Women were represented as rulers of what have come to be called 'king/queendoms,' because of the importance of both lines in issues of succession and inheritance (Terraciano 2003; also Spores 1975). The Mixtec are anthropologically prominent because of the long genealogical histories that were recorded, over 500 years in some cases, and for the importance of marital alliance as a political strategy. Other women are shown as warriors and priestesses, taking captives and making sacrifices. In these scenes women wield comparable power to their male counterparts.

As the study of social complexity continues to expand, an engendered approach has embraced other elements of cultural identity beyond the basic male/female duality. A major impetus of this conference is to both query and queer the discipline, challenging ourselves to

think outside the conceptual confines of the dominant ideology. The facile assumption that alternative genders are impossible to discover archaeologically is too reminiscent of the denial of archaeological women that resonated a mere two decades ago. Just because they are not obvious using the current theoretical tools does not mean they weren't there and cannot be found. In another paper presented in this conference we explore ethnohistorical and art historical evidence for alternative and ambiguous gender identities from Postclassic Mesoamerica (McCafferty and McCafferty, this volume).

Children are another important demographic group that has recently begun to attract archaeological attention. Obviously children comprise a major population segment at any given point in time, and through the socialization process they are the conduit for transmitting cultural practices to subsequent generations. Several volumes have now been published on the subject (Ardren and Hutson 2006; Gilchrist 2001; Sofaer 2000), with more in the pipeline. For several years now Chacmool has considered dedicating a conference to childhood, and we're pleased that a session in this conference considered the topic.

Thanks to a conference on Mesoamerican children, organized by Traci Ardren, Sharisse and I prepared a study of children in mortuary contexts from Postclassic Cholula, Mexico (McCafferty and McCafferty 2006). After its abandonment as a ceremonial centre in about A.D. 1000, the ceremonial precinct around the Great Pyramid of Cholula functioned as a burial place for hundreds of individuals, both adults and children. On the outskirts of the city a household compound produced another 18 individuals, almost exclusively infants and children. By contrasting the two contexts we compare public vs. private mortuary patterns, and by looking at the grave goods and treatment associated with the various interments we consider possible age grades in what Rosemary Joyce (2001) terms the "boying" and "girling" process. Through this analysis we query the stages of engenderment and the status of children in Postclassic society. So, for example, children are under-represented in the 'public' cemetery at the Great Pyramid, but are predominant in the household context. Whereas only about one third of the children and none of the infants at the Pyramid were buried with grave goods, at the household compound all infants and children had offerings. Some of the 'richest' burials found were of children, yet there was little

correspondence between objects found with children and stereotypical gender roles known ethnohistorically for adult males and females. In fact, gender stereotypes did not hold up well to the Cholula mortuary data, with nearly as many adult males buried with textile production equipment as were with females. Burial treatment of adult males and females was remarkably similar, challenging the premise of a gender hierarchy. Once again, archaeological data may have more to do with practice than with overarching cultural structures, and thus represent a more pluralistic past.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented some of the recent developments in gender archaeology as relating to issues of social complexity. In rapid order we have documented various social roles played by women, including positions of authority. We have also expanded the investigation to include other gender identities and age groups. Gender archaeology has come a long way.

Or has it? What effect has gender archaeology really had on mainstream archaeology? In a casual survey of introductory archaeology texts, I've found mixed and generally disappointing treatment of gender, and particularly of women in complex societies. In my recent Introduction to Archaeology class I used David Hurst Thomas' hard-cover *Archaeology* (3rd edition, 1998). The topic of gender, or at least women, appears in several chapters, and there is an apparent effort to include female archaeologists among the profiles. Curiously, the chapter that most explicitly focuses on gender is also the one that discusses seasonality and optimum foraging. There are text boxes about "the real Flintstones" and Janet Spector's awl, but women's activities are relegated to amusing anecdotes. Nowhere does male gender get discussed, so that remains the default setting for all human behaviour. And there are no alternative genders or children in the text.

Even worse is *Ancient Civilizations* by Scarre and Fagan (2nd edition, 2003:46-47). In four paragraphs, women are identified as cooks and weavers in Aztec, Inca, and Mesopotamian civilizations, and it is noted that in each of these cultural contexts women "lost control of the products of their work" under state rule. It sounds like that debate is not over. Two "queens" are noted: Sumerian Pu-abi who was buried with her

fancy clothes, and Hatshepsut who is noted as having organized a successful trading party to obtain “good herbs and heaps of myrrh.” Archaeology reifies clothes and shopping as the central concerns of women.

A far more satisfying entry is Bruce Trigger’s *Understanding Early Civilizations* (2003), which surveys complex societies worldwide and devotes a lengthy chapter to ‘family organization and gender roles.’ Nuances in gender-based divisions of labour are discussed, as well as female participation in economic, religious, and political processes. This is the only book I’ve found to address attitudes toward same-sex relations. Trigger concludes that “all early civilizations displayed varying degrees of masculine bias” but that “the position of women varied significantly from one early civilization to another.”

In conclusion, there has been considerable activity in terms of interpreting women’s roles in the complexification of society over the past 20 years. Western stereotypes of male dominance have been identified and challenged. Archaeological case studies serve to demonstrate differences from the culturally prescribed roles, opening up possibilities for imagining change by revealing the transparency of the status quo. As the weight of evidence builds, it is hoped that more middle-range scholars will take notice and the message will be passed on within the discipline and, especially, to students. In response to critics of gender archaeology, yes, we can make a difference.

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