

HOW A FEMINIST STANCE IMPROVES ARCHAEOLOGY

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The title of this presentation makes a bold assertion – that feminism is good for archaeology, and by implication that focusing on gender leads to better archaeology. There are a number of ways this occurs: by creating new methodologies and stretching theory, by questioning received wisdom, by requiring that assumptions be made explicit and that they be examined for inconsistencies. Any new perspective might be said to achieve some of these goals, but the gender perspective is both deeper and more central to the ends of anthropological archaeology.

Let me begin with what feminist thought is not. Most importantly, it is not biased, a charge often leveled from lack of knowledge of the tenets of feminist archaeology. One goal of feminism is rather to correct bias introduced through androcentrism, or the placing of the interests of men in the center, rather than creating a balance between men and women. This goes beyond what men and women do in a given society, and even beyond how they may be differentially valued. It relates as well to the present interests of researchers, and suggests for example that we might want to research what bones can tell about cooking practices as well as butchering (Gifford-Gonzalez 1993), the possibility that women's activities might have led to the development of plant domestication (Watson and Kennedy 1991) (or that women could be shamans!), the transgendered use of artifacts beyond the obvious functional ones (Kent 1997), questions of whether men or women or both made particular tools (Gero 1991), and so forth. All of

these examples are corrections of bias, not themselves biased. New perspectives gained in this way extend the possibilities of archaeological inference. They do not negate the prior androcentric interests, but they do add to them and change them.

Furthermore, feminists have pointed out the false dichotomy between the genders, that often appears in discussions of the division of labor. Men and women may be assigned different roles, but there is considerable overlap in most cultures. Avoiding gender polarization provides more nuanced understandings of societies. The multiple ways that cultures have assigned genders amply demonstrate that biology is not destiny (Bem 1993).

Feminist archaeology thus asks new questions, and shakes up interpretations of existing data as well as suggesting new data sets. It demands details in situations where concepts have been taken for granted rather than argued. It even adds a measure of common sense to well-trodden ground. Furthermore, we can learn new things about gender roles, gender relationships, and gender ideology in particular times and places, adding richness to our understandings. By challenging preconceived ideas about how men and women interacted, feminist archaeology requires proof instead of assertions, especially those which interpret sites based on current attitudes and practices.

The many ways that the inclusion of gendered questions in archaeology has improved the field can be seen in numerous publications – but few of them have made the explicit claim that I am making here (but see also Nelson 1997). I intended to pursue this theme with four examples, demonstrating several of the possibilities that the search for gender has for improving archaeology.

The first example is from the European Paleolithic. It focuses on shifting research questions and questioning assumptions about the well-known female figurines. The second uses data from a late Neolithic site in China, and reconsiders the question of female leadership in complex society. The third is another example from China, examining elites, and the differences that both class and gender may make. Finally, a ruling queen of Korea shows that archaeological discoveries can rewrite history – providing anyone is paying attention. None of these examples can be explored fully in a short paper, but taken together they do develop the theme that studies of gender improve archaeology.

Female Figurines of the Paleolithic

The female figurines and bas reliefs of the Paleolithic are too familiar to require description. A great deal has been written about them, by many men and a few women, for more than a century. Yet the chief impulse has been to describe them as all the same: fitting a particular new theory which is said to cover all the known cases. These labels have ranged from the notion that they are all fat (I learned to call them “fat ladies” in anthropology courses[see Nelson 1990]), but Willendorf, who is almost always used as representative, is in fact the fattest one. In fact the town of Willendorf, on the Danube River, has made a tourist attraction out of their famous fat lady. Another frequent generalization is that they represent steatopygia, but it can easily be seen that some have protruding buttocks and others have absolutely straight backs. The concept that they are all made to the same artistic plan (Leroi-Gourhan 1967) is another generalization, but

more interesting is the lack of fit of many of the triangles and circles. The assumption that men made the figurines is often tacit, but the proposition that they were for men's eyes is obvious in many writings – and in this cartoon.

Changing the rules of the game, however, to looking at the diversity of the figurines rather than focusing on similarities, real or imagined, opens vast new vistas. Instead of seeking the one explanation that fits all, questions of differences can be asked. Instead of wanting to know if the images represent goddesses or earth mothers or paleolithic pin-ups, we look at the particulars of each site (Nelson 1991a). We ask in each instance, is there any evidence to indicate who made them? What purposes are suggested by their numbers at a given site, and the conditions of their disposal? Is it possible to determine whether a particular statue represents reality (a particular woman; a body portrait?) or an ideal (is this how women should look?). How many figurines were found at a site, and disposed in what way or ways? The grand idea is a male path to scholarly attention, but should women be creating other paths, ones with more attention to detail and difference? Can we move away from the idea that nude women are for the gaze of men, but nude men are “figures of authority”?

A Chinese Goddess

The Hongshan culture in northeast China will be less familiar to this audience, but it is a useful example to clear up another frequent misunderstanding about feminist archaeology. Feminists do not pounce on every representation of a woman and pronounce that it is a goddess. It should be fully obvious that interpretations of statues as representing goddesses can be used in androcentric as well as feminist ways. The

familiar European example of goddesses is Marija Gimbutas' work in eastern Europe, to which in the Neolithic she applied the term Old Europe. Stereotypes of peaceful women are not any more useful than those of warlike men, and they do not shed any light on processes of culture change in the past. Furthermore, as numerous historic and ethnographic accounts show, the presence of goddesses doesn't directly interpret into high status for women. Thus the question of what such a statue does represent is important, but it can only be approached with other data from the society in which it is embedded.

In the case of the Hongshan, it is a late Neolithic culture of considerable extent, with villages spread over a region of 40,000 square kilometers (Guo 1995). Near the southern edge of the site distribution, two large ceremonial centers have been discovered and partially excavated. One of these, Dongshanzui, has a series of low walls and stone-edged platforms arranged on a central axis. Some platforms are round and some are square, reminiscent of the Chinese idea that earth is square and heaven is round, and that Earth and Heaven should both be worshipped at unroofed "altars" (Guo and Zhang 1984). Among the artifacts are small and medium-sized female figures. The small ones are nude, and one is more definitely pregnant than any of those from the Upper Paleolithic in Europe. The other cradles something broken off in one arm, near her breast. Although the evidence is fragmentary, the site could be interpreted on this basis as a center emphasizing birth, or affirming life. Some 40 kilometers away is the site of Niheliang, which is mostly a region of large mounded tombs and clusters of tombs – a ceremonial site of death. Beautifully worked jades are the only kind of artifacts found in the burials themselves, although bottomless painted cylinders form lines around the edges of the

larger tombs. In the middle of this realm of the dead is an oddly shaped building, 23 meters long but only 2 meters wide at its narrowest point. Within the building were pieces of statues, most spectacularly a woman's face, made of painted unbaked clay, with inlaid green jade eyes (LPARI 1986). The excavators declared this face to represent a goddess. The building was immediately dubbed Nushenmiao, or Goddess Temple, and so the site is referred to informally.

The speculation among Chinese archaeologists revolved around how this complex region could be ruled by women - based on the equation of a goddess (not proved) in a (possible) temple with a woman ruler – when other late Neolithic sites were interpreted as having already switched over to “patriarchy.” Lacking only evidence for warfare, the Hongshan culture is clearly as complex as other “Jade Age” sites. The large area given over to mounded tombs, a three-tier hierarchy of tombs, the jade in the burials, and evidence of long distance trade imply a highly organized society.

However, while it is necessary to question the grounds on which this has been accepted as a female-centered society, there are other reasons for suggesting that females were honored in the Hongshan culture. The most interesting is in the iconography of the jades found in tombs, for most of the shapes – clouds, birds, and pigs, for example, can be related to water, which in later China was codified as female in the yin/yang system (Nelson 1991). Even dragons were water creatures, although they later became the emblem of emperors, while empresses were denoted by the phoenix. The association with later Chinese thought is not any more (or less) of a stretch than the attribution of the square and round low platforms to deities of Earth and Sky. Thus a more extended

exploration of the ideology of Hongshan may lead to the same conclusion through a different set of assumptions, and the two tend to strengthen each other.

Lady Hao of the Shang Dynasty

Another relevant Chinese example is that of the burial chamber of Lady Hao of the Late Shang dynasty (late 2nd millennium BC) (Linduff 1996, 2001). Hers is one of the few intact burials that has been excavated at Anyang, the capital. Although the kings were buried in deep graves with lavish grave goods, they had all been looted before modern archaeology could investigate them. Therefore, the unearthing of Lady Hao's tomb was particularly informative. Inscriptions on the bronzes give her names in life and as a temple ancestor. Most spectacularly, the largest known bronze food vessel was found in her tomb. The kings had grander tombs, but not always larger artifacts (Chang 1986, Thorp 1980).

A good deal is known about Lady Hao in several other ways. She is mentioned many times on oracle bones, on which her husband King Wu Ding recoded his prognostications about her health and her pregnancies, even though she was not his main wife. It is noted that she led 20,000 troops to battle, that she owned land, and that she made sacrifices to the ancestors. We also know from inscribed vessels in the grave of Lady Hao that she became a royal ancestor, in spite of not having any surviving male progeny.

The lesson to learn from the details about Lady Hao is that even in a highly male dominated society such as Shang China, class may override gender as a salient category.

Lady Hao was well connected, and presumably also talented enough to carry out her multiple responsibilities.

Archaeological findings have revealed the importance of Lady Hao and a few other noble women in Shang society, beginning to cast new light on the Shang and broadening our understanding of Shang gender roles as well as class differences.

The Queens of Silla

The kingdom of Silla in the southern part of the Korean peninsula was divided into caste-like orders, called bone ranks, which took precedence over gender. For a person to be eligible to rule, both parents had to be Holy Bone (Kim 1977). Although the queens of Silla lived about 1500 years later than Lady Hao, opportunities for women in the elite class were greater, extending even to rulership itself.

Again, accidents of preservation provided new information. In this case, an excavated tomb contradicts the written history. This occurrence suggests that the histories should be questioned, but chauvinistic blinders have largely prevented the fresh look required. The histories of the Three Kingdoms were both written several hundred years later than the events, although presumably based on now lost documents of Silla.

The tombs of Silla nobility have been remarkably preserved due to the burial practices which made illegal looting all but impossible. For one thing, the tombs were in the midst of the capital city, so it would have been hard to rob them in secret. Perhaps more discouraging, large boulders and several meters of earth created mounds that could

not be easily breached. While perishables are rarely present, the rich gold and jade grave goods are found intact and in situ (Nelson 1993a).

Some mounds are double, and these are known both through tradition and excavation to have been those of husband and wife. Sexing burials is difficult, however, because, although artifacts abound, bones are rare in Silla burials. The burial chamber was either on the ground or just below ground level, contributing to the rapid deterioration of most perishable materials. With no inscriptions which name the inhabitant of the tomb, and rare bones, artifacts from the double mounds have been used to attempt to impute gender to the tomb occupants. One study of the artifacts found no gender difference in the accouterments in the tombs – both men and women wore gold and jade earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and toe rings! - except that about half the burials contained one or more swords (Ito 1971). Thus the presence or absence of a sword is the only possible gender marker that has been suggested for the Silla noble burials.

Excavated mounds show gradations in the wealth of the burial trappings, even though gold jewelry is found in all of them (Pearson et al 1977). At least 10 tombs have yielded sheet gold crowns and elaborate ceremonial belts. The crowns in particular are quite dazzling, covered with leaf-shaped spangles of gold and curved jades, attached with twisted gold wires so that they would jangle and twinkle when worn in life. The crowns and belts were declared to belong to the kings of Old Silla. Most of the rulers in the lists from both histories are male, so this seemed a reasonable inference.

The excavation of Tomb 98, the largest mound of Silla, provided a gender surprise – one that has been noted but then glossed over by local archaeologists. Tomb 98 is a double mound; therefore it is a husband and wife. The south tomb has extensive

weaponry and many swords, therefore it contained the husband, and presumably the king. But, disappointingly, it had no gold crown and belt. These turned up instead in the north tomb – the woman’s grave – and they are among the most spectacular of the crowns and belts. The belt has a scratched inscription which reads, “belt for milady,” to verify her sex (Kim and Pearson 1977).

The obvious inference is that the woman in this case was the legitimate ruler (legitimized by the crown and belt), and her husband was the war leader. But this has not been part of the discussions about which king in the king list to ascribe the burial to. Instead, the histories have been privileged, and the queen whose accomplishments resulted in so large a tomb has been hidden again behind her husband. A feminist might want to investigate whether the histories are wrong, having been written by men with gender assumptions that wouldn’t accommodate a ruling queen with a husband who is only a war leader (Nelson 1993b). This is in spite of the fact that three ruling queens do appear in the king lists. Each of these queens, however, lacked a husband to whom the rule could be attributed. Even the agreed upon facts show that the Bone Ranks system made mothers as important as fathers. Furthermore, access to the throne at this period could be argued to go through the female line, based on the king lists which include the queens and their family lines (Nelson 1991b). For several generations, the daughters of queens became queens themselves, while the so-called “kings” were married in.

So, turning the usual argument on its head, the possibility that all the secular rulers could have been women could be entertained. The crowns suggest a shamanistic role, compatible with the women shamans of Korea in the present. Much more work

needs to be done before such a conclusion could be reached, but first the discussion has to be opened.

Conclusion

These examples show some of the ways that a feminist stance can improve archaeological methods and archaeological interpretations. A balanced consideration of men and women – their roles, their relationships, and beliefs about their abilities – is central to understanding much about the past. Not only the social structure is at issue here. Economic relationships, political structure, and ideology also are affected by our interpretation of gender roles. The point is not to show that women had higher standing than men in any given instance – in fact, it is important to disaggregate those categories, but to add depth and clarity to our understandings, so that a fuller picture can emerge.

The example of the Paleolithic figurines shows that standpoint may make a huge difference in the ways that particular artifacts, sites, and times may be interpreted. The second demands that applying gendered ideas to all parts of the culture is more productive than fastening on a single fact or occurrence. Dealing with queens' burials in Shang China and the Silla Kingdom of Korea gives some idea of the variety of interpretation that may be brought to the fore when we ask what did it mean to be a queen, in a given instance. It is important that varieties of gender arrangements can be highlighted, rather than subsuming all under a single dichotomy – traditionally between men who build culture, contrasted with boring women, who did the same thing in all times and places around the world.

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