

# V. Gender

## Gender as a factor in the study of prehistoric societies

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From about 1985 onwards, there has been a growing awareness among archaeologists wanting to study prehistoric societies rather than just artifacts, that one of the few things one knows for certain about prehistoric societies is that they were peopled by human beings of two sexes, female and male. Social anthropological research has shown that this sex differentiation is more often than not instrumental in the structuring of societies (Moore 1988), an insight it seems relatively safe to transfer to the past.

Some of the very first studies into the consequences of gender differentiation in prehistory were in fact made in Norway (Mandt & Holm Olsen 1974, Dommasnes 1976, Høgestøl 1983), and took as their point of departure biological sex as a social fact. During the two decades that have passed, our insights have become more sophisticated. The point has been made that biological sex is not a historically given entity, and does not necessarily in every case correspond to a person's given social role. To cover the social aspects of different "sex" identities, the term "gender" was coined. Originally borrowed from linguistics, "gender", or ascribed sex, was found useful in dealing with a reality where human relations turned out to be more complex than could be covered by the male-female (sex) dichotomy. While "sex" is a biological category, "gender" is wholly cultural, and does not necessarily correspond with "sex".

Gender as an ascribed set of values and expectations is a "concept of the mind". To anthropologists, who have access to people's minds and behaviour, it is no doubt a very useful tool in ordering their observations and in interpretation. My question is: how fruitful is such a concept when material culture constitutes your main source material?

In archaeological literature dealing with sex or gender differentiation as an important element in understanding the past, emphasis has been on material culture as much as on gender, and on the relationship between the two. It has

been demonstrated how material culture often serves as an indicator of gender status, it reinforces gender lines or – sometimes – serves to negotiate or manipulate such divisions (see e.g. Hodder 1986, Walde and Willows 1991).

## **Symbols and meaning in material culture**

Thus one set of important aspects regarding the relationship between gender and material culture has been focused upon. This focus is based on several insights. The first one tells us that gender is not given or static, but cultural and variable, the second that its content as well as its expressions are subject to great variation, and the third that material culture does not passively reflect society, but can be an important tool in changing gender structures. In generating these insights, social anthropology and ethno-archaeology have been instrumental. The symbolic value of material culture is not always immediately visible, but can be understood through the study of the dialectic between people and the objects that surround them. Sometimes the story told by people's actions and attitudes is a quite different one from the one that is voiced: material culture then operates on another level than verbal communication.

## **The problem**

Most of the time, social anthropologists and ethno-archaeologists are in the privileged position of having the symbolism and meaning of material culture interpreted through language. Archaeologists, on the other hand, have a fragmentary material culture as their most important, and often only, source of information. My focus in this paper will be the relationship between material culture and the study of gender in prehistoric archaeology. My concern here is not primarily how gender relates to material culture in societies, but how such relations can be identified, recognized, and understood from the study of material remains. How is it possible? Is "gender" a fruitful concept in our context? Should it be modified or specified when applied to material culture?

## **Gender – the concept**

Definitions of gender vary. Common to all definitions is the stressing of gender as embedded in individual cultures. By defining gender as cultural, not biological, one is also defining it as something that goes on in people's minds, while material sources testify to what is outside. The study of gender thus becomes part of the study of meaning, and we recognize the problem: how to infer meaning from non-verbal sources.

Another point in question in the definition of "gender" is its link to biological sex. Social anthropologists tell us that in some societies, biological men may have female roles or the other way round, or more than two genders may be recognized (Moore 1988). Others question that the categories of "male" and "female" cross-culturally form the basis of the differences we recognize as "gender" (Yanagisako and Collier 1987). – The emphasis of the social aspects of

gender sometimes seems to disassociate it completely from biological sex, which can be somewhat confusing. To my mind it also serves to empty the concept of any content. If a concept has no external reference, and no common factors to decide what falls within the definition, there is also no way to delimit its content or evaluate an observation in relation to the concept (which is really a proposition). At the same time, it seems to reflect some sort of essentialism. Despite the stressing of variety and the ambiguity, or openness, of concepts, one suspects that people are really seeking is some hidden truth out there somewhere. Once that is found it will be easier to proceed.

Generally speaking, completely open concepts are seldom functional when addressing specific matters, because they are of little help in focusing. Further, concepts based on insights derived from the sources available to one discipline, in this case social anthropology, which relies heavily on verbal sources, may be less useful when applied to other sources, even though the aim of the research is the same. In addition to exploring the concept itself, theorizing about it should serve to identify aspects that can be empirically investigated. This would entail both precision and specification. In relation to material remains, this can probably best be done by those who study them.

In empirical research based on material remains, my opinion is that the only definitions of gender that can be made operational for the moment, are the ones that recognise a link between sex and gender, simply because this ensures a starting point, however feeble, in making the interpretations. I do not recommend this because I think it is "correct" or even the best, but because I think one can make it function in an archaeological context. Lacking any point of reference outside our own experience, I think it is extremely important that the concepts are given operational definitions that make them fruitful, i.e. link theory and sources.

This does not mean that "gender" becomes a mere substitution for "sex" or an elaboration of sex differences. Even if one takes sex as a basis for structuring differences for given (contra Yanagisako and Collier 1987), we recognize the *variation of its content* and make this the focus of our research. In addition to the intra-cultural variation, it is important that one allows for intercultural variation. The traditional way of expressing this is that gender lines are often cross-cut by other lines such as class and race. I prefer to say that the categories male and female serve to close some, and open up other options within a cultural system. Additional structures of difference may modify the gender options.

## Variety

thus becomes an important part of the definition. The emphasis of variety has important implications for anyone trying to reason from material culture to gender:

- one can expect no set relationship between the genders (or even a set number)
- likewise the relation between gender and material symbols will be subject to change
- and there is no appeal to universals in establishing connections

Take *class*, or simply *wealth*. The sexual categories remain stable, while the cultural ones change. For one thing, a high-class or wealthy person will relate

differently to material culture than a poor one, if only because she can afford expensive possessions or surroundings. Likewise, expectations and demands towards people vary depending on i.e. class. Quite often this is regulated by sets of rules.

In medieval society in Norway the houses, clothes and work of men and women belonging to different classes were described in the poem *Rigstula*. This poem makes it quite clear that not only do the rich live more comfortably; men and women of the different classes described in the *Rigstula* perform different kinds of work and have different expectations of life. – Another example of such strict rules regarding material culture are the clothing-rules of the European Middle Ages.

I thus would prefer to define gender as a culturally prescribed set of rules, regulations and expectations defining femininity and masculinity and regulating relations primarily between biological men and women. In practical life, gender differences will be seen as different behaviour patterns, work tasks and participation in social institutions. I would like to name these last ones “gender roles”. The system (or “society”) decides whether roles open to men and women respectively are overlapping or segregated. I would like to suggest that such systems are more often concerned with norms and “normal behaviour” than with prescribing behaviour in daily life. Ritual behaviour is in most ways subject to stricter rules and thus expresses the norms, sometimes by means of (gender) value-laden symbolism.

*Gender ideology*, norms and their legitimation, *gender systems*, the relationships between genders and between gender and other structures of difference, and *gender roles*, the way gender affects daily life, can be seen as three separate, but intertwining, approaches to gender studies. In the following, I shall discuss these different approaches in relation to material culture.

## Who is gendered?

Presumably anyone who is *in society*. Population does not necessarily equal members of society. Slaves, for example, commonly are not counted as members of society, and its rules and norms would not apply. One might say that although slaves could undoubtedly be seen as sexed, they would not be gendered to their masters, with the rights and obligations this would entail. Gender is relational also in the sense that one is always gendered for someone.

## Studying gender from material remains

In many societies full membership is attained only through initiation rites. If gender is a quality of full members of society, gender symbolism and genderized action would only come into full play among adults. Can children be ungendered? Is this why some analyses show that almost no children have been buried in some grave fields, although child mortality must have been high? Or is it just that they are not recognized when the skeletal remains are missing, because children were not accompanied with gender markers, like jewellery or weapons?

Now I have, for analytical purposes, differentiated between gender as norms and gender as lived, and I have made the point that gender is a relational concept. To study one gender isolated hardly makes sense, since it seems to be the

dynamic aspect that gives gender its purpose. The point I now want to make is that gender studies should not necessarily be a variety of women's studies, and can never be more than one among many aspects of feminist studies. Gender studies should be about relations.

In filling the concept with content, the archaeologist has in each separate case to rely on material remains. Most of us only feel comfortable if an association between gender and artefact or context can be established for a starting point. The only reliable way of doing this is via sex determination: skeletal remains or pictures, as in rock art. From a first association, links can be built to encompass other kinds of material or situation. One can of course, also make assumptions based on universals, cultural kinship or cultural typologies. Very often, such assumptions must be made in order to start the investigation at all.

Thus, description alone becomes a major task of interpretation. Uninterpreted, this description may well cover a wide variety of roles and gender identities, some of which are probably cross-cut by other divisions, like class, clan etc. One can easily imagine that there can be equally strong differences between the sexual roles of women belonging to different classes in a society as between women and men in the same class i.e. in a hierarchical society. The ways and extent to which one can move between other social classes may in its turn be part of the gender system.

## **Gender symbolism**

The fact that there is gender symbolism at all attests to the importance of gender differentiation in a society. Symbols and symbolic actions give expression to ideas, and as such are products of prehistoric minds. One must assume that in most societies gender was seen as static and universal, while changes "happened" more or less unplanned over time. Ideologies served to legitimise and stabilise the natural order. The problems of interpreting symbolism has been treated at length elsewhere (see for example Hodder 1982), and I shall not go into them here. The interpretations we make, however, must be seen as interpretations of gender ideals and ideal orders.

## **Gender in action**

or through action in daily and ritual life is probably a more dynamic field where changes happened faster. Sexual roles can be seen as enacting of part of the gender ideology, but are often modified by practical considerations, as can be seen if for example a woman steps into a practical masculine role in a critical situation. This is also the arena where people can contribute to change gender arrangements by actively choosing to act against the norms, individually or in groups.

Action seems to be a key word here. Archaeology is traditionally centred around artefacts and monuments as representing people's environments, possessions, wealth etc. Only occasionally does one consider them as results of intentional actions, achievements and competence. By thinking of archaeological remains primarily as remains of people's activity, we can also include (via

associations) among the potentially gendered sources a wide number of unprestigious remains like cooking pits, garbage pits, plowing furrows and traces of prehistoric activity without finds in the potentially gendered source potential.

The acts one learns to do, and the skills one masters, are factors in the way the environment is experienced. Hallpike (1979) uses the term “interactive environment” to show that our natural surroundings are not objective and stable. His example is the intellectual and “the man of robust common sense”, both stranded on a desert island. The skills of an intellectual are of little help in survival, while the practical man(!) will be able to build shelter and find food. The desert island might even seem friendly to him, because he masters it. Thus, Hallpike points out, the interactive environment depends on the way one understands it, and “understanding is an integral part of action” (1979:482).

This makes action a form of knowing, a point also made most strongly by Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle. Ryle argues against the Cartesian dualism of the dualism of mind and body, which conceives of the mind as a separate entity, but without substance or location (“the ghost in the machine”). There is no such thing, argues Ryle, it is all a question of confusing the categories. Like Hallpike, he argues that action is a form of knowing (an activity of the mind). Observing actions is the way to get to learn another person’s mind. – Since cultural remains are most often results of intentional actions, they can also be seen as a path to the minds of the people who acted, or, more technically, of inferring from the “material” category to the “mind” category. By understanding the skills people had, we should be able to learn about the people themselves and their frames of reference.

This includes gender and gendered behaviour. Substituting Hallpike’s two men with a man and a woman, with gendered skills and competences, we immediately start reflecting on how this would influence their handling of the situation, their experiences of the surroundings. We assume that they were not a couple, but had to rely on the skills of one gender alone. The archaeologist, reading material culture as evidence of gendered action, has a fair chance of learning not only about the skills and actions themselves, but of how these skills enabled people of the past to interact with their surroundings.

Through the combined approaches of symbolism and action-related investigations, the archaeologist stands as good a chance of studying gender both in its ideological aspects and the practical as she has of learning about anything else in prehistory.

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## **Giminė – produktyvi archeologijos koncepcija?**

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### **Santrauka**

Lyties diferenciacijos, kaip struktūrinio priešistorinės ir šiuolaikinės visuomenės principo, tyrimai pradėti archeologijoje palyginti anksti, o giminės, kaip socialinio reiškinių, koncepciją sukūrė socialinės antropologijos specialistai. Jiems ši koncepcija pasirodė naudinga analizuojant realybę, kurioje žmonių santykiai yra per daug sudėtingi, kad būtų galima juos aiškinti remiantis vien lyčių dichotomija. Lytis yra biologinė, o giminė – kultūrinė kategorija, nebūtinai sutampanti su lytimi.

Feministinės tradicijos archeologai greitai priėmė šią koncepciją ir joje glūdinčią sampratą, nes jau vien jos apibrėžimas, atrodo, galėjo išspręsti kai kurias svarbesnes problemas. Praėjo beveik dešimt „giminės“ tyrimų metų. Atėjo laikas paklausti: kaip gi su ta giminės koncepcija archeologijoje? Ar ji iš tiesų yra raktas nuo supratimo, kurio tikėjomės? Ar reikia šią koncepciją papildyti siekiant, kad ji būtų produktyvesnė *archeologijos kontekste*? Juk galų gale koncepcijos yra galingiausi tyrinėtojų įrankiai. Jeigu joms trūksta aiškumo bei galiybės būti pritaikytoms, tai to paties trūksta ir mūsų moksliniams tyrimams.

Šiame darbe autorė nesutinka su mintimi, kad minėta koncepcija yra ribotos vertės, jeigu nėra ryšio tarp jos ir materialaus palikimo, kurį ji turėtų paaiškinti. Autorė primygtinai rekomenduoja pradėti nuo suvokimo, kad tarp biologinės lyties ir socialinės giminės egzistuoja ryšys. Būtent toks turėtų būti išeities taškas kiekvienu konkrečiu atveju. Tyrimams palengvinti įvedami ir kitokie, tačiau susiję terminai: *giminės ideologija*, *giminės sistemos* ir *giminės vaidmenys*.

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