

Is the archaeology of gender necessarily a feminist archaeology?

Introduction

Existing theoretical frameworks are conceptually and methodologically sophisticated enough to handle engendered inquiries, rendering a feminist-based framework with new methodologies redundant (Wylie 1991, Hill 1998). Attempts to date to work outside of mainstream archaeological practices have accumulated in flawed analogies (Brumfiel 1991) or politicisation of gender issues (Biaggi and Lobell 1994, Gimbutas 1982, 1989, 1991, Meskell 1995). Fundamental terms require clarification to avoid repeats of methodologically flawed works and feminist political agendas need to be divorced from research questions. Also, the impact of using different classes of evidence, like burials and iconography with their attendant different focuses, constrains the types of questions which can be asked and the information obtained. Multivariate approaches to the gender question can operate successfully to access gender roles and construction in past societies, and to provide a corrective to andro- and gynocentric biases.

Some definitions and history

Deconstructing gender and sex

Issues of gender presence and inter-relations for the past have increasingly been focused upon in the last two decades in the English-speaking archaeological community (Hill 1998, Wylie 1991). Conkey and Spector (1984) are widely credited with the first paper to systematically examine the application of feminist approaches and insights to archaeological practice and theory (Wylie 1992). Studies were published during the 1970s in Scandinavia, which went largely unnoticed due to the comparatively few archaeologists who understand the Nordic languages, exploring archaeological issues using an explicitly feminist perspective (Sørensen 2000). In 1979, Norway hosted a workshop discussing the androcentric element in

archaeological interpretation; however, the proceedings remained unpublished until 1987, when they were distributed in English (Sørensen 2000). The proceedings have largely remained uncited in the literature on the history of gender archaeology, resulting in the incorrect attribution of a late date for the inception of its beginnings (Gilchrist 1991, Wylie 1992).

Fundamental terminology such as theory, gender and sex requires working definitions and Hill (1998) has identified five core concepts which are being used inconsistently:

1. The methods by which gender studies are incorporated into investigative frameworks;
2. The inappropriate, ahistorical usage of ethnographic analogies with prehistoric data
3. An over-emphasis upon one line of inquiry and verification; and
4. The conflation of gender studies with feminist politicking.

This is a consequence of gender archaeology's failure to produce significant alternative methodological advances on issues like household organisation, ideology, labour division and production by comparison with traditional processual and post-processual frameworks.

Hill (1998: 101) defines theory as "a conceptual framework that provides the foundation for explanation". With no inclusive, programmatic "feminist theory" having been proposed and taken up as an investigative framework for prehistoric archaeology (Visweswaran 1997), a focus point has been feminist-inspired critiques of androcentrism within archaeology. The critiques of the explicit and implicit androcentrism in existing archaeological theoretical frameworks have contributed, in particular, to clarifying categories of gender and sex as organising principles.

It has been argued that gender is not genetically inherited but a process of structuring subjectivities, whereas sex is biologically determinate and static (Claassen 1992, Gilchrist 1991, Nelson 1997). However, not all feminists and anthropologists concur with this strict separation, pointing out sex is not "the ground upon which culture elaborates gender" (Morris 1995, 568-569) and "sexing biases have been identified among the methods used in sexing skeletons... When sex is assigned to a skeleton of

unknown sex, it is a cultural act” (Claassen 1992, 4). Butler (1990: 7) has gone further, claiming “perhaps [sex] was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all”.

These philosophies, whereby sex is a social construct formed by discursive practices, implicate Western biological anthropology in denying that same physical characteristics can be used in a cross-cultural capacity to characterise sexual identity (Hill 1998). This approach of sexual fluidity has been undermined by the application of DNA analysis to skeletal remains: “... An 8000-year-old skeleton from the Hourglass Cave, western Colorado, was tested...and the results indicated that the skeleton was that of a male; this was in agreement with the physical anthropological analysis... Ancient DNA offers a way out from the uncertainties that may be encountered with physical anthropological methods...” (Brown 1998, 43)

Despite the conclusions drawn from molecular results, it must be recognised the investigations were conceived and the DNA findings interpreted through a culturally mediated Western concept of biology. While a sex-gender divide remains useful, the underlying construct is a distinction between Western scientific views on anatomy, and how biology and culture interact from birth through concepts of appropriate role plays, dress code, diet and occupational activity (Whitehouse 1998). This can serve as a useful analytical tool, provided it is recognised the division is not rigid.

Aside from the distinction made between anatomy and the cultural conceptualisation of gender, gender studies are concerned with analysing both males and females (Gilchrist 1991, Leick 2003). Fieldwork has challenged the notion of a distinct male-female dichotomy, through expanding the categories to include a third or fourth gender in some non-Western societies (Herdt 1994, Hollimon 1997). Furthermore, ideology of gender is also expressed through various objects, activities and spatial arrangements in the landscape (Nelson 1997). Gender is therefore an important social variable which must not be directly assumed, but rather is interwoven with the social values of the society being studied.

[Feminism and gender archaeology](#)

Wylie (1991) lists three reasons why it has been claimed gender cannot be studied; namely that women and gender are inaccessible in archaeological contexts, the methodology is too limited to sustain such research and since identifying women and their activities is inherently problematic, any reconstructions must be drawn from enigmatic data. In rejecting these objections, Wylie states the sophisticated understanding of gender during the Third Wave of feminism made women and gender a possible object of study in archaeology. This fails to account for historical differences in the development and impact of feminism in America and Europe. While there was a concern in America with studying the sexual division of labour in historical and prehistoric contexts, gender archaeology in Europe focused more on the symbolic and cultural manifestations of gender (Sørensen 2000). While this development has been attributed to the greater impact of Second Wave feminism on American than European academia (Gilchrist 1999), Sørensen (2000) notes that the existence of women has always been acknowledged; it is how their presence is understood which has changed.

The history of feminism, with its political stance that women's positions in society are inferior to that of men, has been articulated by American feminists into three paradigmatic markers (Gilchrist 1999, Visweswaran 1997): the First to Third Waves of feminism.

The First Wave spanned the Progressive Era (c. 1880-1920) of various suffrage and social reform organisations, the emergence of the first major phase (1912-1919) of mass feminist mobilisation (Cott 1987), and the first feminist publications (Sørensen 1998). It was rooted in the reactions against "Victorian notions of sexual difference [which] held that men and women were characterized by their biology, which in turn determined their social roles" (Visweswaran 1997, 598). While Victorian anthropologists Fletcher and Cox Stevenson posed the question of whether gender and sex could be distinguished between, they failed to follow this through. It was Margaret Mead who first used ethnography to develop a biological and social distinction through her work in Samoa (Mead 1928, Sørensen 1998). However, ethnographies understanding the structural symbolic position of women only appeared from the 1950s onwards (Richards 1956).

The Second Wave spanned the 1960s and 1970s, with its beginnings attributed to the American civil rights movement (Giddens 1984) and the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan 1963). It is the most widely known Wave through its association with the second mass feminist movement of 1967-1974 (Visweswaran 1997). Second Wave feminism saw gender as being cultural constructed. As such, gender could not be assumed and had to be investigated to understand how gender functioned in a particular society. This broadly coincided with the advent of Binford's "New Archaeology" (Binford 1962) but failed to make a mainstream impact on European archaeology (Clarke 1973). It was the also time when the theory of patriarchy gained momentum within the feminist movements and had a direct influence on the politically-inspired fringe notions of a Mother Goddess during the Upper Palaeolithic and Neolithic of Europe, the Near East and Egypt (Meskell 1995, Ucko 1962).

The approach of processual archaeology was orientated to exploring macro-processes, i.e. the adaptation of the whole system. Binford vilified individuals, internal variables and gender dynamics as unimportant and agency theory had yet to be developed (Binford 1983, 1986, 1989, Johnson 1989). The tenet of gender being a social construct incorporating irreducible and variable symbolic and ideological components ran counter to processual archaeology's notion of systems-level mechanisms, with the material culture mediating adaptive responses to the environment (Wylie 1991). Therefore it was only from the 1980s onwards, as more women entered archaeology drawing upon the feminist researches of their anthropological colleagues and as micro-scale theoretical stances were increasingly being put forward (Hodder 1998), that gender began to become integrated into of the mainstream discourse of subjectivity (Hassan 1998).

The Third Wave began in the 1980s and continues today, linked with Second Wave feminism through the development of feminist investigative stances such as standpoint theory in the 1970s and 1980s (Visweswaran 1997). These recent feminist critiques of science share parallels with post-processualism in critiquing and deconstructing the claimed objectivity of positivist processual archaeology, particularly with post-processualism's emphasis on symbolic activities and micro-processes. Feminist theorists have developed three solutions in response to the inherent contradictions involved in their deconstruction of science (Harding 1986):

are anti-class, anti-racist, anti-sexist investigations more neutral and objective than androcentric-inspired work?

Feminist empiricism claims that normal scientific methodology is sound and the purported flaw is in how the scientists conduct their research (Engelstad 1991). However, this stance says little about theories of science and fails to adequately detail how feminists' selective choice of subject material is anymore objective than androcentrism.

The feminist standpoint approach is claimed to be “a morally and scientifically preferable grounding for our interpretations and explanations of nature and social life” (Harding 1986, 26). While rejecting relativism, this approach negates variability in social background, culture, history and life experience. Its essentialist nature contributed towards the growth of feminist post-modernism, where knowledge is historically contingent and attempts to deconstruct and transform systems of knowledge are privileged (Engelstad 1991). The problem with feminist post-modernism is common to all post-modernist thought: how does one judge between different plurality of meanings?

Anthropologists and sociologists such as Barthes, Bourdieu, Giddens and Foucault inspired both feminist post-modernism and the post-modernist thought found in the post-processual archaeological theories of Shanks and Tilley (1987), and Hodder (1989). Hodder has since backed away somewhat and has added in the qualifier of archaeological context (Hodder 1998). The post-processual concept of power ideology in viewing history as a text, inspired by the anthropological text metaphor of Geertz, is problematic when trying to “translate” between two cultures and the “hero”, the investigator, becomes the focal point. Moreover, those arguments are themselves made from a position of power and are not self-reflexive on their masculine authoritative language (Engelstad 1991). As such, the claim by Shanks and Tilley (1987) that gender archaeology is under-developed is partly a consequence of their view of gender research as centring on sexual repression and exploitation; this is in line with their power ideology which ignores gendered individuals and the role of gender in structuring culture, individuals and society.

Gender-informed archaeologies

It is incorrect to regard “gender-neutral” or “engendered” perspectives as alternative foci, as gender is inextricably intertwined with cultural, economic, ideological and social variables. Such variables include traditional archaeological concerns like craft specialisation, alliances, imagery, state formation and households, amongst others (Gero 1991). Engendering the past raises questions about how societies are constituted, the social relationships between both individuals and hierarchical divides, the criteria used in the excavation or post-excavation analyses, and the methodologies employed with explicit or implicit assumptions.

At the same time it has to be recognised that gender archaeology is still in its infancy, with the need to continuously outline its relationship with feminism and to demonstrate it produces more holistic conclusions and insights into past societies (Vida 1998). Although it can be argued archaeologists and palaeoanthropologists have examined sex and its social effects reflected in material culture remains, for example Binford’s (1973) study of the Mousterian, gender archaeology constitutes more than a search for a datum. A holistic approach to gender archaeology investigates social categories and their expressions, irrespective of biological sex (Hill 1998).

The invisibility of prehistoric females was tied to the notion of “naturalness” and a tendency to project Western societal perspectives onto the past, which developed into a tautology of legitimating the present through the past (Hager 1997, Hurcombe 1995). Hurcombe has termed this the Biased Interpretation of Gender (BIG). In addition to the hindrances of the adherence to systems theory, processual archaeology continued to perpetuate the notion of females as passive actors on the stage of human evolution, quietly foraging and raising children in the background. By contrast, males manufactured the stone tools and were regarded as being at the heart of communicative and trade networks (Zihlman 1997).

Androcentric human origins

These views became crystallised in 1966 at the symposium “Man the Hunter”; the papers were published under the same name two years later (Lee and DeVore 1968).

Man was placed at the centre of a positive of a positive feedback loop linking cultural and biological developments, associated with hominid origins. A feminist-inspired reaction to the marginalisation of women from participation in evolutionary significant activities was forthcoming: “Women the Gatherer” (Slocum 1975). This paper, as well as others during the 1980s in the *Yearbook of Physical anthropology* (three papers) and the *Annual Review of Anthropology* (one paper), attempted to redress the sex bias in the prevailing theories. Slocum, through detailing the pivotal role played by female primates like chimpanzees in their societies, laid the groundwork for the publications of Tanner and Zihlman (Tanner 1981, Tanner and Zihlman 1976, Zihlman 1978, 1987, 1997).

Although Tanner and Zihlman have been accused of being gynocentric on the basis of the corrective “Women the Gatherer” model (Wolpoff 1999), Zihlman (1997: 98) points out that “rather [they] drew on the broad spectrum of data emerging from multiple areas of research... We argued for flexibility of roles and maintained that it was more likely that all individuals – regardless of sex – performed a wide range of tasks”.

Despite the awareness of the BIG problem, androcentric reconstructions of the role of men and women continued. “The Origin of Man” hypothesis (Lovejoy 1981) depicted women staying behind in social groups while men hunted and gathered food to provision his family. It has been criticised for its weak socio-biological underpinnings; in particular leaving the women open to predators without protection (Falk 1997). Additionally, it can no longer be automatically assumed that stone tool manufacture was the prerogative and domain of men (Bird 1993). More recently, Hurcombe (1995) has highlighted the continued usage of 1960s images of Maurice Wilson’s [Figure 1], continuing the androcentric view of females highlighted above, in a publication by the British Museum (Andrews and Stringer 1989).

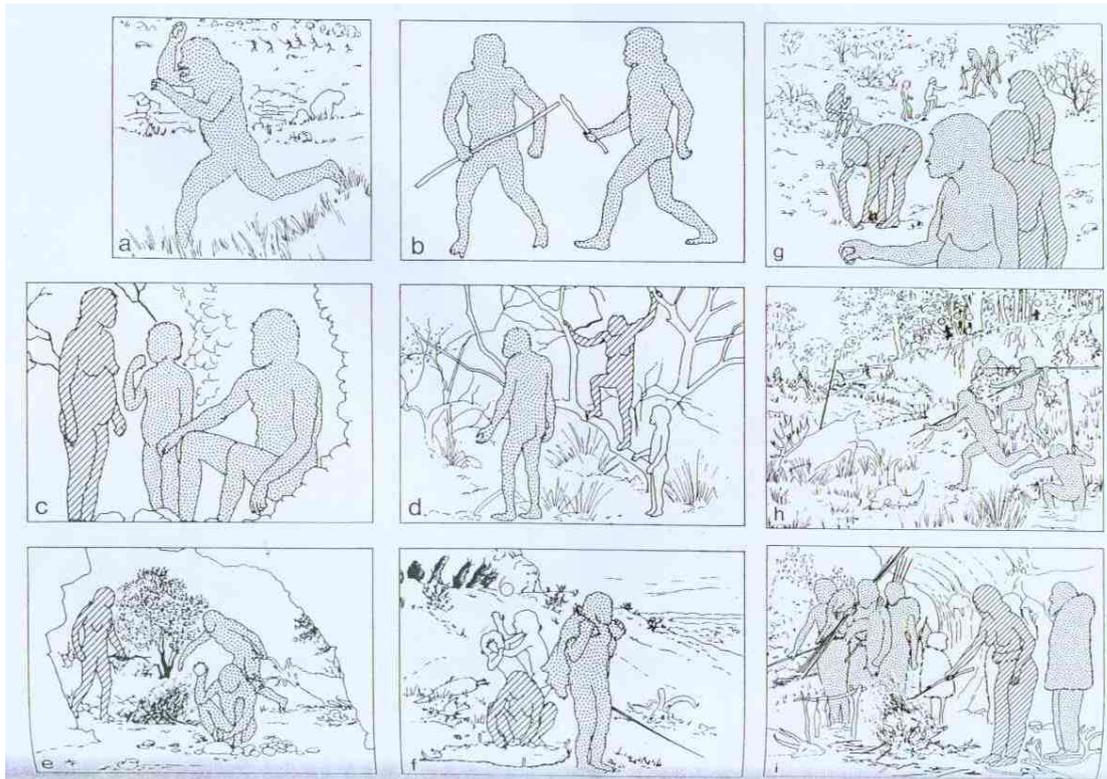


Figure 1. Maurice Wilson's illustrations of ancient hominin female (lined) and male (stippled) activities. *From (Hurcombe 1995, 90)*

Gendered use of space and materials

As discussed earlier, avoidance of addressing issues of gender was due to the perception of gender as a small-scale internal variable. However, “if gender relations are viewed as the product of broad spectrum social relations as well as micro-level interactions” (Hill 1998: 105), gender is thus reconceptualised gender in terms of scale and providing greater variability in research scope.

Appropriate methods should generate hypotheses which can be independently tested. As Hill (1998: 109) cogently points out, such approaches embracing “the dynamism inherent in prehistory must avoid analogical arguments that are historically uniformitarian in construction and thus antithetical to any theoretical structure that purports to study change”. Caution must be exercised when dealing with only the residual material remains of past activities, for the risk is run of disregarding the embeddedness of gender in the ideologies and social institutions of the society in question. Furthermore, there has both been an over-reliance upon ethnographic and ethnohistoric analogies without contextual consideration (Nelson 1997), and

archaeologists have tended to inherit ethnographies representative of Western cognitive categories (Wilmsen and Denbow 1990).

Summarised in 1991 as “What This Awl Means: Toward a Feminist Archaeology”, and expanded upon in a 1993 book, Spector re-examined the pitfalls and consequences of excluding the societies being studied from the production and distribution of knowledge. Combining traditional excavation analysis with her relationship with the contemporary society, Spector also utilised past ethnographic accounts and created her own ethnography to highlight individualised cultural lives: women’s activities and how the activities of both genders constituted and informed their inter-relationships. Contra Spector (1991) terming her research “feminist archaeology”, her studies fall within the framework of gender archaeology outlined earlier and illustrates a different approach to conceptualising and illustrating gender, through a “task differentiation” framework using present and immediate past resources.

Such an approach is problematic to adopt directly when dealing with prehistoric sites, with no ethnography or informants to draw upon. Sørensen’s 1987 study on metalworking in prehistoric Scandinavia served to try to feed women into societal structure by focusing on copper alloy technology. The moulds were made from clay and the clay technology is posited to have been a female domain on account of the mould’s unearthed in domestic contexts. Sørensen tried to work out the implications: if men made the moulds then they were using “typical” female technology and impinging upon women’s “spheres”. Also, if women were manufacturing the moulds then this in turn would inform and exert a degree of control over the presumably masculine mining activities. By extending her analysis to include dress code, grave goods and burial rites, it was concluded “there was apparently substantial regional variation in gender arrangements. In this context it is particularly important that studies show that the expression of men and women do not necessarily follow parallel patterns. The degree to which gender categories can be separated regarding their sphere of articulation is therefore becoming a central issue” (Sørensen 1992, 46).

In keeping with increasing scrutiny of gender relations also within Africa (Kent 1998, Wadley 1997), another issue to receive attention is their (mis)representations in southern African rock art. Solomon (1992) pioneered the way in establishing the

centrality of gender in Bushmen thought and iconography. As well as positing that gender underlays much of the structure of the paintings, detailed analyses of the “mythic women” motifs [Figure 2] suggest that some paintings are linked to female initiation rights (Solomon 1994). Parkington (1989) has noted the large numbers of male figures, activities and equipment in rock art scenes, postulating that males dominated the ritual sphere. However, areas such as the Limpopo-Shashi confluence (northern South Africa) have a predominance of females (Eastwood and Blundell 1999). This creation of a false male/female dichotomy also negates the role and importance of female shamans in modern (Katz 1982) and past (Hewitt 1986) ethnographic recordings; this draws attention to the problems of which aspects of ethnography can be emphasised successfully and to what extent can ethnographic recordings be generalised onto past remains in the same geographical region.

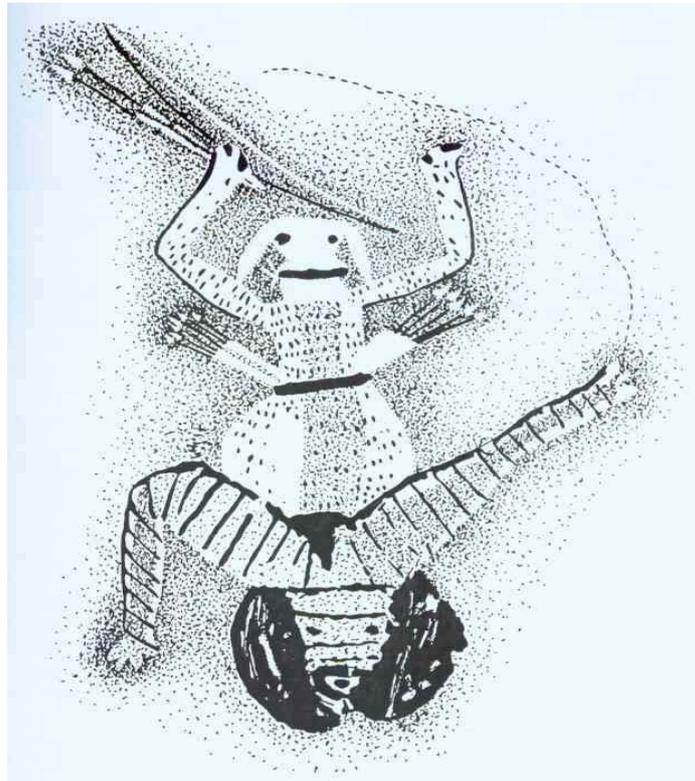


Figure 2. The “mystic woman” from Willcox’s Shelter in the Drakensberg, South Africa.

From (Solomon 1994, 335)

The “mythic women” are unusually recorded in frontal view, seated, standing or squatting (Solomon 1999). Through the linkage to rites of passage, Solomon (1994, 1999) has incorporated questions on their form and not the referents *per se*. Parkington has picked up on this theme and re-examined the Kalahari ethnography

(Biesele 1993), as well as the Bleek and Lloyd records (Bleek 1924, 1932, Guenther 1999, Lloyd 1911) in light of the rock art depictions in the Western Cape, South Africa: “Cloaked human figures are conventional depictions of initiated men, hunters who have killed their first eland, potential husbands. The cloak they wear is probably that of an eland. The depiction of the cloak is visually linked to the torso of a painted eland. Men also wrap their women in eland skins. Cloaked figures [Figure 3] could be incorporated into a broader definition of therianthropes, as could lines of women dancing at a first menstruation ceremony [Figure 4]. A girl who has experienced her first menstruation is said to have “shot an eland” and older women dance the eland bull dance to welcome her to the herd.” (Parkington 2003, 144)

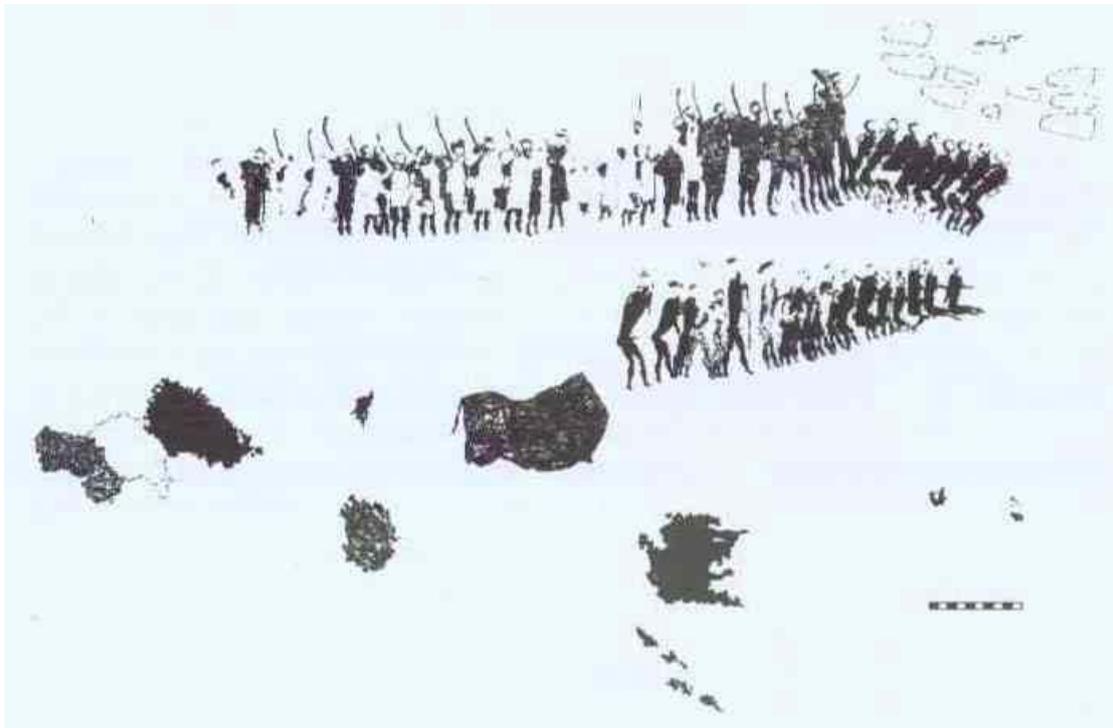


Figure 3. A line of cloaked men with bows and quivers. Reminiscent of male puberty ceremonies, the men at front of the line are naked. *From (Parkington 2003, 145)*

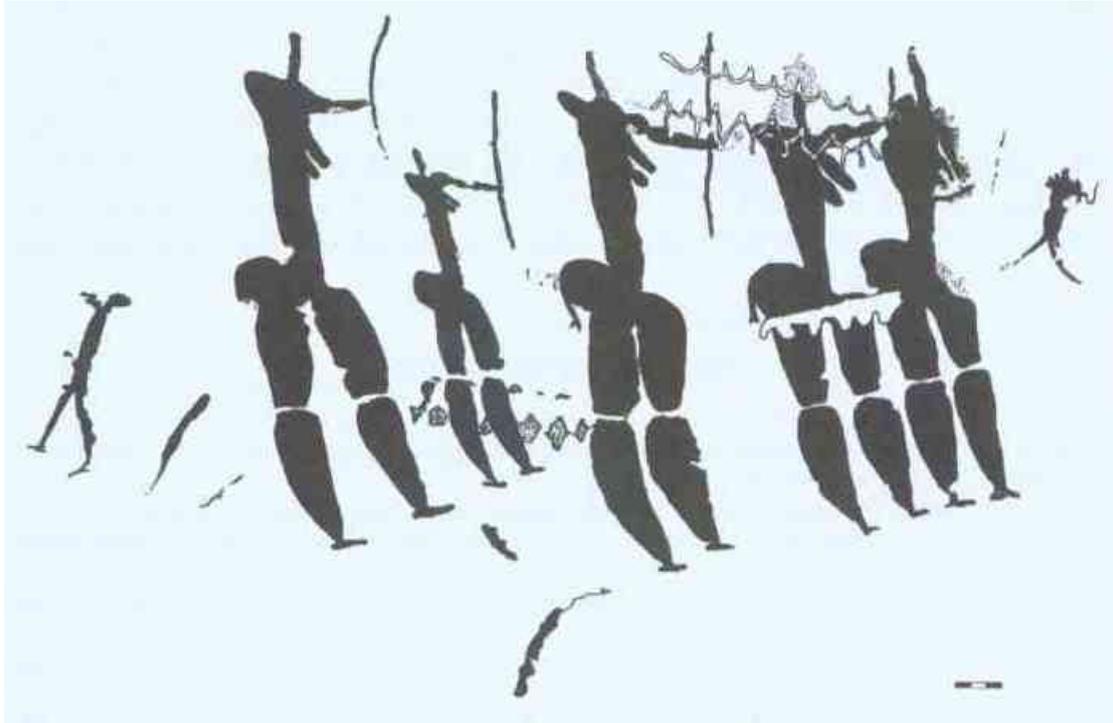


Figure 4. Naked women with small tails on their buttocks. *From (Parkington 2003, 145)*

The perspective generated postulates broad continuities in symbolic clothing and ceremonial forms, but is flexible enough to accommodate spatial and temporal variations successfully. In doing so, Parkington is highlighting the potential for practical and idealised gender representation in iconography.

Conclusion

Gender is socially constructed, with archaeological manifestations varying spatially and temporally. As the social construct of sex class, and the learned behaviour of being masculine or feminine, activities, behaviours and role-plays are expected of different gender groups. Feminism has highlighted the composition of archaeology's substantive body of knowledge and demonstrated how gendered research is interwoven implicitly into specific theoretical and practical constructs. It shares in common with post-processualism the rejection of dispassionate objectivity, and the separateness of subject and object, favouring nuanced approaches over categorical thinking. Spector (1993) demonstrates how Western classificatory schemes impose foreign values, distorting the original categories and biasing interpretation.

The task of recognising the inherent bias and developing a more gender-friendly discipline through challenging the status quo rests in integrating gender studies into mainstream archaeological practice. The dangers of adopting an androcentric approach have been highlighted through examining past and current literature on human origins (Lovejoy 1981), whereas a gynocentric approach can lead to extremes such as exclusive Mother Goddess interpretations for the Upper Palaeolithic and Neolithic figurines in Europe, the Near East and North Africa (Goodison 1998, Meskell 1995). Parkington (2003) has highlighted aspects of Bushmen rights of passage portrayed in Western Cape rock art. Such examples reflect both the advantage and disadvantages of a feminist approach.

Part of the process towards recognising that gender archaeology is not feminist archaeology is an understanding that whereas feminism is inherently political with a focus on power relations, gender archaeology is about social theory which can be adapted by both feminist and non-feminist frameworks: gender is another tool to further analyse the structuring principles and practices of past cultures.

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