The concept of fundamental, innate differences between males and females is a relatively recent phenomenon, the product of western Enlightenment thinking; yet the uncritical acceptance of sex and gender as natural and unchanging phenomena continues to shape much of the research in prehistoric archaeology today. A Companion to Gender Prehistory aims to correct this view by understanding gender as a complex social category, and charting its variability through time and space.

In this in-depth overview of the field, organized thematically and geographically, top scholars offer up-to-date and comprehensive coverage of gender-based research over the past 30 years, challenging a number of false assumptions about sex and gender, and demonstrating how top-down thinking can skew interpretations of the past. Thematic chapters (Part I) address current areas of interest and debate in gender prehistory, including the interfaces between gender and human evolution, social complexity, prehistoric material culture, bodies and identities, human imagery, and sexuality. Regional chapters (Part II) offer gendered perspectives on archaeological research in particular areas of Africa, Asia, Europe, the Americas, and the South Pacific, and highlight key areas for future research.

With its critical wide-ranging approach to prehistoric archaeology, examined through the lenses of gender and feminism, this Companion will serve as an introductory guide to gender prehistory for researchers, instructors, and students in anthropology, archaeology, and gender studies.

The Editor
Diane Bolger is a Research Fellow in Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. In addition to her research on gender, she specializes in the ceramics of early agricultural societies in the ancient Near East, particularly in Cyprus, where she has been involved in fieldwork since the early 1980s. Her major publications on gender include three books: Engendering Aphrodite: Women and Society in Ancient Cyprus (2002), Gender through Time in the Ancient Near East (2006), and Gender and Genes: Suffering and Survival in Ancient Cyprus (2016), and Gender through Time in the Ancient Near East (2006).

Reviewed by:
Jerome Stock, University of Pennsylvania

This tremendous book contains all past studies, current theories, and everything on gender. I can't wait to own a copy!

Joan Gero, American University

The publication of A Companion to Gender Prehistory signals a new era in feminist and queer archaeology. With contributions from both established and emerging scholars throughout the world, this volume showcases the diversity and depth of gender-focused archaeology as the study of the deep past The authors stimulate our curiosity about the long history of gender and its variability and show the potential for emerging research.

Barbara L. Voss, Stanford University

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A Companion
to Gender
Prehistory
The *Blackwell Companions to Anthropology* offers a series of comprehensive syntheses of the traditional subdisciplines, primary subjects, and geographic areas of inquiry for the field. Taken together, the series represents both a contemporary survey of anthropology and a cutting edge guide to the emerging research and intellectual trends in the field as a whole.

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A Companion to Gender Prehistory

Edited by Diane Bolger
IN MEMORY OF ELIZABETH BRUMFIEL AND JANET SPECTOR,
INSPIRING FEMINISTS AND PIONEERS OF GENDER PREHISTORY
Contents

List of Illustrations x
List of Tables xiii
Notes on Contributors xiv
Acknowledgments xxii

Introduction: Gender Prehistory – The Story So Far
Diane Bolger 1

Part I Thematic Perspectives in Gender Prehistory 21

Section 1 Current Themes and Debates 21
1 Engendering Human Evolution Adrienne Zihlman 23
2 Gender, Complexity, and Power in Prehistory Scott R. Hutson, Bryan K. Hanks, and K. Anne Pyburn 45
3 Archaeology of Embodied Subjectivities Teresa Dujnic Bulger and Rosemary A. Joyce 68
4 Queer Prehistory: Bodies, Performativity, and Matter Benjamin Alberti 86
5 The Future of Gender in Prehistoric Archaeology Margaret W. Conkey 108

Section 2 Gender and Prehistoric Material Culture 121
6 Gender and Prehistoric Rock Art Kelley Hays-Gilpin 122
CONTENTS

7 Gender and Lithic Studies in Prehistoric Archaeology 142
  Nyree Finlay

8 Gender, Labor, and Pottery Production in Prehistory 161
  Diane Bolger

9 Gender and Textile Production in Prehistory 180
  Cathy Lynne Costin

Section 3 Gendered Bodies and Identities in Prehistory 203
10 Personhood in Prehistory: A Feminist Archaeology in Ten Persons 204
  Yvonne Marshall

11 Bioarchaeological Approaches to the Gendered Body 226
  Joanna Sofaer

12 Figurines, Corporeality, and the Origins of the Gendered Body 244
  Douglass W. Bailey

13 Goddesses in Prehistory 265
  Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris

Part II Regional Perspectives in Gender Prehistory 289

Section 4 Gender Prehistory in Africa and Asia 289
14 Gender in North African Prehistory 291
  Barbara E. Barich

15 Gender in the Prehistory of Sub-Saharan Africa 313
  Lyn Wadley

16 Gender and Archaeology in Coastal East Asia 333
  Sarah Milledge Nelson

17 Gender Archaeology in East Asia and Eurasia 351
  Katheryn M. Linduff and Karen S. Rubinson

18 Gender in Southwest Asian Prehistory 372
  Diane Bolger and Rita P. Wright

Section 5 Gender in European Prehistory 395
19 The History of Gender Archaeology in Northern Europe 396
  Marie Louise Stig Sørensen

20 Gender in Eastern European Prehistory 413
  John Chapman and Nona Palincas

21 Gender and Feminism in the Prehistoric Archaeology of Southwest Europe 438
  Margarita Diaz-Andreu and Sandra Montón-Subías
CONTENTS

22 Gender in British Prehistory
   Benjamin Edwards and Rachel Pope 458

23 Gender in Central Mediterranean Prehistory
   Ruth Whitehouse 480

24 Gender in Greek and Aegean Prehistory
   Louise Hitchcock and Marianna Nikolaidou 502

Section 6 Gender Prehistory in the Americas and the South Pacific 526

25 Gender in the Prehistory of the Eastern United States
   Cheryl Claassen 527

26 The Archaeology of Gender in Western North America
   Alice Beck Kehoe 544

27 The Archaeology of Gender in Mesoamerica: Moving Beyond Gender Complementarity
   Elizabeth M. Brumfi el 564

28 Gender in South American Prehistory
   Melissa A. Vogel and Robyn E. Cutright 585

29 Gender and Archaeology in Australia, Papua New Guinea, and the South Pacific
   Cherrie De Leinen 608

Index 628
List of Illustrations

Figure 2.1  Map showing New World locations mentioned in text 48
Figure 2.2  Plan view of ‘Aak household buildings from the final two chronological stages (a, b). Grinding stones (metates) are represented by the letter M. Chunchumil, Yucatan, Mexico 57
Figure 4.1  Priest-King relief fresco from Late Bronze Age palace at Knossos, Crete 98
Figure 4.2  Bull-leapers fresco from Late Bronze Age palace at Knossos, Crete 98
Figure 6.1  Birthing figure from Chevelon Steps, Arizona 124
Figure 6.2  Male and female figures and engravings in the Upper Yule River area, Pilbara, northwestern Australia 131
Figure 10.1  An outline of some processes involved in manufacturing an Iron Age mirror 217
Figure 10.2  Some of the relational elements of form and decoration which might be brought together in an Iron Age mirror 218
Figure 10.3  Plan view of the Iron Age Portesham burial containing a decorated bronze mirror 220
Figure 12.1  Bearded figurine from Achilleion, Greece 246
Figure 12.2  Figurine with penis from Koutsouro, Greece 247
Figure 12.3  Figurine with displayed breasts from Achilleion, Greece 248
Figure 13.1  Diversity of anthropomorphic representations from the Upper Palaeolithic 266
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>(a–h) Diversity of animal representations from the Upper Paleolithic; (i–o) Diversity of anthropomorphic representations from the Neolithic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>(a) The Ain Sakhri figurine; (b–c) Figurines from Çatalhöyük; (d–h) Some representations of bodily experience from the Aegean Bronze Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>Map of the Sahara and the Nile Valley with main sites referred to in the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>Two details of the “Great God” panel in Sefar I “Round Head” style from Sefar, Tassili, Algeria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>Map of sub-Saharan Africa showing countries and selected sites referred to in the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>A broken female figurine from the Iron Age settlement at Schroda, South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>Chinamwali art depicting themes from Chewa girls’ initiation in central Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>Dogon women’s grave goods, Bandiagara Plateau, Mali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>The queen’s gold crown from the north mound of Tomb 98, Kyongju, Korea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>Map of East Asia and Eurasia showing major regions and sites referred to in the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>Map of Cyprus, Anatolia, the Levant, and northern Mesopotamia with locations of prehistoric and protohistoric sites referred to in the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>Map of southern Mesopotamia showing locations of later prehistoric and protohistoric sites referred to in the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>Early Neolithic figurines from Kovachevo, southwest Bulgaria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>Pottery with male and female symbolism, Romania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>Representations of women in Levantine art, Centelles style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>Locations of burial types and areas mentioned in the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>Neolithic–Copper Age figurines from Malta (a–d), Sardinia (e–g), and mainland Italy (h–k)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>Copper and Bronze Age statues from Lunigiana (a–c), Sardinia (d–e), Corsica (f), southeast Italy (g), and Malta (h)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>Bone pendant of the 5th millennium B.C.E. in the shape of a reclining female from Dispilio, northwest Greece</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 24.2 Bronze figurine from Kato Syme, Late Minoan IA–B, ca. 1700–1450 B.C.E. 514
Figure 25.1 Map of North America showing locations of major sites referred to in chapters 25 and 26 528
Figure 27.1 Map of ancient Mesoamerica showing locations of sites discussed in the text 566
Figure 28.1 Map of South America 586
Figure 28.2 Andean chronology 587
Figure 29.1 Map of Oceania showing locations of principal sites and regions referred to in the text 609
# List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Timeline of selected events in human evolution</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Estimates for time invested in textile production</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>Chronological chart of early prehistoric periods in Southwest Asia referred to in the text</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>Chronological chart of later prehistoric and protohistoric periods in Mesopotamia referred to in the text</td>
<td>380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>Adult interments from Cotswold-Severn long cairns</td>
<td>463</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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that follow. Sadly, two of these scholars, Elizabeth Brumfiel and Janet Spector, passed away during the final stages of the book’s production. Their contributions to the archaeology of gender cannot be understated, and as colleagues and friends they will be sorely missed.

Diane Bolger
Edinburgh
June 26, 2012
Introduction:
Gender Prehistory – The Story So Far

Diane Bolger

The production of this book has coincided quite fortuitously with the twentieth anniversary of the landmark volume *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory* (Gero and Conkey 1991), a collaborative project of prehistorians who gathered at the Wedge Plantation in April 1988 to examine their respective sub-disciplines from the perspective of feminist social theory. While valuable research on gender and prehistoric archaeology had been published during the 1980s (e.g., Conkey and Spector 1984; Bertelsen et al. 1987; Ehrenberg 1989), it was Gero and Conkey’s edited volume that gave rise to gender prehistory on a larger scale by broadening its scope and expanding its theoretical and methodological frameworks. Today *Engendering Archaeology* continues to provide a rich mine of ideas and information about gender in societies of the remote past. On a less positive note, the book’s continued relevance can to some extent be attributed as well to the inability – or refusal – of the archaeological “mainstream” to incorporate gender and feminist theory into research and teaching agendas; this has resulted in the persistence of essentialist narratives of the past that fail to recognize the dynamic nature of gender constructs through time and space.

The present volume, which is intended in part as a tribute to *Engendering Archaeology*’s ground-breaking achievements, provides an opportunity to survey the changing landscape of gender prehistory, to explore some of its current themes and directions, and to speculate on fruitful areas for future research. In doing so it will be useful to consider some of the major theoretical and methodological developments in gender prehistory during the last several decades, to address some of its shared concerns, and to explore some of the tensions and debates which at times seem to divide its practitioners into intractable, opposing “camps.” As I hope to demonstrate, such
debates need not be divisive, and in fact can be productive and enriching since they often generate a healthy dialogue on areas of common concern and interest and therefore serve as useful platforms for further scholarly investigation. First, however, I will briefly summarize some of the fundamental changes that have taken place within the field of prehistoric archaeology as a whole during the last 20 to 30 years. While in some respects these changes have had only a limited impact on the degree to which gender and feminist perspectives have been incorporated into teaching and research agendas in prehistoric studies, they have helped to establish gender studies as an important area of archaeological investigation and have contributed to a research climate which in recent years has become increasingly concerned with social interpretations of the past. While this is sometimes attributed to the shift from “processual” to “postprocessual” approaches in archaeology, it can equally be associated with recent developments in three important domains of archaeological analysis – diversity, scale, and context – all of which have had a significant impact on research in gender prehistory.

**RECENT APPROACHES IN PREHISTORIC ARCHAEOLOGY: DIVERSITY, SCALE, AND CONTEXT**

Over the last few decades prehistoric archaeology has moved beyond the systems-oriented models that dominated research during the 1970s and 1980s to a diversity of perspectives that reflect a greater degree of concern with individuals, social groups, and social theory. Finer-grained methods of fieldwork, with more sophisticated means of recovering, recording, and analyzing data, have contributed significantly to this more complex view of the past, as have the multitude of specialist investigations generating detailed interpretations of landscape, environment, technology, diet, material culture, and many other aspects of social, political, and economic life. Dating methods have also been refined and improved, so that the chronological relationships between sites are more clearly understood. The range and depth of these activities have undermined the ability of broad analytical categories (such as band, tribe, chiefdom, and state, derived from social anthropology) to account for the variability of social organization in the past, and have encouraged the development of new research agendas based on social and cultural difference. Similarly, the diversity of evidence for the emergence of complex society has encouraged archaeologists to move beyond broad, generic schemes based on unilinear trajectories to more nuanced approaches that suggest alternative pathways to socio-economic complexity.

The shift in focus from general to specific and from similarity to difference underscores the importance of scale in recent archaeological research. As numerous studies over the last few decades demonstrate, greater attention to the micro-scale is crucial for looking at society from the “bottom up” rather than the “top down” (e.g., Renfrew 1984; Renfrew and Bahn 2000:chap. 5); for constructing alternative models to account for the development of wealth, power, and social inequality (e.g., McGuire 1983; Bender 1989; Price and Feinman 1995); and for understanding the variable processes by which societies developed through time (e.g., Rowlands 1989; Stein and Rothman 1994; Bolger 2008). Consequently, archaeological research has become more nuanced through its concern with particular individuals, groups, and
communities, and with the relationships between them, rather than limiting its focus to broad, monolithic categories like “society” or “culture.”

Research on the micro-scale can be approached by a variety of methods. These include looking at the ways in which various sectors or groups within society functioned or changed over time (Stein and Rothman 1994); investigating the social practices of day-to-day existence (Bourdieu’s *habitus*, see Bourdieu 1977); examining evidence for individuals or persons in prehistory (e.g., Knapp and Meskell 1997; Gillespie 2001; Meskell 2002; Meskell and Joyce 2003; Fowler 2004); interpreting stratigraphic evidence for gradual changes in the built environment (Tringham 1991, 2000; Papaconstantinou 2002, 2006); and tracing changes in status or identity associated with various stages of the life course (e.g., Morbeck et al. 1997; Gilchrist 1999:88–100, 2004; Bolger 2004:109–119, 2008). These and other related studies regard the seemingly mundane activities of daily life as essential for understanding the relationships between individuals, groups, and the material world, and underscore the need to draw upon theories of social change that regard people as active agents rather than passive adapters to extrinsic environmental and economic forces.

The interpretation of archaeological evidence at different scales is closely related to questions of archaeological context. The view that archaeologists should interpret the past within particular historical frameworks (see Hodder 1986:chap. 7) is now widely accepted, and contextual approaches have proved to be one of the most successful means of overcoming the limitations of broad evolutionary models of social change referred to above. While “context” in archaeology occurs in a range of dimensions, including temporal, spatial, typological, and depositional (Hodder 1986:125), it also includes the broader cultural and theoretical frameworks used by archaeologists to interpret the past. The recognition of archaeological inquiry as a reflexive process involving an interactive or dialectical relationship between the archaeologist and the evidence lies at the heart of many current research programs, and marks a radical departure from traditional “deductive” methods of archaeological inference based on empirical evidence (e.g., Hodder 1987; Papaconstantinou 2006).

Interpreting prehistoric communities within broader cultural and theoretical frameworks demands that we engage in a “comprehensive internal study of archaeological cultures” (Trigger 1989:350) in order to give greater emphasis to the social context of culture change (Price and Feinman 1995:9). The recognition that individuals and groups can bring about transformations in social organization, for example, reveals the limitations of processual models, which regard the environment as a “prime mover,” compelling people to change in particular ways in order to ensure their survival. While it is important to acknowledge the constraints placed on individuals and groups by environmental, economic, and demographic forces, the greater role of social factors in current archaeological research enables us to appreciate the complexity and indivisibility of human experience, and to recognize the variety of meanings that can result by interpreting evidence within multiple contextual frameworks.

A different kind of archaeology has emerged from the focus on diversity, scale, and context outlined above. This new way of looking at the past, which includes but is not limited to postprocessual interpretations, has been applied to research on individuals, personal relations, kinship relations, social interactions, and social identities; it considers questions of status, age, gender, cognition, social memory, *habitus*, performativity, the body, and sexuality; it adopts a “bottom up” rather than a “top down”
perspective; it emphasizes temporal and spatial differences within and between communities; and it advocates a phenomenological approach centered on the active engagement of people with their surroundings. All of these perspectives fall within the general rubric of “social archaeology” since they are the direct result of human behavior and social interaction. Why then does gender-based research continue to be pursued by only a small proportion of prehistorians? Why, 20 years after its publication, is there still a need to evoke many of the challenges to the discipline so strongly evinced in *Engendering Archaeology*?

**Gender Prehistory: Then and Now**

With the emergence in recent years of a research climate more favorable to concerns with agency, identity, and gender, it seems perplexing and frustrating that gender and feminism are under-represented in much of the current research in prehistoric archaeology. To some degree this may be due to the influence of sociobiological interpretations, which continue to inform much of the research on early humans in paleoanthropology, archaeology, evolutionary biology, and evolutionary psychology (see Bolger 2006; Gilchrist 2009:1033–1034; Zihlman this volume). The refusal or inability within these disciplines to move beyond biologically determined perspectives naturalizes sex and gender, and continues to result in a narrative of the past that is static, timeless, and androcentric. In fact, the concept of fundamental, innate differences between males and females is a relatively recent phenomenon, the product of Western Enlightenment thinking; it is not widely attested cross-culturally (Laqueur 1990; Wright 1991), nor is it supported biologically (Fausto-Sterling 2000). As indicated by the numerous papers in the current volume that raise this as an issue of central concern, the uncritical acceptance of sex and gender as natural and unchanging phenomena continues to shape much of the research in prehistoric archaeology today. Twenty years after *Engendering Archaeology*, biological differences between males and females are still widely regarded (implicitly or otherwise) as fundamental determinants of gendered behavior, both in the past and in the present.

A second factor restricting the acceptance of gendered perspectives in prehistoric archaeology lies in the persistent inequality between men and women in the archaeological workplace, the result of gender discrimination on a global scale over the course of many generations (Nelson et al. 1994). Unfortunately, this situation is unlikely to change without profound revisions to the structure of the discipline itself, which involve not only a radical reassessment of teaching and research strategies, but the adoption of more equitable policies of hiring and promotion within universities and other academic institutions worldwide (see Moser 2007 and Bolger 2008:chap. 10 for recent in-depth treatments of this topic).

Despite these obstacles, gender and feminist perspectives in archaeology have continued to challenge essentialist assumptions about human behavior; to formulate more nuanced interpretations of the past that focus on spatial and temporal differences of sex and gender constructs; and, more recently, to investigate the dynamic relationships between sex, gender, and social identity. The term “gender” itself has been given more nuanced and complex definitions in recent years that focus increasingly on its intersections with other aspects of social identity, and