

Archaeologia ChauvinisticaBare-faced, but not naked, ape

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If escape from our own culturally-based assumptions and perceptions is significant for archaeological discourse and historical construction (and this has been, and is, generally accepted) then the recognition of implicit cultural biases in our own discourse is of considerable importance. Archaeologia Chauvinistica can, and will, pinpoint some of the most blatant and sexist forms and sources, of this bias - but more insidious forms cannot be so neatly depicted.

Clearly the universal use, in archaeological discourse, of the male pronoun when both sexes are being referred to is a significant aspect of sexist bias. This 'traditional' usage (but note that the grounding of legitimation in tradition is a notable characteristic of the reproduction of asymmetries in social relations - and of the naturalisation of these asymmetries) effectively perpetuates the oppositions male:visible:active v female:invisible:passive. Man does, woman is. To continue to use the male pronoun when both sexes are meant, to continue the habit of tradition, is to support and perpetuate the asymmetries between the sexes. If you wish to change these asymmetries, then change your language.

According to Euan Mackie, the presence of a raised wooden floor in the broch of Dun Mor Vaul on Tiree 'suggests the need to provide accommodation for women, children and stores out of the way of any activity on the floor and inside the upper wall galleries'. The representation of women as passive, and as an 'other' category is rooted in Western, patriarchal values. Men are men, but women are wives, mothers, mistresses etc. This perception of woman as 'other', as object, as in Colin Renfrew's deliberate formulation... of general categories - such as 'hand axe', 'house', 'wife', or 'state' (a telling juxtaposition of words) is not uncommon in archaeological literature.

The following is from Andrew Fleming in a paper on the Wessex Culture. 'If the dynamic, acquisitive individual could achieve great social status at this time, the fact is only partially reflected in the grave goods. Rich grave goods are quite often buried with young people whose competitive lives cannot have been long, and probably with women too... All this suggests that status had a hereditary status...' Might women not have

been 'dynamic, acquisitive individuals' then? - as is readily and implicitly assumed for adult men. Fleming may well be correct, but particular sexual and social relations must be shown, and not assumed. The premisses on which interpretations are based must be critically examined before use.

This applies particularly to the use of anthropological interpretation - much of which is not more objective in its viewpoint than archaeology. John Barrett, for example, implicitly accepts a male-oriented viewpoint in his use, in a recent paper, of certain Marxist approaches to the subject. 'Generalised exchange establishes a relationship of indebtedness between wife-givers and wife-takers, against which goods flow in payment of bride-price... (T)he existence of distinct groups, some of which may be so expressed in the material culture by the diverse and exclusive sets of artefacts known from the period'. Is it necessary, or desirable, to continue to perceive societies, past and present, through the eyes of Western Man? Is it not possible to construct other views and approaches to society? It must at least be admitted that representation of the sexes, and of asymmetries between the sexes, is culturally specific and although female subordination is universal, the specific form that this subordination takes varies substantially from one culture to another. If we cannot escape totally from our cultural orientations we can at least acknowledge them for what they are.

Seeing 'Sex Determination in Man', a paper's title, as paradoxical and sexist is not pedantry. Language and thought are so inextricably intertwined that the persistence of sexist discourse is a reflection of, and influence on, the persistent bias in the way we think, talk, write and act. The removal of this bias is significant not just for personal, but also for archaeological, understanding.