

# Gender stereotypes in archaeology

Edited by Laura Coltofean-Arizancu, Biserka Gaydarska  
& Uroš Matić Illustrations by Nikola Radosavljević

A short  
reflection  
in image  
and text





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**Edited by** Laura Coltofean-Arizancu,  
Bisserka Gaydarska & Uroš Matić  
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# Contents

Challenging the status quo: deconstructing gender stereotypes in archaeology <i>Bisserka Gaydarska, Laura Coltofean-Arizancu and Uroš Matić</i>	6
 <b>Stereotype 1</b> Man, the hunter and field archaeologist vs. woman, the gatherer and laboratory analyst <i>Bettina Arnold</i>	10
 <b>Stereotype 2</b> Only women cooked in past societies <i>Marga Sánchez Romero</i>	12
 <b>Stereotype 3</b> Active men – passive women <i>Bettina Arnold</i>	14
 <b>Stereotype 4</b> Only women took care of the old and sick in past societies <i>Marga Sánchez Romero</i>	16
 <b>Stereotype 5</b> Only women cared about children in past societies <i>Katharina Rebay-Salisbury</i>	18
 <b>Stereotype 6</b> All women were young, slim and beautiful in the past, while all men were young, tall and athletic <i>Brigitte Röder</i>	20
 <b>Stereotype 7</b> Only men were violent in past societies <i>Uroš Matić</i>	22
 <b>Stereotype 8</b> Only high-ranking men were literate in the past <i>Agnès Garcia-Ventura</i>	24
 <b>Stereotype 9</b> Prehistoric societies were either matriarchal or patriarchal <i>Julia K. Koch</i>	26
 <b>Stereotype 10</b> Prehistoric female images are Mother Goddesses <i>Bisserka Gaydarska</i>	28
 <b>Stereotype 11</b> Families always consisted of a father, a mother and children <i>Julia K. Koch</i>	30
 <b>Stereotype 12</b> Two adult women buried together are the lady and her chambermaid <i>Julia K. Koch</i>	32

	<b>Stereotype 13</b> Sex and gender are the same <i>Katharina Rebay-Salisbury</i>	34
	<b>Stereotype 14</b> Binary sex and gender systems are natural <i>Sandra Montón-Subías</i>	36
	<b>Stereotype 15</b> There are only two genders <i>Pamela L. Geller</i>	38
	<b>Stereotype 16</b> Gender is universal <i>Alice B. Kehoe</i>	40
	<b>Stereotype 17</b> Gender as studied by gender archaeologists is an ideology <i>Uroš Matić</i>	42
	<b>Stereotype 18</b> Gender archaeology is practiced only by women and gay men <i>Rachel Pope</i>	44
	<b>Stereotype 19</b> Gender archaeology is only about women <i>Doris Gutschmiedl-Schümann</i>	46
	<b>Stereotype 20</b> There is no longer a need for dedicated gender archaeology <i>Nils Müller-Scheeßel</i>	48
	<b>Stereotype 21</b> Same-sex practices are a “modern” invention or a disorder <i>Uroš Matić</i>	50
	<b>Stereotype 22</b> Queer archaeology is just LGBTQIA+ researchers imagining past LGBTQIA+ people <i>Bo Jensen</i>	52
	<b>Stereotype 23</b> Women have equal career chances in archaeology as men <i>Maria Mina</i>	54
	<b>Stereotype 24</b> Archaeology is free of harassment, assault, bullying and intimidation <i>Laura Coltofean-Arizancu and Bisserka Gaydarska</i>	56

Selected bibliography	58
List of authors	62

# Challenging the status quo: deconstructing gender stereotypes in archaeology

This booklet is a short but informative and critical response by archaeologists to various gender stereotypes that exist in archaeological explanation and representations of the past, as well as in contemporary disciplinary practice. The idea for such a project was proposed for the first time at the 26th Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA), which was held virtually at the end of August 2020 in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the annual meeting of the Archaeology and Gender in Europe (AGE) Community, Egyptologist and former AGE co-chair Uroš Matić shared his idea of creating an illustrated booklet on gender stereotypes in archaeology. After the meeting, the discussion continued with AGE co-chairs Biserka Gaydarska, Laura Coltofean-Arizancu and Ana Cristina Martins. Uroš, Biserka and Laura then started sketching the outline of this booklet. Maybe not by coincidence, earlier that summer we had been members of the Task Force developing the EAA's first Statement on Gender and Archaeology which pleaded for a more diverse, inclusive, equal, and safer archaeology. Gender stereotypes were therefore very fresh in our minds. We were brought up in very similar archaeological traditions in the Balkans, we are of different gender, we live in three different (non-home) countries and we have very different expertise. Yet we encountered very similar biases and stereotypes in approaches to the past and in profession-

al practice. Our next step was to reach out to other colleagues and ask them to share their experiences. The immediate spontaneous replies borne out of years of frustration and constant battles further convinced us to proceed and form a team of authors aiming to deconstruct gender stereotypes as they witnessed and understood them.

The booklet includes 24 common gender stereotypes in archaeology, from the classical stereotyped roles of male and female and their social organisation in the past to relatively more recent oversimplified ideas concerning sex and gender, gender archaeology along with its scope and practitioners, as well as the practice of archaeology in general. Gender and feminist archaeologists have fought for decades against gender stereotypes through critical discussions in academic writing (e.g. Dommasnes 1982; Conkey and Spector 1984; Gero and Conkey 1991; Dommasnes 1992; Du Cros and Smith 1993; Claassen 1994; Nelson, Nelson and Wylie 1994; Treherne 1995; Díaz-Andreu and Sørensen 1998; Dommasnes 1998; Sørensen 2000; Palincaş 2004-2005; Sánchez Romero 2005; Jensen 2007; Montón-Subías and Sánchez Romero 2008; Sánchez Romero 2008; Dommasnes et al. 2010; Matić 2012; Bolger 2013; Fries et al. 2017; also see concluding selected bibliography), museum exhibitions (e.g. "Ich Mann. Du Frau. Feste rolle seit Urzeiten" at Colombischlössle Museum



in Freiburg, 2014-2015; “Enfrentándose a la vida” at Museo de Arte Ibérico ‘El Cigarralejo’ in Mula, 2015), projects (e.g. PastWomen in Spain; VAMOS in Austria) and popular culture (e.g. Evaristo 2019), among others. Despite their efforts, many of these stereotypes continue to live and even flourish, both in academic and non-academic settings, especially in countries where gender archaeology does not exist or where gender in archaeology is barely discussed. These stereotypes reflect essentialist interpretations and (visual) representations of the past, which often replicate contemporary ontologies, perceptions and dichotomies. Given this context and the rise of radical right and ultra-conservative ideologies and beliefs across the globe, this booklet is a timely and thought-provoking contribution that openly addresses often uncomfortable topics concerning gender in archaeology, in an attempt to raise awareness both among the professionals and others interested in the discipline.

The number of entries is a pragmatic choice – we aimed at short, if uncomfortable, unveilings of persistent archaeological myths and practices, rather than an exhaustive list of easy short-cuts to explaining the past. In 250 words, each author explains and deconstructs a stereotype, while briefly pointing to their origin and uncritical proliferation and ultimately insisting on a more nuanced view not only of the past, but also about who is doing

gender archaeology and why. The choice of these particular stereotypes is a mixture of ‘top-down’ ideas from the editors and ‘bottom-up’ suggestions of authors with expertise on gender in the past and contemporary archaeology, most of whom are members of AGE. This has inevitably resulted in some overlap between the entries, exactly as in real life. Archaeologists tend to separate the past into themes such as subsistence, religion, burial or settlement, to mention just a few, while in fact most humans do not consciously divide up their life like that. If there is one message that this booklet wants to convey, it is – do not assume anything about the past and the people who study the past.

From the very beginning, illustrations were conceived as a key component and the award-winning Serbian artist Nikola Radosavljević agreed to be part of the project. Many of the images are deliberately provocative. Although they use particular archaeological objects and past societies as inspirations, these depictions are not representations of a stereotypical view of a particular past society. Rather, they are generic, stereotypic portrayals of gender one can find in archaeological writings on different societies. The front cover, for example, shows a state of affairs that we cannot be sure has happened in the past. The same is true of the situations depicted in other illustrations of this booklet (e.g. stereotypes 3, 8 and 11). However, contrary

to the cover image, they are repeatedly reproduced as 'reality' in pictures in academic texts, museum reconstructions, archaeological texts and various forms of mass media. In this context, the front cover has as much credibility as these depictions. Perhaps counter-intuitively then, one of the aims of this booklet is to deconstruct the ideas underpinning these images. The illustrations are not simply accompanying the texts – they are vital for the key questions we want to raise. Some of them ask – 'was this situation valid for every society, everywhere in the world through time?' either by literate scenes that far too often find place in museums and popular reconstructions (e.g. stereotypes 2 and 4) or by mocking an ill-thought re-enactment (e.g. stereotype 6). Others offer an invitation to think 'what is wrong with this image?' (e.g. stereotypes 20 and 24). Yet a third group is aspirational (e.g. stereotype 18). This straightforward and challenging combination of text and image is the approach that we developed to question the assumptions that stubbornly continue to dominate the imaginations of many archaeologists about the past and reveal the core of gender archaeology.

One word that often appears in the different entries is 'diversity'. The past was probably just as varied as our contemporary reality. This is also reflected in the scenes depicted in the booklet. We have therefore tried to create more diverse and inclusive

visual representations of both the past and the present, by enriching them with characters other than white middle-aged men. Some of the images further develop stereotypes and ghosts of disciplinary history, such as white male archaeologists imagining past communities as white, while believing that technology and culture could not be produced by black people (see stereotype 19). To counter these unfounded presumptions, the tactic of the exact opposite was utilized to illustrate the stereotype that gender is an ideology and to explain the particular understanding of the word 'ideology'. A black woman who can get the same pay cheque as her white male colleagues, or even be their boss, should not be unimaginable. However, imagining her as a threatening giant, a figure of gender ideology, is wrong! Thus, all 24 images sum up the underlying concept of this booklet – to insist on non-essentialist interpretations of the past, together with demonstrating the non-conformist but also inclusive nature of gender archaeology and its practitioners.

The project which this booklet is the result of was entirely financed through an unexpectedly successful 30-day, all or nothing, crowdfunding campaign (<http://kck.st/3m-lg79o>) on the Kickstarter platform. The campaign reached its minimum funding goal in just six days and continued to receive generous backings until its end. The project was very well received and widely

disseminated, confirming that crowdfunding can be an alternative, faster and more easily accessible funding path for archaeologists compared to traditional academic funding with its complex application procedures.

We should like to express our enormous gratitude to all our backers on Kickstarter, the EAA's Officers, Executive Board and Staff, AGE co-chair Ana Cristina Martins, archaeologists Karsten Wentink, Bettina Arnold, Alice Kehoe and Natasha Billson (Behind the Trowel), designer Marta Klement, as well as to our families and friends. Without their support, under the form of backings and/or dissemination, this booklet would not have been brought to life. We would like to especially thank archaeologist John Chapman for carefully revising the English, as well as for his continuous and friendly encouragement of this project. Ultimately, this is a project that has resulted from the joint efforts and the solidarity of archaeologists and the public. We therefore dedicate this booklet to them, in hope for a better and more inclusive past, present and future for all of us.

*Bisserka Gaydarska,  
Laura Coltofean-Arizancu  
and Uroš Matić*

**“...A black woman  
who can get the  
same pay cheque  
as her white male  
colleagues, or  
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unimaginable...”**

# Man, the hunter and field archaeologist vs. woman, the gatherer and laboratory analyst

*Bettina Arnold*

Popular ideas about the division of labor in prehistoric societies are reinforced by illustrations and museum exhibits that often present gender stereotypes. Men are typically represented in dynamic poses in the foreground, leaving on or returning from hunting expeditions, while women are usually depicted more statically, in close proximity to children, often seated or kneeling, and closely associated with domestic structures and tasks. These stereotypes are echoed in the way archaeologists are viewed by the general public: men “hunt” the data in the field while women “cook” the data in the lab. Men’s greater physical strength is assumed to make them superior field archaeologists while women, viewed as weaker and less able to withstand the rigors of outdoor labour, are thought to be naturally suited to less physically tasking activities like processing and analysing finds. These views of what men do and what women do are

often presented as biologically predetermined as well as hierarchically organized, with men portrayed as “naturally” aggressive leaders while women are represented as “naturally” nurturing followers. In fact, the archaeological as well as ethnographic records show that gender differentiation does not automatically imply gender inequality. Rather, gender complementarity, in which men and women are seen as contributing equally to the survival of the group, means that opportunistic hunting by women and plant food gathering by men, or fieldwork and lab work conducted by either gender, is a more accurate reflection of actual practice.





**“... the archaeological as well as ethnographic records show that gender differentiation does not automatically imply gender inequality.”**





# Only women cooked in past societies

*Marga Sánchez Romero*



**“While in most ethnographically documented societies, women are often in charge of food processes, this sexual division of labour shows different flexibility levels...”**



Cooking practices – that is the set of procedures applied to plants and animals either to transform them into suitable products for consumption or to preserve them for future use – play an essential role in any community. These activities have been generally associated with women without critical analysis. There is no scientific data which unequivocally proves that this was the case at all times and places in the past. While in most ethnographically documented societies, women are often in charge of food processes, this sexual division of labour shows different flexibility levels, as is the case of the Aka pygmies in central Africa, where male and female roles are interchangeable in taking care of children, cooking, hunting and setting up camps. Gender relations can be established through food practices. Societies can grant or withhold power from men and women regarding access to and control of basic resources

such as food. This refers to men and women’s capacity to produce, provide, distribute and consume food, depending on factors such as class or ‘family’ organization. Gender relations may mark food production and consumption in different ways, such as spatial division (distinct locations for men and women), temporal variations (when food is produced, served and eaten), and qualitative and quantitative differentiations (type of vessels, and food or drink given to each person). Cooking is a complex technological process requiring knowledge and learning, tradition and innovation, all linked to identity and memory. Understanding its technological and social implications should be implicit in any archaeological enquiry.



# Active men – passive women

*Bettina Arnold*

Images in books, films and museum exhibits that show the production of stone tools or artwork tend to reinforce the idea that men were the main drivers of human cultural and technological evolution and innovation, while women were primarily necessary to produce offspring and were the passive beneficiaries of male ingenuity. Representations of Upper Palaeolithic art, for example, frequently portray the artists as exclusively adult males, even though archaeological evidence, including foot- and handprints, clearly shows that women and children were also present in the caves. In images showing the production of stone tools, the producers are virtually always male and in general women are more likely to be depicted using rather than making tools. The hard and hot technologies (stone tool production, metal-working) are generally depicted as male activities, while the soft and cool technologies (fibre arts and ceramics)

tend to be represented as primarily carried out by women. While cross-cultural ethnographic analyses have identified some gender-specific patterns in production activities, there are always exceptions and these are rarely if ever depicted. In fact, there is no reason to assume that women were any less creative or innovative than men and, in the case of one of the most important transitions humankind has ever experienced – from foraging to farming – it is likely that women, working together with men, were instrumental in the experimentation that changed our relationship to plant foods, and the natural world in general, forever.





**“... it is likely that women, working together with men, were instrumental in the experimentation that changed our relationship to plant foods, and the natural world in general, forever.”**





# Only women took care of the old and sick in past societies

*Marga Sánchez Romero*



**“The systematic association of such activities with women only results in the perception that care does not need technology, knowledge or experience.”**



Care encompasses activities related to the well-being of individuals, whether babies, the elderly or the sick, for whom total or partial help is essential for survival and community integration. Such care includes basic needs regarding hygiene, health, shelter, food, and affection. Traditionally, these activities have been ascribed to women, although there is no unequivocal evidence for that in the past. This attribution originates from the idea that maintenance activities are biologically linked to women and that only they can perform them. Care in past societies involved not only the social and economic conditions causing diseases or injuries (e.g. nutritional crises, infections, violence, accidental falls) but also the social conditions that facilitated the development of care-giving, which ensured individuals' survival. Just like today, all community members were involved in these processes. The systematic association of such activities with women only

results in the perception that care does not need technology, knowledge or experience. In archaeology, specific material culture (e.g. bowls, tissues in certain contexts), along with organic and anthropological remains related to cure and treatment of diseases, demonstrates the fallacy of such a perception. Historical and anthropological sources indeed show that women had a greater involvement in care-giving but also that such activities and their practitioners were diverse across time and space. The culturally and socially influenced sexual division of labour and the amount of activities related to this should enable us to acknowledge care-giving as a community effort. Recognition of its social value allows the reconsideration of everybody's knowledge, work and role in society.



# Only women cared about children in past societies

## *Katharina Rebay-Salisbury*

A common misperception about societies in the past is that the sole responsibility of caring about and for children rested on the shoulders of women. Raising children is fundamental to the successful reproduction and continuation of any society. Motherhood has both a biological and a social component. Whilst women give birth to and often breastfeed their own children, many people contribute to childcare. The whole community must work together to provide a safe and healthy environment for children to grow and learn. Frequently overlooked is the contribution of siblings, who may take on responsibilities from an early age in carrying infants and keeping younger siblings safe. Bio-archaeological evidence such as changes in joints and vertebral facets in adolescents may point to early mechanical loading. As masculine gender construction does not necessarily encompass childcare or limits the involvement

of men to the education of adolescent boys, the contribution of fathers to raising children is difficult to trace archaeologically. However, the involvement of men in education is occasionally attested in written sources. More recently, kinship analysis through ancient DNA has brought insights into the importance of paternal lineages. The range of kinship extension to members of the household that are not biologically related is subject to investigation in each specific cultural context. Prehistoric baby bottles offer archaeological evidence that feeding babies can be taken over by caretakers other than the mother. Elderly relatives such as grandparents make particular contributions by providing resources as well as teaching, storytelling and passing on traditions. Indeed, it takes a village to raise a child.





**“It takes a village  
to raise a child.”**





**All women were young,  
slim and beautiful in the  
past, while all men were  
young, tall and athletic**  
*Brigitte Röder*



**“These clichéd representations reflect gender stereotypes that have been present in our societies for decades.”**



Representations of everyday scenes from prehistory often look as if they had been taken from Western commercials: women are young, slim and beautiful, while men are young, tall and athletic. Women are portrayed as catwalk models performing their tasks with grace and elegance, as if taking part in a beauty contest. Men are muscular and strong and therefore able to handle any challenge. These clichéd representations reflect gender stereotypes that have been present in our societies for decades. They reinforce traditional, stereotypical norms of masculinity and femininity. According to these, all men have the role of breadwinners and family heads who are expected to be strong and proactive, so that they can feed and protect their families. Moreover, all women are destined to be housewives and mothers who please their husbands and are confined to the protected private and domestic sphere that requires no special phys-

ical fitness. Women are therefore portrayed in such a way that they appear attractive to heterosexual men. Women have internalised this male gaze and try to meet the expectations with a pleasing appearance. Such depictions can lead to the misconception that today's idealistic Western female and male attractiveness is primordial and generally human. That this idea is absurd is shown, for example, by 120 cm long Iron Age bronze belts and manifold representations such as Palaeolithic figurines and the so-called “fat ladies” (maybe also “fat gentlemen”) from Neolithic Malta. Archaeology urgently needs new images that show the physical diversity of humans.



# Only men were violent in past societies

Uroš Matic

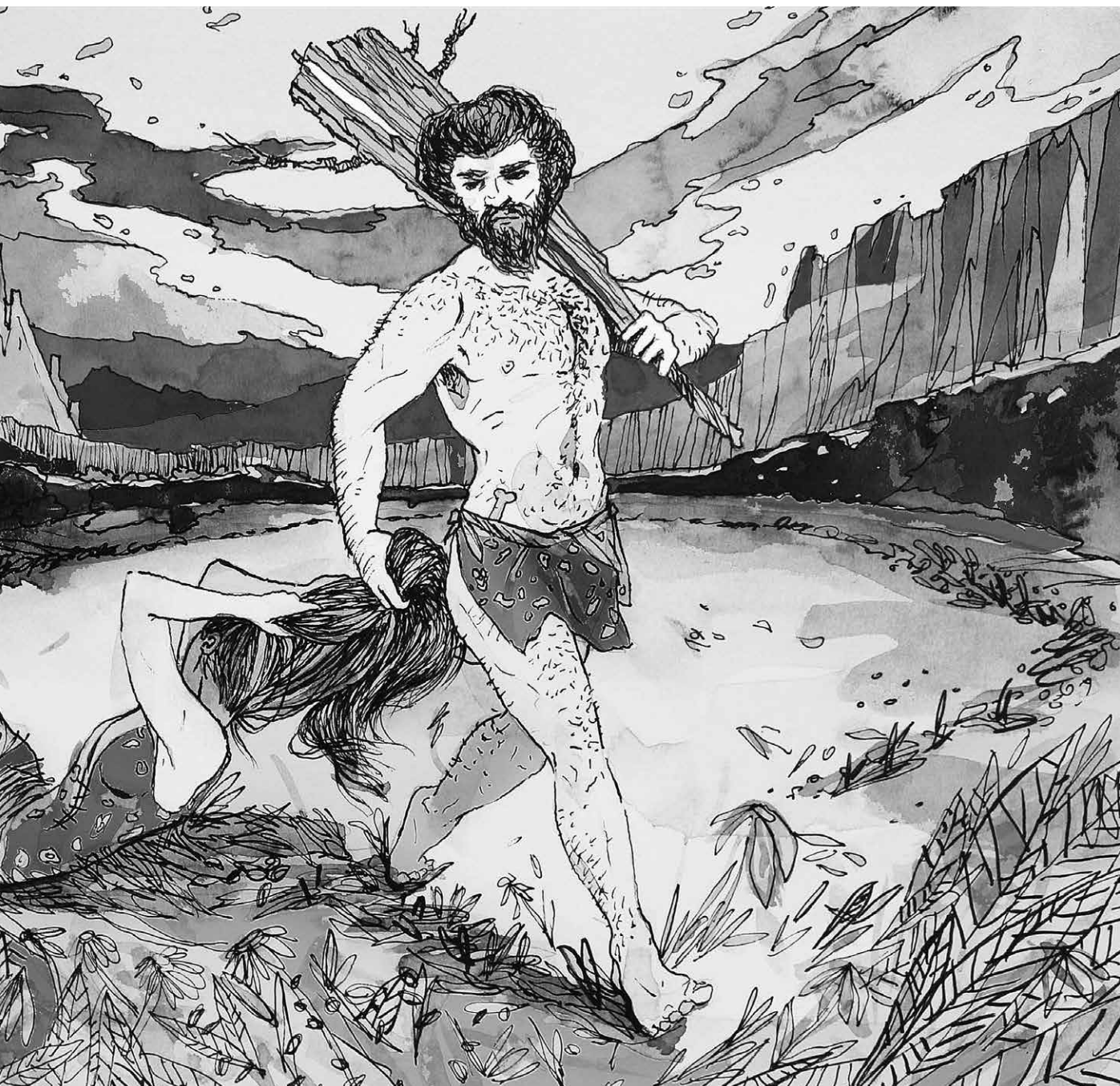
One of the most common gender stereotypes about past and present violence is that men are more violent than women. This is often argued on the basis of the assumed evolutionary background of the violent predatory nature of men. However, although violence has some evolutionary background, it is not less cultural than preparing food or burying the dead. Peaceful Palaeolithic to Neolithic women-run societies destroyed by Bronze Age violent societies run by men are a fiction rather than fact. Men and women of different backgrounds populated the past and their violent behaviours or the gender patterns behind these should be explored rather than assumed. Female rulership in any society is not necessarily pacifist and male rulership in any society is not *a priori* violent. Gendering violence in the past also does not mean searching for warrior women like mythical Amazons or Viking shield maidens. We shall study

those too if we find them. To gender violence in the past means to explore the complex entanglement of the two. For example, violence can be structured by gender (e.g. feminization of male enemies) and gender can be structured by violence, as through the societal judgement or physical punishment of those who do not comply to the expectations of their gender. The bioarchaeology of human remains can inform us much about the gender patterns of violence when victims of violence are concerned. However, gender patterns of violent behaviour in prehistory are a challenge in studying societies for which we do not have rich textual or visual sources.





**“Female rulership in any society is not necessarily pacifist and male rulership in any society is not *a priori* violent.”**





# Only high-ranking men were literate in the past

*Agnès Garcia-Ventura*



**“There were, as there are now, varied levels of literacy and numeracy mastered by both women and men of diverse age, status, profession and class.”**



The emergence of writing is a milestone widely discussed in studies on the past. Early examples are cuneiform writing in ancient Mesopotamia and hieroglyphic writing in Egypt. Both are attested since the end of the fourth millennium BC and have been mostly linked to high-ranking men. Thus, it is assumed that, regardless of rank and gender, women and all those outside the highest echelons of society were completely illiterate. This is a stereotype based on two main assumptions. The first is that only men were professional scribes in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Indeed, statues, reliefs and paintings seem to indicate that most scribes were men. Furthermore, some written records detail their names, duties and salaries. Several women are also attested as professional scribes in these records, but they have been often overlooked by modern scholars who presumed that only men were educated in specialized schools.

Current reconstructions of these schools only portray young boys learning and adult males teaching. However, some school exercises include the following sentence at the end: “written by a female scribe”. Thus, women also have to be included in the scenario! The second assumption which needs to be challenged is that literacy was the exclusive skill of professional scribes. There were, as there are now, varied levels of literacy and numeracy mastered by both women and men of diverse age, status, profession and class. Letters and accounting documents of different complexity and with spelling mistakes reflect these realities well.



# Prehistoric societies were either matriarchal or patriarchal

*Julia K. Koch*

In archaeology, the development of social and power structures over time is often considered to be linear. In short, primal societies represented by matriarchies were violently disrupted and replaced by patriarchies. Matriarchy and patriarchy are understood as a pair of opposites which exclude other forms of social systems. On the one hand, matriarchies are perceived as egalitarian and peaceful groups that are close to nature, led by wise maternal women and protected by the Great Goddess. On the other hand, patriarchies are seen as strongly hierarchical warlike groups built on inequality and oppression, which plunder nature, are ruled by a few men and are at the mercy of aggressive gods. These are ideas that emerged in the nineteenth century and have survived until today. Proponents of matriarchies sought archaeological and ethnographic evidence for matriarchal societies to uphold such systems as political utopias for a better future.

Equally, significant cultural and social changes in European prehistory have frequently been attributed to the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, whether occurring at the beginning of sedentism, during the Neolithic through the shift from collective to individual burials combined with the invasion of equestrian nomads, or during the Bronze Age with the decline of the Minoan culture. However, what all these views overlook is that the history of humankind was neither linear nor globally uniform. As archaeologists, we should strive to look for a diversity of power structures, with and without “gender”, which is a much more balanced approach to (pre)historical realities.



**“Matriarchy and patriarchy are understood as a pair of opposites which exclude other forms of social systems.”**





# Prehistoric female images are Mother Goddesses

*Bisserka Gaydarska*





**“Let’s be clear – there is no evidence for such an essentialist link in prehistory!”**



This image is underpinned by a series of assumptions and uncritical links. It is assumed that people in prehistory believed in supernatural forces. Such beliefs are then equated to religion practice and thus to gods and goddesses. In turn, such deities are anthropomorphized and more often than not linked to human depictions in the archaeological record. And in cultural contexts with more female than male depictions, such images become the (Mother) Goddess. Finally, to spice up the narrative, fecundity, fertility and even the matriarchate are thrown into the pot to create a staple premise in archaeology. Let’s be clear – there is no evidence for such an essentialist link in prehistory! There are, of course, images of deities – for instance, Ishtar – but these are well-documented historical examples. Conceptualizing fire, wind and rain was probably a part of making sense of the natural world. Ensuring fertility was probably

a main component of the ritual calendar. And making durable human images gained importance in some societies, although not in others. Are we to say, then, that societies not relying on human depictions were not concerned with supernatural beings or their next crop? Or maybe they just expressed their existential concerns in a different way? Such questions compromise the simplistic chain of links between natural forces – religion – anthropomorphic deities – human depiction. They call for more nuanced approaches to the ingenuity of our prehistoric ancestors.



# Families always consisted of a father, a mother and children

*Julia K. Koch*

The nuclear family consisting of two adults and up to four children and the extended family counting up to ten individuals comprise standard demographic models based on cross-cultural studies of agricultural societies. However, these studies are based on ethnographic and historical data which often exclude non-agricultural and numerous other past societies. Typically, the modern European bourgeois family ideal is transferred to the past with little reflection. In the absence of written sources, it is difficult to reconstruct family structures based on material culture alone. Many normative variations are possible in the organization of family life and many events can influence it. For example, the number of simultaneous spouses is just as variable as the socially regulated duration of a marriage. Standardized marriage constellations can be disturbed by external events (e.g. accidents, war, catastrophes, epidemics), as well as by family mem-

bers' departure or death. Whether children grew up with biological or social parents, how long they stayed with them, and whether they were raised by a man and a woman are questions that can no longer be answered without written and pictorial sources. The definition of "family" is dependent on time, region, social and cultural contexts, while its understanding can change within just a few decades. Thus, focusing only on one family type in the reconstructions of the past is not justified. It is important to remember that the 'happy prehistoric nuclear family with many children' is just one of the many family structures that could have existed in the past.



**“Many normative variations are possible in the organization of family life and many events can influence it.”**





# Two adult women buried together are the lady and her chambermaid

*Julia K. Koch*





**“... there is an uncritical assumption that people buried together in the same pit must have been somehow related...”**



When examining cemeteries, stereotypical interpretations are often used to explain double and multiple burials. If there is a child in the grave, it is assumed that the adult person is the parent. A man and a woman are considered a married couple, while two men are often considered to be brothers-in-arms. What about two adult women buried in the same grave? Such burials, even dating as early as the 2nd millennium BC, are often interpreted as the mistress and her chambermaid, in reference to ancient Mediterranean or even medieval societies. The ideal scenario for such interpretations is when one of the women in the grave was older and more richly equipped than the other. Conversely, if the young woman had more elaborate grave goods, then it is suggested that they could be the young mistress and her housekeeper. Double and multiple burials are invaluable for the study of social structures. However, there is an uncritical assumption

that people buried together in the same pit must have been somehow related in life and that the position of their skeletons (e.g. an embrace in contemporary interpretation) in relation to each other is indicative of the relationship type they once had (e.g. romantic). Stereotypical interpretations of such graves hinder new insights based on a thorough analysis. Current archaeological science routinely traces relationships between individuals and their potential geographical origin and mobility. These are of great importance, next to grave goods, when analysing double or multiple burials and help preventing one-sided speculations.

# Sex and gender are the same

*Katharina Rebay-Salisbury*

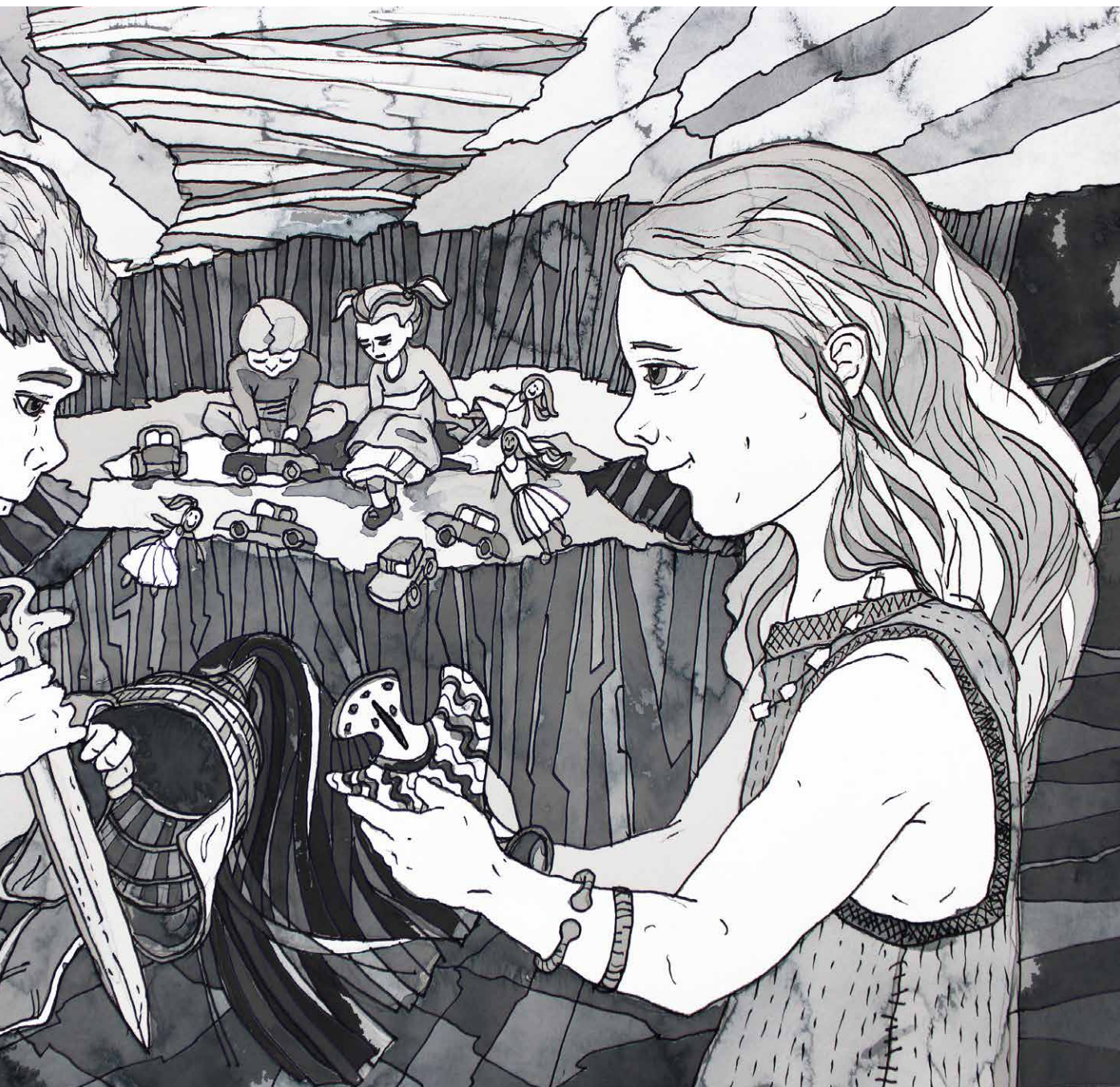
Sex and gender are often used interchangeably when differentiating between boys and girls or men and women (gender medicine, gender reveal parties). In archaeology, it is important to distinguish between them. Sex is a biological classification based on our reproductive system requiring one sperm and one egg to form new life. Through various developmental processes in which hormones play a decisive role, genetic or chromosomal sex (XX, XY) expresses in a female or male body. Whilst sex is usually categorized as female or male, there are also intersex variations and idiosyncrasies of sex development. Sexual dimorphism of the skeleton, for example, manifests most clearly in body height and the morphology of the skull and pelvis. Gender is a cultural classification and elaboration of sexual differences, referring to distinctions between boys and girls or men and women that are culturally constructed. It may be

ascribed at birth, learned during adolescence and individuals may change their gender over their life-course. Roles, identities and material culture may be gendered. Thus, dress and jewellery may appear masculine or feminine, but only in a specific cultural context. Societies create and tend to perpetuate gender norms, but vary in how fixed they are and in the way they interrelate with the distribution of power and wealth. In its fluidity, gender is not a strictly binary concept and often intersects with other identity categories such as age and status. Sexual orientation may contribute to gender identity, but differs from both concepts. We can learn about gender construction in the past by investigating this interface.





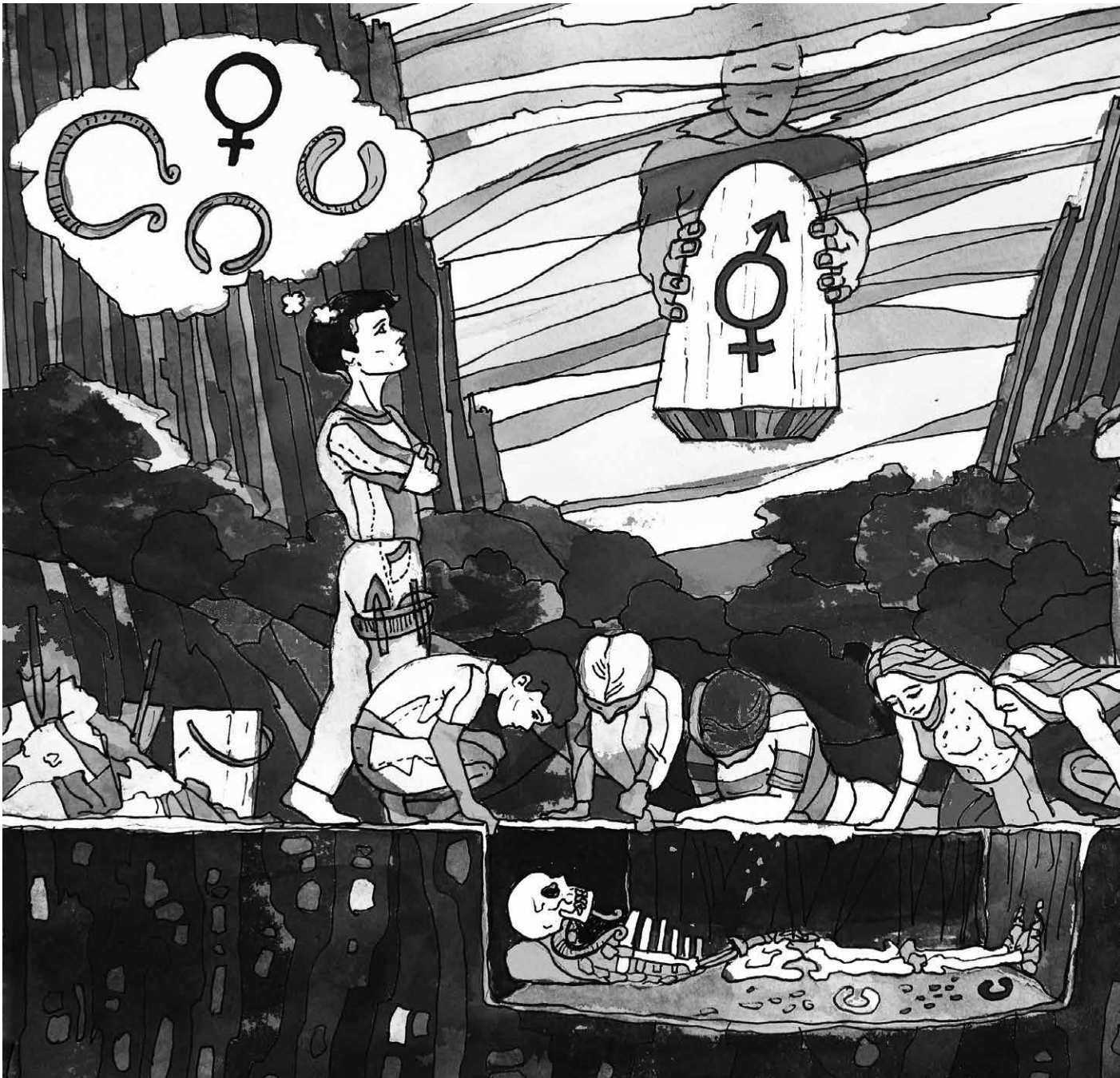
**“Societies create and tend to perpetuate gender norms, but vary in how fixed they are and in the way they interrelate with the distribution of power and wealth.”**





# Binary sex and gender systems are natural

*Sandra Montón-Subías*



**“Far from being natural, what is considered to be a man and a woman is a product of social and cultural processes.”**



The dominant heteronormative sex/gender system binarizes human beings into men and women, tries to pass for natural, prescribes specific dichotomous selfways and proscribes what does not fall within them. Far from being natural, what is considered to be a man and a woman is a product of social and cultural processes. These often occur within a social matrix of unequal power relations where men are ascribed higher social value. As part of this rationale, investigations and discourses concerning the past have usually overestimated what have been considered masculine roles, behaviours, attitudes and values in the making of history, and assumed a universal binary system of gender/sex. Needless to say, the past was probably richer than this scheme, as indeed is our present. Many people today dismiss normative ways of being men and women and/or do not biologically fit into the two sexes that supposedly fore-

ground them (e.g. intersexes). Moreover, in different places worldwide, people like *kwolu-aatmawols* (Papua New Guinea), *güevedoces* (Dominican Republic), *hijras* (India), *burnneshas* (Albania) or *chibados* (Angola), amongst other, embody gender categories outside from the heteronormative. Whether this challenges or reinforces binarism needs to be carefully analysed in each specific case. The present Western binary sex/gender system is a product of history, and we cannot take it for granted. Assuming without evidence that past societies shared it is not only methodologically flawed but also sustains and strengthens modern structural inequalities between men and women. It also renders invisible those people and behaviours that do not conform.



# There are only two genders

Pamela L. Geller

Analysis of human remains in archaeological contexts, or *bioarchaeology*, often begins by estimating the sex of an individual. Sex is regarded as a biological truth that is objective, observable, and strictly dimorphic (an understanding of bodily difference that bioarchaeology inherits from Darwinism and biomedicine). An individual is deemed “female” or “male” based on an analysis of overall robusticity, pelvic morphology, or sex chromosomes. “Indeterminate” sex assessment results more from inadequate preservation or analysts’ skills rather than human variation. Researchers then presume that sex tells us something about gender. An individual’s biology makes for a social destiny in which only two genders exist. Men perform masculinity; they explore, hunt, wage war, and govern. Women’s femininity constrains their activities to care-giving and house-keeping. These gendered divisions of labour are believed to be natural

rather than recognized as the outcome of cultural and historic circumstances. They arose in Western society at the end of the eighteenth century due to social, economic, political, and religious changes. The universalising, heteronormative presumptions that underpin studies of bodies – that sex and gender are interchangeable and binary – may be why researchers are hard-pressed to explain burials containing female-bodied individuals with weapons and hunting toolkits or male-bodied ones with weaving implements. It is possible that these individuals represent a third (or fourth) gender within a culture. More importantly, they point to the culturally specific ways in which gender can be distinct from biological sex, change throughout a life-course, and intersect with other aspects of identity like class, ethnicity (or race), and sexuality.



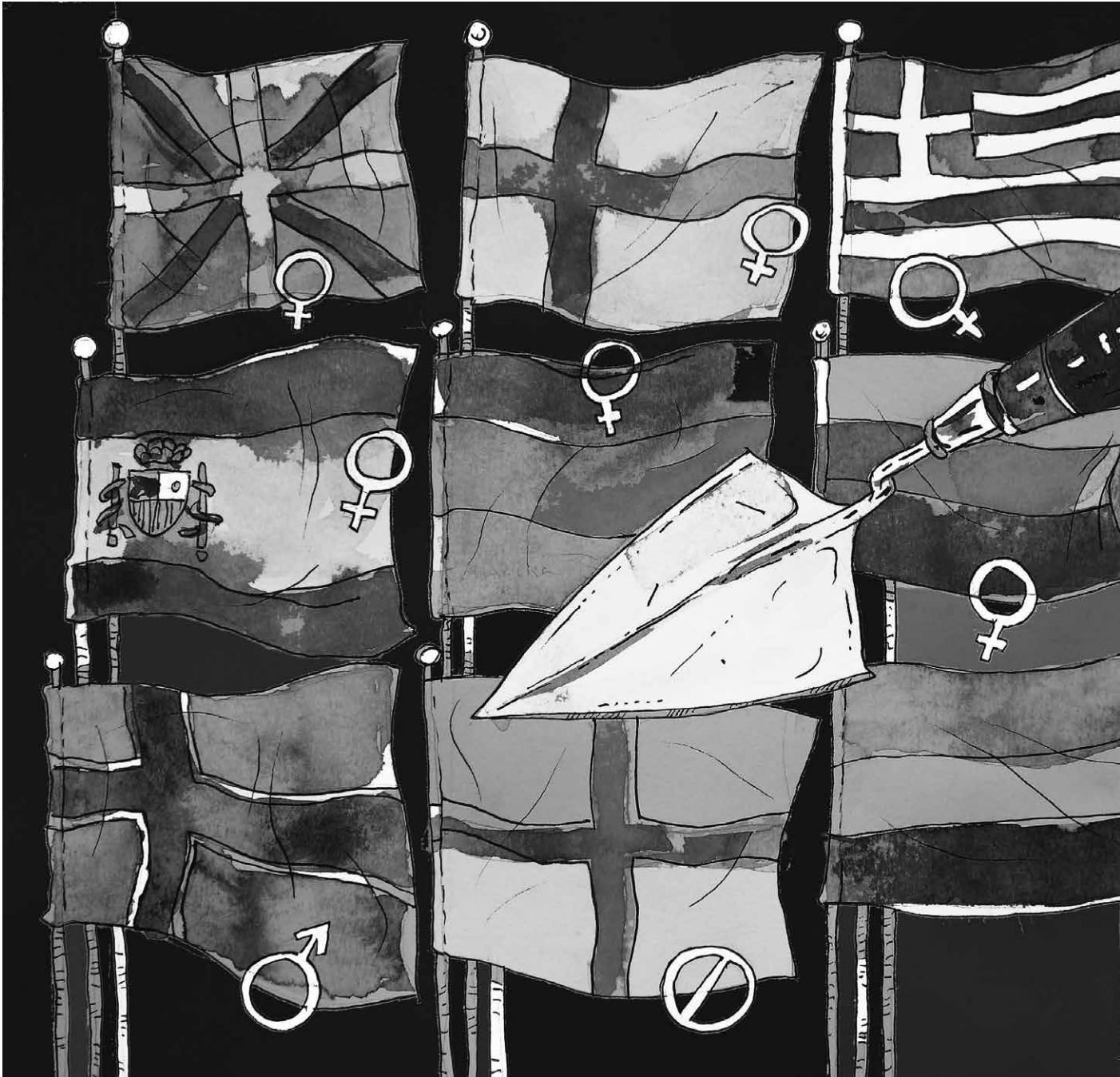


**“...gender can be distinct from biological sex, change throughout a lifecourse, and intersect with other aspects of identity like class, ethnicity (or race), and sexuality.”**



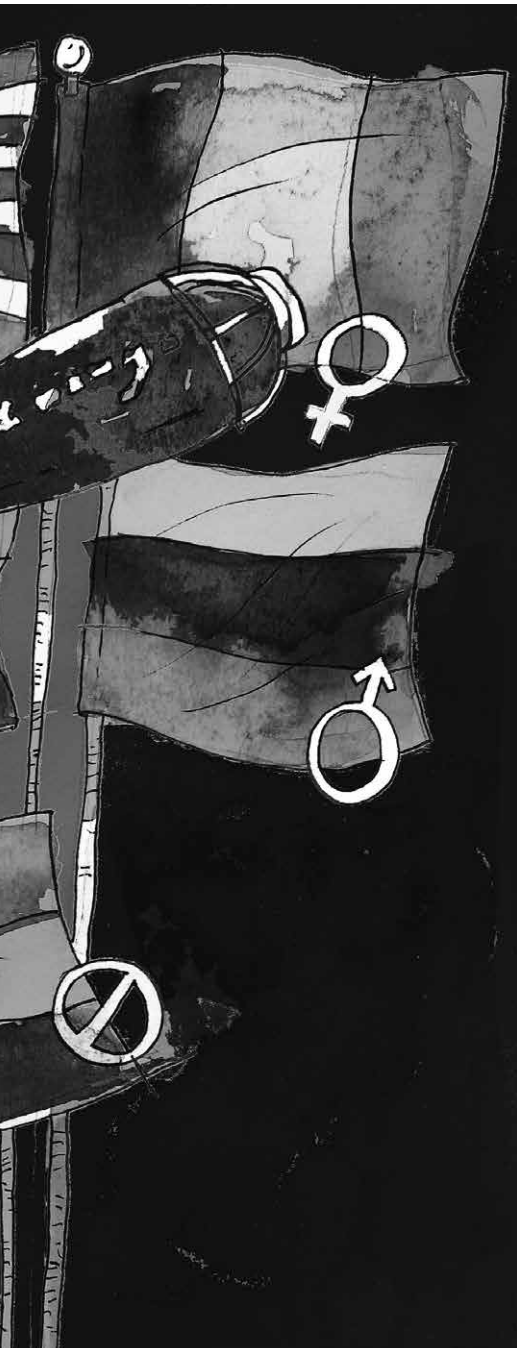
# Gender is universal

Alice B. Kehoe





**“... caution is needed before imposing present Western cultural beliefs, cosmologies, and even syntax (e.g. Indo-European) in understanding the past.”**



Since the 1970s, “gender” is used to mean sex-based social roles. This is illustrated by United States Supreme Court Justice Ruth Ginsburg, who substituted “gender” for “sex” to emphasize cultural, not biological, factors. She could do so because English, as an Indo-European language, classifies nouns as masculine, feminine, or neuter (even if not an organism), and the syntax rule that modifiers agree with noun class is called gender. Therefore, “gender” is technically a linguistic term. Few language stocks, ancient or modern, have gender syntax, and it need not refer to sex. Indo-European, Semitic, some ancient Egyptian and Nilotic languages are examples that do. There are language families, such as Uralic and Turkic, that lack grammatical gender. Communities speaking these languages may socially and culturally stereotype identities and roles, obviously not “gender” them in modern Western terms. Archaeologists

seek to recognize clues to activities in the archaeological record as performed by men, women, boys, girls and different social and occupational classes. For scientific observation, they use associations of artifacts and features, such as house posts, hearths, knives and pots. Based on these, they infer past activities and, very often, also make assumptions regarding the identity of those who performed them. This is a step beyond such material data, so caution is needed before imposing present Western cultural beliefs, cosmologies, and even syntax (e.g. Indo-European) in understanding the past. Such colonialist attitudes could be balanced by acknowledging that the past, just as the present, probably had diverse ontologies.



# Gender as studied by gender archaeologists is an ideology

*Uroš Matic*

“Gender ideology” (also the “gender, feminist or gay lobby”; “gender mainstreaming”) is a populist term used in far-right discourses to label ideas, concepts and debates in feminist theory. It supposedly endangers the family, morality and even the nation. Far-right resistance to freedom and equality propagated by feminism is justified with superficial political, cultural and religious explanations. Even during the fund-raising campaign for this booklet, some have criticized it as being a “trendy” pursuit. Behind this is the notion that gender studies in archaeology are based on ideas from feminist theory which are “trendily” applied to past societies. This stereotype is entangled with several different complex themes. The word ‘ideology’ is used as a lie imposed on the natural or even God-given state of nature by interest groups (the usual suspects being the above-mentioned lobbyists or the “West” in general). In fact, this is a simplification

of a classical Marxist definition of ideology which is seen as a promotion of false ideas about the political regimes to subjects under their control, in order to reproduce the status quo. An alternative proposed by Slavoj Žižek is that, in order to work, ideology should be presented as non-ideological (e.g. natural and/or God-given heteropatriarchy). Contrary to unfounded accusations of “trendiness”, gender archaeology has been reflective about the way past gender has been studied since the 1970s. It has demonstrated that archaeology often lacked this reflectiveness through imposing the concept of modern heteropatriarchy (i.e. ideology presented as natural state) to all past societies with little evidence.



**“Contrary to unfounded accusations of ‘trendiness’, gender archaeology has been reflective about the way past gender has been studied since the 1970s.”**





# Gender archaeology is practiced only by women and gay men

*Rachel Pope*



**“... all men and women in archaeology deal with gender, although not always explicitly.”**



That only women or gay men practice gender archaeology is a stereotype that sadly does have some basis in fact. Gender archaeology as a field grew out of the notable absence of women in twentieth-century narratives of the past. As more young women entered a male-dominated field in the United States in the 1970s, they became concerned at the tendency to write histories only about men, with women's roles confined to domesticity. Thus, the origins of gender archaeology were very much tied to feminist thinking, meaning that, at this point, most practitioners were indeed women. The aim of early gender archaeology was predominantly to 'find the women' excluded from earlier work. Over the years, another stereotype appeared associating gay men with gender archaeology. However, all men and women in archaeology deal with gender, although not always explicitly. Gender archaeology made a difference by

introducing self-reflection and avoiding assumptions based on common sense, often rooted in a strictly historically contingent gender experience. As a new generation of young researchers inherited gender archaeology, they became concerned not only to 'find women' but to move the field on from inherited stereotypes of what makes a man or a woman. The shift is from a scientific narrative about men and women in the past, based on gender stereotypes, to revealing culture-specific gender norms for each society based on scientific method (factoring in age, gender beyond binary, etc.). Increasingly, men are now also taking up this challenge.



# Gender archaeology is only about women

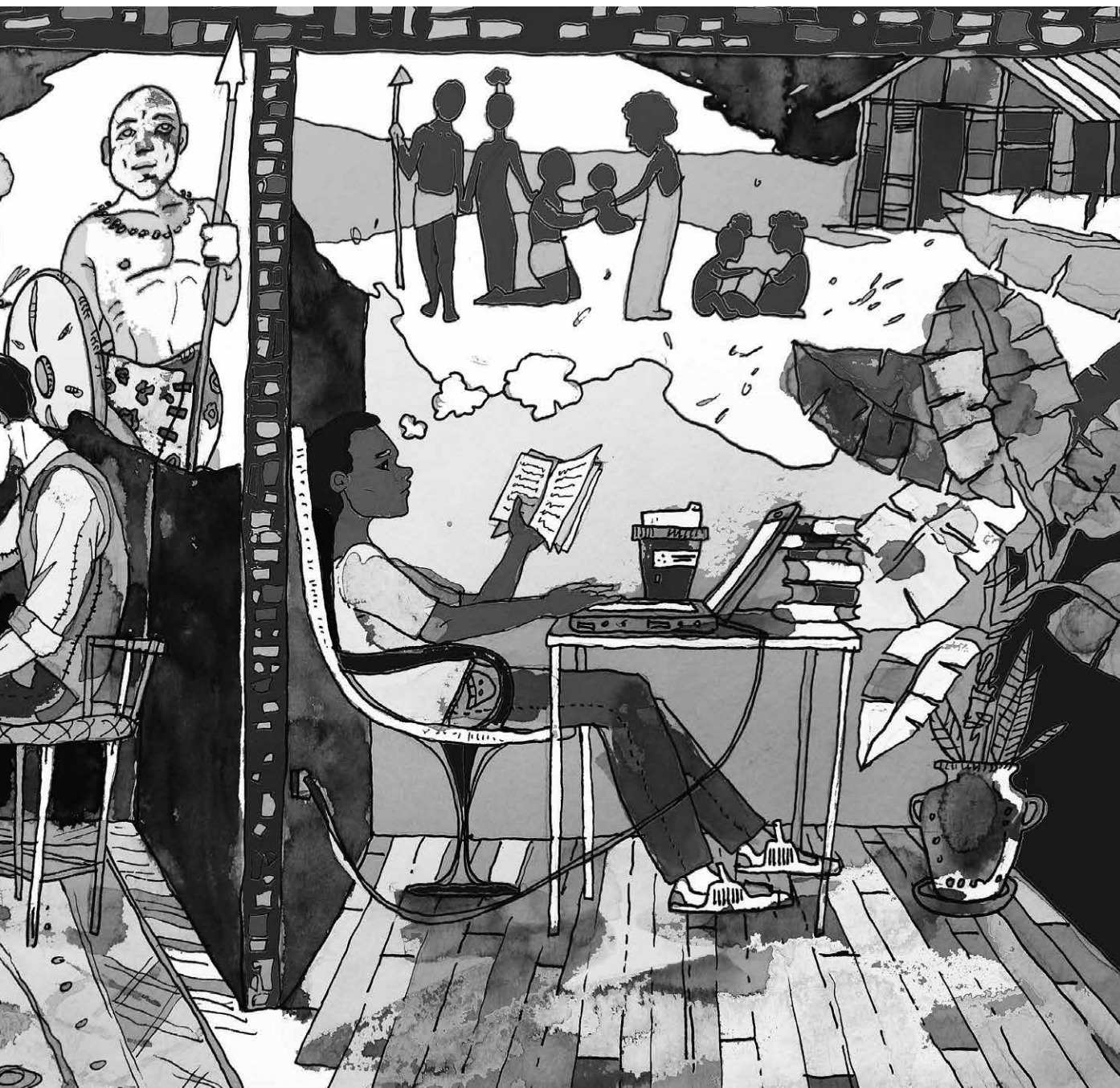
*Doris Gutschmiedl-Schümann*

A common misconception is that gender archaeology is only about women. It is not. Gender archaeology focuses on *people*, both past individuals and societies, as well as contemporary archaeologists. It aims to give voice again to those who were marginalized, and to show diversity in the past, along with the diversity of archaeology practitioners. In the beginning, feminist and gender archaeologists were indeed women who argued that females were under-represented in interpretations of the past. Thus, the first challenge of gender archaeology in the 1970s was to overcome traditional androcentric archaeological interpretations and to envisage women as present and active agents. However, this was only a starting point. As gender was more and more understood as a social construct, which can develop or even change during lifetime, archaeological gender studies became aware of further differentiations and intersectional-

ity, including factors such as age, ethnicity, religion, class or sexuality. By considering gender in connection with various other social aspects, past people become visible, where previously only finds and features were investigated. Nowadays, gender archaeology explores the lives of past individuals, bearing in mind that modern and meaningful concepts of men and women, queer, trans and cis, children and elderly, people of colour, and disabled, among others, could be, but are not necessarily, meaningful for past societies. It is essential also to consider other forms of genderness. Gender archaeology, thus, claims to improve our discipline by offering a less essentialist understanding of the past and by seeing and acknowledging diversity in general.



**“Gender archaeology focuses on people, both past individuals and societies, as well as contemporary archaeologists.”**





# There is no longer a need for dedicated gender archaeology

*Nils Müller-Scheeßel*



**“Abandoning gender topics in the past would also mean less awareness of gender problems in the present.”**



The sentiment that a dedicated gender archaeology is no longer required is relatively recent. While it admits that gender was a neglected topic among preceding generations of archaeologists, it purports that gender is fully acknowledged in mainstream archaeology today and, therefore, a dedicated gender archaeology is superfluous. This is false on at least three grounds. First, it is certainly true that gender topics are discussed more frequently than, for example, 30 years ago. However, even in academic writing, sex and gender are often still conflated and objects are gendered without evidence and justification. Therefore, when it comes to the implementation of an archaeology of gender, there is still much educational work to be done. Secondly, recent decades saw enormous advances in scientific methods that possess immediate relevance for social identities and individuals' biographies (e.g. aDNA and stable

isotope analyses). Unfortunately, such methodological advances are rarely linked to social theory and, therefore, old narratives based on biological, not social, categories appeared in their wake. A discussion on how the new methods and results could be reconciled with a dedicated gender approach has barely begun. Finally, archaeology is the study of the past in the present. Therefore, our research is inextricably linked to current discourses. Abandoning gender topics in the past would also mean less awareness of gender problems in the present. As critical participants in our own society, we are obliged to offer socially relevant research, which does not send the wrong signals. These are three reasons why a dedicated gender archaeology is still needed.



50

# Same-sex practices are a 'modern' invention or a disorder

*Uroš Matic*

This stereotype has no foundation in archaeology and history but stems from homophobic political agendas of state and religious institutions aiming to ban all sexual identities and practices which do not conform to today's heteronormative society. Non-normative sexual practices, including same-sex intercourse, are argued to be unnatural and a product of modern ideology rather than existing since prehistory. These claims give state and religious institutions legitimacy to their sanctions. Same-sex practices are known both in human and other species. Whereas there is no attested sanction of such practices outside human cultures, they have acquired various meanings in different societies. In some non-western societies, certain same-sex practices are more tolerated than others. There are numerous past societies with written and visual records of same-sex practices, including ancient Egyptian, Greek,

Roman, and Viking. There is no reason to exclude the possibility that same-sex practices were also part of prehistoric people's sensual experiences, as is suggested by Natufian stone figurines, Mesolithic Cuevas de la Vieja panel, Albacete or Bronze Age Scandinavian rock art. Some same-sex sexual roles (e.g. active and penetrative) are sometimes more tolerated by society than others (e.g. passive). Often lying behind such attitudes are gender power relations and attribution of passivity to women, immature men (e.g. adolescents) and political enemies. Although modern archaeology and history do not deny the existence of same-sex practices in the past, they insist that the identities formed around them were not the same as today.



**“Same-sex practices are known both in human and other species.”**





# Queer archaeology is just LGBTQIA+ researchers imagining past LGBTQIA+ people

*Bo Jensen*



**“Indeed, every difference is potentially queer.”**



This prejudice stems from a poor understanding of queer theory. Queer people do imagine the past in their own image, but they are hardly alone – compare, for example, those past male elites imagined by modern elite men. Queer identity does not make you any kind of a theorist, or any kind of an archaeologist. Being a woman does not make you a feminist archaeologist, either. Experience is a starting point, but theory demands more work from everyone. Straight readers can benefit from queer theory too, just as men can benefit from feminist perspectives. Queer archaeology is anti-essentialist. It acknowledges that the real lives of any group – whether women, men and children or sexual, religious and ethnic majorities and minorities – are historically and culturally contingent, hedged by local social understandings. It acknowledges that diversity and discrimination exist today, and discusses how this influences archaeology. It asks less if sexual

minorities existed in the past (of course they did!), but more about the ways past societies included and excluded groups, accepted or ostracized difference, or made it invisible. As present and past realities differ, present and past ideals may well have differed, too. More abstractly, queer archaeology deals with affect and unsettlement: today, queer differences challenge the mainstream order. These challenges can only ever be resolved locally and temporarily. Queer archaeology investigates how past societies reacted to, accommodated, rejected or circumscribed *all* sorts of differences – between lay and secular, locals and outsiders, urban and rural communities, among others. Indeed, every difference is potentially queer.



# Women have equal career chances in archaeology as men

*Maria Mina*

The false assumption that women enjoy equal career prospects in archaeology is largely based on the neo-liberalist ideology that professional success is open to anyone competent and talented enough, and that gender inequality is not the result of deeply embedded structural power relations. However, recent surveys in Europe and the United States have exposed how far women's prospects lag behind those of male archaeologists. Although women tend to outnumber men in archaeology, only a small minority reach senior and influential positions, further contributing to various gaps. In academic research, women are also under-represented in peer-reviewed journals – possibly a result of the reviewers' or the editorial board's inherent bias. More publications, combined with increased experience acquired by men through positions with higher responsibility, subsequently leads to unequal career advancements. Gender

inequality in archaeology is best described by the term 'glass escalator', whereby predominantly heterosexual white men are placed on a fast track to senior positions when entering a female-dominated profession. Women's unequal position in archaeology largely relates to widely held perceptions regarding women's 'natural' skills, such as multi-tasking and their avoidance of conflicts or risk-taking which renders them 'ideal' for organising, working as members of teams, or serving in less demanding domains. Social expectations for women's child-rearing and care-giving duties also lead to lower research hours and limited fieldwork opportunities. The prejudices against women are informed by gender stereotypes, highlighting the fact that gender inequality will be remedied in archaeology only if we openly address the structural power relations that negatively impact women's professional opportunities.



**“... predominantly heterosexual white men are placed on a fast track to senior positions when entering a female-dominated profession.”**



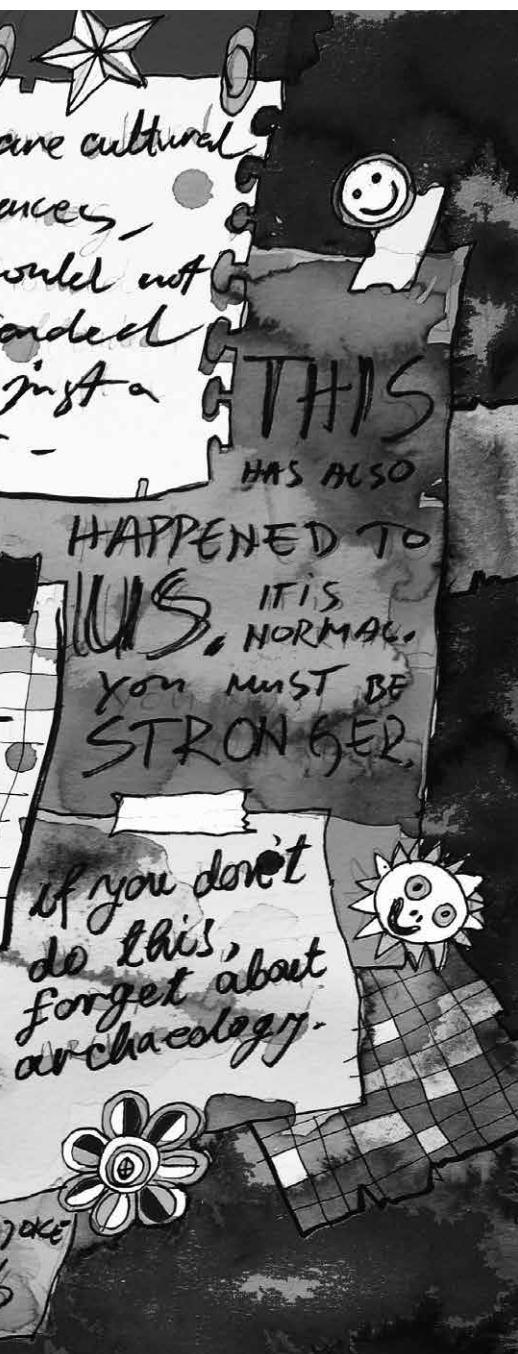


# Archaeology is free of harassment, assault, bullying and intimidation

Laura Coltofean-Arizancu  
and Bisserka Gaydarska



**“They can force victims to renounce their jobs or abandon archaeology forever, while their perpetrators continue living, researching and oppressing undisturbed.”**



It is a common misconception that archaeology is free of harassment and assault, especially sexual. In fact, recent surveys have shown that archaeology suffers from just such a culture of harassment, assault, bullying and intimidation. They also revealed that harassment is not “just” sexual but comes under various forms, including power and psychological to gender and religious. The phrases in the image are a few examples of what perpetrators and even witnesses tell victims to justify, defend and deny these misconducts. Such phrases lead to the acceptance and perpetuation of these offensive behaviours, to the extent where they become normalized and not recognized anymore. You can hear these phrases in various settings, from fieldwork and university classes to laboratories, museum storerooms and scientific events. Anybody could be a victim but most often these are people of disadvantaged backgrounds or with no power

within the hierarchies of given settings. Anybody could be a perpetrator – from a fellow colleague to a professor of any sex or gender – but usually these are white men in positions of power. Harassment, assault, bullying and intimidation frequently generate deep emotional and psychological wounds and traumas. They can lead to insecurity, anxiety, and even depression. They can force victims to renounce their jobs or abandon archaeology forever, while their perpetrators continue living, researching and oppressing undisturbed. Preventing and combatting these misconducts is a common responsibility and we can only succeed together through creating safe and empowering study and work environments, implementing adequate reporting mechanisms and sanctions, and encouraging victims and witnesses to disclosure.



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Archaeology and Gender in Europe (AGE) is a community within the European Association of Archaeologists. Its area of concern is the discussion of gender issues in European archaeology, where gender is considered both as a structural element to be studied in the past and as influencing research in the present. Thus, AGE addresses the study and understanding of gender arrangements in the past and of how current gender systems affect archaeology as an academic and professional practice. Website: <https://www.archaeology-gender-europe.org/>

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# Gender stereotypes in archaeology

Were men the only hunters and producers of tools, art and innovation in prehistory? Were women the only gatherers, home-bound breeders and caregivers? Are all prehistoric female depictions mother goddesses? And do women and men have equal career chances in archaeology? To put it short, no. However, these are some of the gender stereotypes that we still encounter on a daily basis in archaeology from the way archaeologists interpret the past and present it to the general public to how they practice it as a profession.

This booklet is a short but informative and critical response by archaeologists to various gender stereotypes that exist in the archaeological explanation of the past, as well as in the contemporary disciplinary practice. Gender and feminist archaeologists have fought for decades against gender stereotypes through academic writing, museum exhibitions and popular literature, among others. Despite their efforts, many of these stereotypes continue to live and even flourish, both in academic and non-academic settings, especially in countries where gender archaeology does not exist or where gender in archaeology is barely discussed. Given this context and the rise of far right or ultraconservative ideologies and beliefs across the globe, this booklet is a timely and thought-provoking contribution that openly addresses often uncomfortable topics concerning gender in archaeology, in an attempt to raise awareness both among the professionals and others interested in the discipline.

The booklet includes 24 commonly encountered gender stereotypes in archaeology, explained and deconstructed in 250 words by archaeologists with expertise on gender in the past and in contemporary archaeology, most of them being members of the Archaeology and Gender in Europe (AGE) Community of the European Association of Archaeologists. In addition, the stereotypes are beautifully illustrated by Serbian award-winning artist Nikola Radošavljević.

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