

An Analysis of the Notion of Gender and Identity: A Scholarly Exploration via Archaeological Lens

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Abstract

The dynamics of relationships across various social groups, including families, different socioeconomic levels, age cohorts, and religious communities, can be better understood by examining the interplay between genders. Gender, as a concept, is reflected in material culture and serves as a marker that showcases the social construction of culture. In the field of archaeology, the categorization of gender goes beyond a simplistic binary division of male and female. It is crucial to recognize that gender encompasses a wide range of identities, as is evident in the present context. This recognition necessitates acknowledging the existence of diverse gender identities, such as transgender individuals, pansexual individuals, alongside conventional categories of women and men. The emergence of gender archaeology in the 1980s aimed to transform archaeological methodologies, drawing influence from various disciplines within the humanities, civil rights movements, and the broader field of anthropology. It is important to note that the representation of sex and gender may not have held significant importance throughout history, and the understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality may have been fluid and variable within different societal contexts.

Keywords Archaeology, Material Remnants, Western Notions, Sex and Gender

Introduction

Gender archaeology is a methodological approach used to study ancient civilizations by analyzing their material culture, with a specific emphasis on comprehensively examining the social construction of gender identities and relationships. Gender archaeologists investigate the societal hierarchies of individuals based on their gender, particularly focusing on men, women, and children. This investigation involves identifying and analyzing power dynamics and levels of authority that were evident in the material and skeletal remains of these individuals. These variations can persist in the tangible documentation, even though they may not be immediately apparent and often require subjective analysis. The interaction between genders can also offer insights into the dynamics of relationships across other social groups, such as families, different socioeconomic levels, age groups, and religious communities. The integration of feminist theory within the field of gender archaeology has brought a fresh perspective and established fundamental principles within the broader framework of archaeological thought. The emergence of a feminist viewpoint in archaeology can be attributed to significant societal changes and an evolving understanding of gender roles that took place in Western cultures during the 20th century. This perspective originated from the Feminist Movement of the late 1960s.

Theoretical Aspects

In the realm of archaeological research, the terms "sex" and "gender" are often used interchangeably, which can lead to a problematic association of gender with biological sex and a disregard for the socially constructed nature of gender. Gender is a concept that is reflected in material culture and serves as a marker of the social construction of culture. Unfortunately, archaeologists often focus solely on the gender binary and fail to investigate the dynamics of gender within civilizations, which perpetuates gender determinism and ethnocentrism. However, the application of feminist theory to gender archaeology has provided a new perspective that challenges patriarchal biases and recognizes gender as a dynamic phenomenon. This shift in perspective is likely influenced by the growing presence of women in the field of archaeology and evolving social perspectives on gender. As a result, there has been a growing interest among female archaeologists in

examining the distortion of gender roles in ancient societies and challenging previously held notions of strict gender roles. Despite the challenges posed by the absence of technological advancements, archaeologists continue to formulate conjectures about gender roles and historical perspectives on sexual anatomy and desire. Our understanding of historical social frameworks has been compromised due to the current situation. Gender archaeology is an academic field that promotes the creation of inclusive and unbiased concepts about gender, based on factual data.

Gender Identity in Archaeology

In the field of archaeology, the understanding of gender goes beyond a simplistic division of male and female. It involves the exploration of how individuals express and represent their identities, which are influenced by various factors such as age, gender, race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. The development of gender identity is not predetermined at birth, but rather a gradual process. Ideally, gender should be considered as a fundamental aspect within communities. Gender archaeology challenges the widely held belief that gender is a fixed, biologically determined concept applicable to all. This study examines gender roles and identities by analyzing different forms of material evidence, including landscapes, spaces, architecture, food, bodies, and artifacts. A gender role encompasses cultural norms and expectations that dictate how individuals should behave, including their mannerisms, speech patterns, clothing, and actions. However, this simplistic approach contrasts with the complex nature of gender identities, which involve subjective perceptions of oneself. The expression and embodiment of genders can change throughout an individual's life, leading to a continuous process of reevaluating and renegotiating gender roles and identities over time. Despite this, some studies still mistakenly equate gender with biological sex, view gender as a binary division between male and female, or assume that gender identities conform to Western or European ideals. It is crucial to recognize that gender encompasses a wide range of identities, as is evident in the current context. This requires acknowledging the existence of diverse gender identities, including transgender individuals, pansexual individuals, as well as traditional categories of women and men. The emergence of gender archaeology in the 1980s aimed to transform archaeological methodologies, drawing influence from various

disciplines within the humanities, civil rights movements, and the broader field of anthropology. The text highlights the flawed assumptions that currently exist regarding historical events, particularly the idea of universal male dominance. The challenges associated with this phenomenon can be traced back to the activism of second-wave feminism, during which women advocated for increased representation and inclusion in both contemporary society and historical narratives. Initially, feminist archaeologists focused on making women more visible and prominent within the discipline. Informed by broader post-structuralist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, gendered perspectives in the mid-1990s began to shift towards discussions centered around the concept of "difference." This shift involved examining power dynamics and agency, moving away from the simplistic notion of simply incorporating women without further analysis. This entailed deconstructing the idea of fixed gender identities of "man" or "woman" and embracing the fluidity of identity, which is a defining characteristic of third-wave feminism. As a result, there was an expansion of discourse surrounding sexual orientations, physical appearance and expression, racial and ethnic identity, individuality, and the trajectory of human existence.

The Intersection of Archaeology and the Human Body

Archaeological research has increasingly focused on the study of the human body, leading scholars to question the importance of human beings, their interactions with objects, and the consequences of their physical actions in historical settings. The human body serves as a starting point for examining the various aspects of diversity among historical populations, including factors such as sex, gender, social status, ethnicity, physical abilities, and other aspects of individual identity. By studying the human body, researchers are able to analyze how cultural changes have affected specific segments of populations over time. Archaeologists draw upon a wide range of social theories from related fields, such as gender studies, racism studies, disability studies, and philosophical perspectives on the existence of the body. This allows them to explore how the material remains of past societies can provide temporal context for understanding embodiment. Archaeologists employ a diverse range of materials to investigate the concept of embodiment, including human skeletal remains, clothing and decorative items, tools used as extensions of the body, and objects and structures that shape the experiences of

embodiment. The vast array of materials at our disposal allows for the exploration of a multitude of research topics. These include delving into the phenomenological aspects of bodily and sensory experiences, examining the impact of cultural practices on bodily modifications, analyzing the role of visual culture in shaping and transforming body ideologies, and studying how skeletal remains can provide insights into past daily life. Recently, archaeologists have been giving more thought to the ethical implications of studying human remains. This includes not only the way in which research is conducted, but also the inclusion of the perspectives of descendant groups and the general public in relation to research inquiries and the dissemination of findings. Additionally, archaeologists take into account their own personal experiences when working with human remains.

The Study of Gender Within the Field of Mainstream Archaeology in South Asia

Archaeology in South Asia, like in other regions, lacks consistency in impartiality. The influence of colonial and culture-historic factors has significantly shaped the field of South Asian archaeology. However, the emergence of post-processualism in recent times has provided an opportunity to address the prevalence of biased perspectives, such as androcentric and ethnocentric viewpoints. Post-processualism recognizes the subjective nature of interpreting facts and encourages a critical examination of deeply ingrained preconceptions. It also raises questions about the extent to which Western ideology consciously or unconsciously affects the interpretation of archaeological findings. One consequence of this bias is the neglect of the feminist viewpoint, resulting in a lack of theoretical frameworks and a simplistic understanding of gender. Pamela Geller argues that studying gender without considering the feminist perspective is akin to analyzing class relations without Marx's influence or studying evolution without acknowledging Darwin's contributions.

The feminist perspective is often overlooked when examining the female figurines found in the Harappan Civilization. Many assume that these figurines solely represent a Mother Goddess, but this interpretation lacks substantial evidence. Meskell argues that equating every female figurine to a Mother Goddess is similar to considering plastic figures of the Virgin Mary and Barbie to hold the same level

of importance. While it is not impossible to believe in the existence of a Mother Goddess, the available evidence does not definitively prove that each female figurine represents her. This observation emphasizes the potential problems that arise from thoughtless interpretations of gender, which can lead to inappropriate assertions.

Comprehending the Body as a Site of Lived Experience

In order to fully understand how body portrayals can provide insights into sex and gender identity, it is crucial to develop a comprehensive understanding of the body itself. According to Grosz, it is essential to initially view the body as shapeless, lacking any inherent identity. To establish its identity, the body relies on social interaction, organization, and regulation. Essentially, the human body can be seen as a canvas onto which a grid is overlaid to highlight specific areas of importance and intensity. It is worth noting that different cultures and communities have their own unique social influences and structures, which contribute to the diverse identities found within their populations. Contemporary research in the field of gender studies suggests that gender identity is influenced by various factors, such as age, social standing, physical abilities, sexuality, ethnicity, life stages, and familial relationships.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how the body assimilates external stimuli that shape one's identity, it is crucial to view the body not only as a fixed societal construct, but also as a dynamic entity that embodies lived experiences and interactions. The concept of lived experience holds great significance in archaeology as it serves as a bridge between material evidence and the interpretation of human encounters. The comprehension of lived experiences requires a constant dialogue between tangible and intangible elements, necessitating the integration of multiple academic disciplines due to its complex nature. Within the field of archaeology, it is essential to incorporate ideas from various social science disciplines while exploring the theorization of identity. Archaeology has the ability to decipher the human body as a manifestation of intricate intersections, encompassing biology and society, collective and individual dynamics, and the interplay between societal constraints and personal agency.

The representation of the Indus Body

In the absence of written records, exploring sexual and societal differences can be challenging. However, studying gender variant traditions in South Asia provides valuable insights into the historical dynamics of ancient South Asian cultures. It is crucial to recognize that the understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality varied significantly among ancient civilizations. The significance of sex and gender representation throughout history may not have been consistent, and the understanding of these concepts could have been fluid and diverse within different societal contexts. It is also important to acknowledge that sexual differentiation is just one factor that could potentially influence the portrayal of the human body. Figurines, for instance, can depict both realistic and ideological notions, reflecting the preferences of those in positions of power or conforming to societal stereotypes. Moreover, contemporary perspectives on the Indus civilization have evolved over time. While analyzing early depictions of female figurines, scholars like Marshall and Mackay observed exaggerated hips and prominent breasts in some of these figurines. However, other researchers such as Gordon and Gordon, Mackay, and Wheeler noted that most of these figurines did not exhibit an excessively small waist, exaggerated breasts, hips, or pubic area, commonly referred to as the "generative organs".

It is worth noting that while there has been an increased focus on the sexualized and symbolic body associated with fertility, the exaggerated features commonly associated with fertility are not representative of the majority of female figurines found in the Indus civilization. Despite this misconception, researchers widely acknowledge that the figurines do not exhibit exaggerated depictions of the female form nor do they solely symbolize childbearing. The absence of clothing on the figurines has been interpreted as indicative of a fertility purpose or a religious function, rather than a representation of attire worn by the Indus civilization. It is important to note that nudity does not inherently connote sexuality or fertility. The presence of youth or lower social standing in ancient art has been suggested as potential interpretations. Additionally, most female miniatures do not depict nudity, and the male figurines do not always depict nudity, contrary to popular belief. It is possible that the figurines were not exhibited in a state of nudity or partial nudity; instead, they may have been embellished with perishable materials

like fabric. The presence of belts on the female figurines within the context of the Indus civilization may suggest the existence of cultural norms pertaining to modesty in female attire.

The act of concealing the female body among Indus women implies the existence of societal restrictions. Additionally, the belt, sometimes adorned with pearls, likely holds additional symbolic meaning. For instance, in ancient Egyptian society, women would occasionally wear amulets or girdles around their pelvis and abdomen to protect against negative forces entering through the navel or vaginal opening. It is worth noting that Western concepts like "virginity" and "chastity" did not carry the same significance in ancient Near Eastern cultures, such as Mesopotamia, and may not be applicable in this context. Research conducted by Pollock in contemporary Mesopotamia and by Brumfiel and Joyce in later Mesoamerica has revealed a discrepancy in the representation of female subjects across different forms of media, including official sources like monuments and seals, as well as popular media like figurines and pottery. These studies have shown that unlike male subjects, female subjects are depicted inconsistently and even contradictorily in various forms of representation. While Indus terracotta figurines have been widely studied by some archaeologists, the scarcity of other depictions, especially at significant Indus sites, means that seals, tablets, and a limited number of statues remain the primary mediums for comparative analysis. The seals and tablets unearthed from Harappa display a unique iconographic representation, which is also present on multiple tablets. This portrayal depicts a female figure without any clothing or adornments, unlike the female figurines. It is important to note that there is a lack of female stone sculptures available for comparative analysis. However, it is worth mentioning that a bronze figurine discovered at Mohenjo-Daro, as described by Marshall, showcases a naturalistic style and depicts a nude figure with small breasts, slim hips, and long legs. This depiction contrasts with the terracotta figurines found at the same site. Marshall suggests that these physical attributes may symbolize youth or ethnicity, but it is also possible that these variations in representation are a result of different messages, intended audiences, and artistic styles used throughout the Indus civilization.

Gender and Other Social Differences

The association between occupations and gender roles is a common occurrence. The majority of figurines discovered at Harappa are depicted in stationary positions, but some sculptures showcase activities that are typically associated with specific genders. For instance, certain figurines suggest that the people of the Indus civilization may have engaged in avian domestication and animal husbandry, which are often considered women's work in other ancient cultures. Other figurines, depicted in a sitting position with their arms extended and holding elongated objects, are believed to represent women engaged in food preparation or grain grinding. However, it is important to note that these interpretations may be limiting, and these figurines could potentially depict women involved in other occupations such as mineral grinding or pottery production. These depictions may indicate that Indus women were involved in a broader range of production, offering a different perspective on their roles within the civilization. While some scholars may argue that these figurines contradict the idea of supernatural representation or ritualistic purpose, it is also possible to interpret them as a connection between women and ritual practices, particularly in relation to fertility or prosperity. Nevertheless, the existence of figurines could potentially offer evidence to support the proposition that "certain women residing in urban areas may have held significant social and ceremonial roles." This idea gains more credibility from the discovery of potential matrilineal burials in the Harappan era cemetery located in Harappa. Additionally, social status plays a role in gender dynamics. In various ancient Greek literature, women of lower occupation and social standing, such as slaves and prostitutes, are referred to with grammatically neuter names. An example of this can be seen in Pseudo-Demosthenes' *Against Neaera*, where the name "Phrynion" is used. The portrayal of nudity in ancient art, as demonstrated by Meskell's research in 1999, may indicate a lower social rank. However, one can analyze the relationship between gender and status by considering the premise that higher status is manifested through more intricate depictions. In the context of Harappa, it is observed that female figurines exhibit a greater degree of intricate clothing and ornamentation compared to their male counterparts. Several male figurines also display intricate details and embellishments, including beards and nipples. However, there is a noticeable disparity in the level of complexity among

the male figurines, with a significant number lacking intricate facial characteristics. This difference suggests that the more ornate male sculptures may have been intended to represent individuals of higher social standing or to emphasize their distinct personalities. It is worth noting that attire and embellishments can serve as indicators of ethnic identity.

Conclusion

The study of gender in archaeology has become closely linked with feminist theory and the redefined understandings of sex and gender. The terracotta figurines found at Harappa hold great importance in the realm of gender studies, as they offer valuable insights into the existence of multiple gender identities, including male, female, and gender-ambiguous, within Harappan society. This research suggests that the significance of Harappan gender identification is rooted in its cultural context. Acknowledging this phenomenon could lead to further exploration of anthropomorphic figurines and therianthrope artifacts, ultimately enhancing our understanding of sex and gender dynamics within the Harappan Civilization.

The study of sex and gender in archaeology has consistently lacked a unified paradigm. Instead, it has developed as a fluid collection of critical perspectives. The traditional view of sex and gender as a binary opposition, with distinct biological and social aspects, has evolved to acknowledge their complex and interconnected nature. Some scholars argue that these categories are inseparable, forming a continuum of ideas that exhibit cross-cultural variations. Archaeologists, including "second wave" and "third wave" feminists, generally agree that sexual difference is just one aspect of social difference within a dynamic and interconnected framework that is constantly negotiated. Therefore, it is increasingly clear that when interpreting historical events, it is essential to recognize the intricate interplay between various dimensions of diversity, such as sex, gender, life stage, social status, and ethnicity, for all individuals within a society. It is crucial to analyze how social identity is portrayed through the human body. The story of the blind men from South Asia, also known as the Buddhist Sutra Udana VI.4 and retold in John Godfrey Saxe's poem, serves as a prime example of the limitations of studying only one aspect of a society. This tale emphasizes the possibility of incomplete and inaccurate perceptions resulting from

narrow examinations. While not solely focused on women, the study of gender as a cohesive element in ancient civilizations is expected to contribute to the gradual dissolution of gender archaeology as a separate subfield. This integration will occur when gender archaeology is seamlessly incorporated into all aspects of the discipline and its social theories.

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