

## **MARGINAL NOTES: A MALE VIEW FROM THE 1ST WOMEN IN ARCHAEOLOGY CONFERENCE, ALBURY, FEBRUARY 1991**

**Iain Davidson**

It will take some time before we can judge the full impact on Australian archaeology of the first Women in Archaeology Conference. But we can be sure there will be one. In style and content it was quite unlike any other conference in Australia and the participants I spoke to all described it as outstanding and above all stimulating. There will be much important work stemming from it and it is to be hoped the proceedings appear rapidly. Laurajane Smith and Hilary du Cros are to be congratulated for organising it, both for the ideas and for the efficiency of the arrangements.

The tone was set by three outstanding papers by the invited overseas guests: Margaret Conkey, one of the founders of gender studies in archaeology; Joan Gero, co-convenor of the just-published conference in South Carolina (Conkey and Gero 1991); and Alison Wylie, well known as a philosopher of the science of archaeology, but now immersed also in 'the "f" word', feminism. Conkey argued that archaeology can make us realise that the present is not the only way of doing things and quoted Haraway that 'The open future rests on a new past'. In this she emphasised that a feminist archaeology would break away from the androcentric stereotypes created by an unthinking immersion in dominant cultural values. Susan Cheney addressed a similar issue in a case study of the frontier in nineteenth century Canada. If we can show that the ideology of the gentility of women in the nineteenth century was not observed in practice, then we need pay less heed to it in interpreting the earlier past.

That such stereotyping is pervasive was reinforced by Gero's review of the practice and presentation about 'Early Man' in the New World, where almost all of the practitioners and the images presented are by and of men. And Wylie, reviewing some recent work which has been explicitly feminist sought to answer the questions 'Why does a feminist archaeology emerge now?' or more importantly 'Why does a feminist archaeology ever emerge?'. In doing so she emphasised that knowledge is created not discovered, and that if we are creators, then we can determine something of how the creation happens.

To emphasise the excellence of the three invited contributions would be to go against the spirit that they set by their presentation. Catherine Roberts followed the presentation by Conkey with a paper that covered some of the same ground. The important distinction she made was between an archaeology of gender and a gendered archaeology, a distinction that is funda-

mental to the problems and perceptions of the conference. This was made obvious in a later paper by Matthew Spriggs, read for him in his absence (by a woman). Women in archaeology is about much more than writing about the work that women may have done in prehistory, with all of the male biases intact. Indeed, my concern after these early papers was whether there was a role for men at all. The answer, I think, is in writing a gendered prehistory of men, making explicit our concerns with male activities, and hence recognising also those that are not men's. This must be an explicit rejection of the unthinking prehistory that either leaves our story told without gender or that simply reflects the dominant ideology of male importance. The first of these possibilities is as bad as the second, because androcentric ideology leaves individuals free to see the genderless prehistory as a reflection of that ideology.

The other great theme was outlined by Wendy Beck, in a joint paper with Jane Balme. In discussing the use that is made in feminist literature of ideas about the division of labour, they emphasised that we must consider both what feminism can contribute to archaeology, and archaeology to feminism. Feminist theory in archaeology is necessary, at least in part, because feminists use the results of our work in their attempts to justify political positions by an argument from history. We can, hardly, in Australia, ignore the political consequences of the work we do, nor should we be unconscious of the political biases that inform (?) our work. This was poignantly illustrated by Robyne Bancroft's measured and moving account of her perceptions of attending the Townsville AAA meetings as an Aboriginal student of prehistory, not a gender issue, but clearly about similar problems of marginalisation. Even in 1990, it seems, there are some who expect Aborigines to identify first with other Aborigines in all contexts. This hinders archaeologists working constructively with Aborigines, and accounts for the long time in which there have been no Aboriginal graduates in Australian prehistory, the study of their own heritage. In the same way, some males expect women to be women (in their image of what women should be) first and people if they can. Feminism affirms that women are female people first. Part of the problem for women has been that there has not been much of an attempt to show that prehistory is their heritage.

This was well illustrated by Stephanie Moser, in a virtuoso display of the visual reconstructions of what happened at Pleistocene sites such as Olduvai,

Choukoutien, Terra Amata, Torralba and all those classic sites of first year texts. It occurred to me that there was a strong association between the vividness of reconstructions and the extent of questioning in recent critical literature (see, eg, Solomon, Davidson and Watson 1990). This may be because the reconstructions, not the data, made them famous.

One of the issues about an empirically rich study of gender in prehistory is about the identification of females or males at all. Sheila McKell argued that the problem is made more difficult by the unthinking use of 'Man the Hunter – Woman the Gatherer' stereotypes from ethnography. Beverly Parslow attempted to show variations in New Zealand sites that might most appropriately be attributed to gender divisions. Outside Australia some success has been had by the identification of the sex of skeletons in cemeteries and the association of grave goods with particular sexes. Isobel Ellender showed some of the possibilities of this for an Australian burial. But the problems are severe, as Denise Donlon revealed. The identification of the sex of skeletons in Australia relies on criteria derived from skeletons which themselves are of unknown sex! This may be one reason why, on the presently used criteria, there seems to be a systematic under-representation of female skeletons in prehistoric collections, particularly if robust females were identified as males.

Some hope may come from the study of pictures of one sort or another. Claire Smith's analysis revealed differences between the modern acrylic paintings by male and female artists in the Central Desert. From this she inferred that gender may be an important source of difference in prehistoric paintings. Indeed difference was a major topic of discussions. We routinely identify variability and attribute it to one or other cause. Conkey pointed out that we accept resource stress or social complexity as explanatory of some sorts of variability, but routinely ignore gender as a cause. Yet, she affirmed, we may more easily assume that gender differentiation was present than that other forms of complexity were. It will be more difficult to demonstrate that the difference derives from gender where gender labels are arbitrary and defined by convention.

David Frankel showed sculptured figures on decorated pots from the Early Bronze Age of Cyprus which depict males and females engaged in a variety of tasks. But some are figures without obvious sexual identification. I would argue that here we can indeed identify gender (rather than sex) because the identification of particular sexes with particular tasks is socially defined. And this social definition of gender continues to the extent that there are tasks where it was not important to define the sex of the actor.

This division into male, female, and other is present in other representation systems, such as the Sydney rock engravings discussed in Tessa Corkill's analysis of the

conventions about depiction of size of figures with unambiguous sex. Her analysis required the omission of figures with no identifiable sex. Julie Drew found a similar triple categorisation in her analysis from the literature on the paintings of the Laura region and the Victoria River Downs. I suggest that the third category makes the representational system more interesting, rather than more intractable.

One of the highlights of the conference made this point most emphatically. Linda Conroy addressed the issue of the evolutionary emergence of gender. The first point is that there must be such an issue. Gender is socially defined, although most generally two genders map onto two sexes. The cases where there is an issue about gender identification show that the mapping is not usually exact. If gender is socially defined then it must emerge after the emergence of the definition of social roles made possible in turn by the emergence of language. Conroy argued that gender can first be discerned in the female figurines of the Upper Palaeolithic of Europe (their interpretation as 'Mother Goddesses' dismissed in another paper by Pamela Russell), not because they are female and hence indicate gender, but because the depictions are conventional, and convention can only arise by social definition. It is well known that there are other figures in the same assemblages that are generally not identifiable to sex. Conroy's fundamental insight, as powerful as it is simple, that the gender opposition in this case is between female and other, rather than between female and male provides crucial support for the argument that it is gender difference that is being observed in the convention, not simply representation of sex.

Unfortunately Conroy's paper was heard by rather less than half the people at the conference because it was necessary to hold parallel sessions. While she was speaking there was a session on Cultural Resource Management and Gender Issues, and by the reactions when we all got together afterwards, Anne Clarke's paper was similarly outstanding. I also missed the session on Historical Archaeology.

The final session I was able to attend addressed the issue of Women in the Archaeological Career Structure, with a survey of patterns of employment by Marilyn Truscott and the presentation of results of a detailed questionnaire about the profession of archaeology in Victoria, by Gabrielle Brennan, Kristal Buckley and Megan Goulding. Some insight into how archaeology stands in comparison with other careers was provided by Carole Cusack and Gary Campbell. That the situation for women is no better in archaeology than in other careers is little comfort.

There followed a series of workshops addressing particular issues of this sort. The one I attended made suggestions about specialist training courses for postgraduates in the industry, and about the need for a professional body to provide accreditation for such

courses, that would embrace all professionals in archaeology in Australia. Some action on these fronts is already taking place as a result of the conference.

On the last day there were discussions of the way forward for both gender studies and feminism in the intellectual discipline and in countering sexism in the practice of the discipline. I have been told that the supportive atmosphere of the conference made some feel comfortable enough to recount their personal histories of discrimination. That these occur at all is a blight on our profession. It is to be hoped that this conference will be the start not only of a more exciting

intellectual field but also of a more tolerant and equitable discipline.

### References

- Gero J. and M. Conkey (eds) 1991 **Engendering Archeology: Women and Prehistory**. Basil Blackwell: Oxford
- Solomon, S., I. Davidson and D. Watson (eds) 1990 **Problem Solving in Taphonomy**. Tempus 2, University of Queensland: St. Lucia.

**Dept. of Archaeology and Palaeoanthropology  
University of New England  
Armidale NSW 2351**

## REFLECTIONS ON THE TOWNSVILLE AAA CONFERENCE FROM THE WOMEN IN ARCHAEOLOGY CONFERENCE

**Robyne Bancroft**

This is not an academic paper but an attempt to clarify erroneous assumptions and misunderstandings. Before I begin, there are a few points I wish to make. Firstly, I would like to thank Laurajane Smith and Hilary du Cros for having the vision to see the importance of holding the conference for women in archaeology. I know that future support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women involved in archaeology will come from those who were present. Secondly, I make mention of the new title now given to us by the Australian Government – that is, ATSI or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We prefer to call ourselves by the name which is used in our own area – for example, Goori is the name used on the north coast of New South Wales, Murri in Queensland, and so on. I will use the ATSI acronym here. Thirdly, I would like to bring to your attention a future conference which will be held at Charles Sturt University in July this year called 'Aboriginal Involvement in National Parks and Protected Areas'. For those of you who work with ATSI people and organisations I think this would be an excellent time for discussion, communication and participation on issues of relevance to you. Your response in the way of questions and constructive criticisms will be appreciated.

Earlier papers refer to gender as being only one interrelated dynamic of archaeology. To me, gender is related to oppression and oppression relates to the indigenous people of Australia. It is about the assumptions, politics and values belonging to one culture which are imposed on another. An example of this occurred at the AAA Conference in Townsville in December 1990. My comments are not intended to make you feel guilty but to clarify a situation which has caused a lot of confusion and some discussion.

The AAA coincided with the northern Queensland ATSI Conference held at the same venue but not in the same building. ATSI participants came from Western Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory to present papers or simply to hear of developments and work involving their field.

### DAY 1

It was brought to my attention that the ATSI participants at the AAA were expected to be at the ATSI 'local' conference situated on the bank of Burdekin Dam. This was a surprise. Why should we be at a meeting where local community issues were being discussed? Thus, in my opinion, began communication problems which lasted until the final day of the conference. We were forced into a situation which caused stress and created antagonism between the group on the hill (group one) and the group on the banks of the Burdekin (group two). We were intruding in local community business – community business which did not concern us and to which we were not officially invited. Nevertheless, we reluctantly imposed ourselves on the local conference. We were welcomed by the local ATSI group and invited to participate in their conference. Meanwhile, up on the hill, some archaeologists were concerned that no ATSI people were present at the presentation of their AAA papers.

My paper was on 'Communication and Consultation'. It appears that this should have been given on day one – rather than on the afternoon of the day before everyone left. My co-presenter, David Johnston, intended to give a report to the AAA Conference on his trip to Venezuela where he attended the World Archaeological Congress (WAC). David wished to