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Book Review

Gendered Labor in Specialized Economies: Archaeological Perspectives on Female and Male Work

Edited by Sophia E. Kelly and Traci Ardren. Pp. xii + 400, figs. 62. University Press of Colorado, Boulder 2016. \$34.95. ISBN 978-1-60732-520-8 (paper).

Reviewed by [Thomas E. Emerson](#)

It has been several decades since feminist pioneers Margaret Conkey, Joan Gero, and Janet Spector brought women out of the archaeological shadows. Since their calls for action, the outpouring of research focusing on the political, social, religious, and economic roles of women in past societies has been both prolific and productive. *Gendered Labor in Specialized Economies* builds on those earlier studies to explore the role of gender (particularly that of women) in the context of specialized economies. As the 10 case studies—touching on the New World (Mesoamerica, Andes, and American Southwest), Asia (Thailand), Africa (Ghana), the Mediterranean (Cyprus), and northern Europe (England)—demonstrate, identifying a gendered economy in an archaeological context is difficult.

In an introductory chapter, Kelly and Ardren suggest that the analysis of gendered labor in craft specialization could benefit from a consideration of the neoclassical economic concept of “comparative advantage.” Derived from a theory of international free trade, comparative advantage proposes that one entity can produce a good at a lower cost than another. In the context of gendered craft specialization, this might lead to one gender dominating an area of production (classically, women in pottery making or men in stone-tool crafting). As is the case with many concepts imported from other disciplines, comparative advantage carries with it theoretical baggage. In this instance, the baggage includes assumptions of free trade, economic rationality, profit, and efficiency of production, to name a few. Kelly and Ardren do not consider that, conceptually, comparative advantage presumes a considerable load of behavioral and social implications that are unlikely to be present in the societies studied in the volume. And, as Nobel laureate Richard Thaler’s research (e.g., *Misbehaving: The Making of Behavioral Economics* [New York 2015]) has demonstrated, economic theory that ignores human behavior as a significant variable is likely flawed.

Helms, in her *Craft and the Kingly Ideal: Art, Trade, and Power* (Austin 1993) has ably shown that craft specialization in preindustrial societies cannot be removed from its social, religious, and political contexts. And with decades of research having essentially come to the same conclusion concerning the understanding of gender roles and relationships, therein lies the conundrum for the scholars who contributed to this volume. Virtually every case study acknowledges that most tasks are inherently genderless. Therefore, interjecting gender roles into craft activities of past societies must, methodologically, rely on two problematic approaches: an acceptance of gender truisms (i.e., stereotypes) or a reliance on analogs from ethnographic and ethnohistoric sources. To a greater or lesser degree, all the contributions to this volume fall back on these methods.

The danger of relying heavily on ethnographic and ethnohistoric records is, of course, that they too easily project the present into the past, thus creating a potentially false sense of continuity in gender roles. A similar dilemma faces researchers who accept traditional gender categories, despite known exceptions, or a rigid gender-task correlation (e.g., women and weaving). The volume’s contributors all recognize these difficulties and to a greater or lesser degree attempt to address them.

The most satisfactory analyses are those that can upstream from a detailed ethnohistorically documented base of a strongly gendered society such as that of the Inca. Costin is able to use the well-researched

gender structuring of the Inca empire as manifested in the *aqllakuna* (in effect, state-organized female workshops of weavers) as a comparative base for the examination of the different form of state-dominated crafting practiced by Chimú weavers (even after their conquest by the Inca). Likewise, Escontrías' examination of the organization of space for Inca and Moche weavers ably demonstrates that the Inca weavers were rigidly controlled within spatially restricted areas, while Moche weavers did not operate under such restrictions and were able to interact with the community at large. In both cases, the researchers rely on the accepted notion that Andean weavers were women. The evidentiary hints of male Inca weavers and apparently restricted "genderless" Moche metalworkers remain unexplored.

A similarly strong documentation of the existence in the historic period of closely linked exogamous castes of artisans of metalworkers (men) and potters (women) in Ghana allowed Stahl to examine the continuity of this structure in the past. She used the presence of metalworking slag as temper in pots to measure the degree of closeness of the two artisan groups and concluded that their interrelationships in the past had, in fact, been dynamic rather than constant.

In other cases, the use of the ethnohistoric and ethnographic record, instead of providing evidence for a strongly gendered society, demonstrates the fluid interrelationship of gender and technology. Such appears to be the case in the Mayan area. Callaghan reviews the written records that reveal both genders involved in pottery production; however, he seems compelled to promote women as the primary potters in the past. Other Maya studies in this collection, such as those by Ardren and colleagues and by Kovacevich, are more restrained in drawing a correlation between gender and technology. Their studies look at the variation in crafting between commoner and elite houses and focus on the archaeological evidence for multiple-crafting in the context of households. Both studies reveal that tasks that might be considered gender specific coexisted in a domestic household context and that such multicraft activities continued to be important even at state levels of organization (see also Wright).

The studies in this volume question gender as a structuring principle as often as they promote it. But a significant methodological contribution of such studies is the employment of both ethnographic and archaeological task-segmentation analyses of crafting activities (e.g., Halliwell et al., Kelly and Heidke, and Swantek). Segmenting the production process allows researchers to better understand the role of the "invisible producers" who facilitate production, such as children who might collect firewood or men who might dig raw clay for women potters. This procedure both reveals the complexity of analyzing production and magnifies the difficulty in identifying solely gender-specific technologies. It also supports those analyses that recognize the dominant role of multicrafting in domestic contexts even in complex societies. As Kovacevich summarizes, in gender studies archaeologists must "open [their] . . . minds to the possibility of multiple genders/ages being involved in [craft] . . . production" (323).

Gendered Labor is an ambitious volume, taking on the daunting task of engendering the past while examining the complexities of craft specialization in complex societies. As one expects from gender-centric volumes, there is some beating of androgynous straw "men" and an occasional touch of gynocentrism, but on the whole it is a closely reasoned contribution to our attempts to interpret the role of gender from archaeological materials. The difficulties are considerable. The contributions to this volume all touch on the reality that most technologies are inherently genderless, that gender roles are dynamic and changing, that the ethnographic and ethnohistoric evidence of gender cannot be an unchallenged guide to the past, and that the role of frequent familial and kin-based work groups likely crosscuts gender lines. Wright, a longtime contributor to gender research in archaeology, says it best in her concluding chapter, where she observes that gender is not a universal structuring principle and that factors such as gender complementarity, gender-integrated activities, and joint male and female domestic, household-centered activities diminish the impact of a gender-centric approach. Furthermore, especially in complex societies, kinship, ethnicity, and class likely crosscut gendered labor organization. While gender can be a powerful organizing tool in the hands of the state (e.g., the Inca), it is only one of many variables that plays a role in organizing specialized labor.

The editors, Kelly and Ardren, are to be commended for bringing together a group of scholars who grapple with the role of gender vis-à-vis specialized crafting in complex societies. For anyone interested in parsing

the relationship of gender and labor, the volume is essential—not because it provides simple answers but because it clearly establishes the tremendous challenges that face such research.

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