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Gender & Archaeology in Sweden

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The professional situation of women in Swedish archaeology is good and improving. Since the 1960s, women have gradually come to dominate graduate courses in archaeology. Between years 1965-1995, 58% of the archaeology students at Uppsala University were women. Today, a gender balance or dominance of women over men is noted at most academic institutions. Before the early 1990s, however, men dominated levels of higher education. Between 1965 and 1990, only 33% of the archaeology students completing their Bachelor works in Sweden were women (cf. C-level exam). Men also dominated at doctoral levels. Nevertheless, after 1970, women achieved 40 % of all doctoral exams in archaeology. During the past ten to fifteen years, there has been a manifest increase of women at all higher levels of education, both at BA, Magister and doctoral levels. Notably, the last five years have seen a gender balance of academic exams at the PhD level (Gustavsson 1994; Högskoleverket Report 2009).

In field archaeology, men dominated up until the 1960s. However, from this point there was a rapid increase of women as field archaeologists. Today, there is either a gender balance or a domination of women as field archaeologists, as project leaders and at other leading positions. Women have also held or hold the most prominent positions within the National Board of Antiquities/The National Heritage Board.

The above displays a statistical picture of gender equality. Yet, it covers stronghold, reproduced strands of imbalance and gender inequality. Some are readily apparent, for instance: there are many more male than female professors. In turn, men get more money than women do for the same kind of work. Other strands of inequality are more subtle, and thus very difficult to bring to light, talk about and change. For instance, male networks tend to make up social entities, leaving women colleagues aside from informal and formal communication, decision-making and future career strategies. To be inside male networks increase the possibility of getting new and better positions. Even more subtle, more women than men work for the good of the wider social collective (union work, department administration, social issues, arranging excursions, baking bread, making coffee and so forth). By this means, women give away their limited working time to others.

No doubt, these are historically rooted structures, reproduced within both academic archaeology and field archaeology. Important to note is that also women reproduce the same structures of inequality. As scholars like Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault would put it, we are all bodies imprinted by history (Foucault 1984:83). In particular, we note, this is true when it comes to the scientific world of archaeology.

Swedish archaeology as research discipline formed in the end of the 1800s. At the same time, political movements for women's rights and issues of equality were rapidly emerging. In the late 1800s and beginning of 1900s, Hans Hildebrand and Oscar Montelius (both seen as founding fathers of Swedish archaeology) entered the political debates. Both wrote articles arguing in favor of equal rights between women and men (Arwill Nordbladh 2001). Nonetheless, these debates did not enter the field of scientific archaeology. There was very little room for women and critical debates of equality. A sharp dividing line was drawn up between society/social/political issues/critique on one side and scientific (objective) archaeology on the other. Gender politics concerned society not Scientific archaeology. Archaeology was to be about typology, chronology and methods, not social issues and critical analysis of equality in archaeological practice. Interestingly, in the 1880s, women were already employed at museums – accepted as biologically fit to take care of things. In Scientific archaeology, it took a long time before women were accepted – teasingly classified as a third ‘kind of gender’: there were men, women and female archaeologists.

Notably, this view of scientific archaeology – as something best set apart from society and equality issues – is reinforced in contemporary archaeology – most unexpectedly within certain strands of European gender archaeology. We will come back to this below.

The status of gender archaeology in Sweden

Since the early 1990s, Swedish archaeology has seen a rapid increase of academic research on gender, ranging from women's archaeology over children to masculinity and queer perspectives. Within field archaeology, gender is likewise a frequently used concept. Thus, it may seem as gender has become an accepted part of mainstream archaeology or reached 'a mature stage'.

However, gender in archaeology involves struggles, paradoxes and splits. Yes – gender is a commonly used concept in archaeological research, academic publications and excavation reports. There is also a complex scholarship on gender and feminist theory in Sweden. Yet, gender archaeology is a sub-discipline located in the margins of mainstream archaeology. Notably, women archaeologists do most gender archaeology. Men that do gender archaeology get more credits than women doing the same thing. Archaeologists outside gender archaeology, or within 'the mainstream', tend to be either ignorant or antagonistic towards gender and gender archaeology. On one hand, gender archaeology is seen as an accepted – not 'dangerous' method to analyze women, and sometimes men, in prehistory. On the other, there is the notion that gender is too political and has command over 'objective' archaeological research. Thus, gender is involved in a paradox – causing diverging lines also within contemporary gender archaeology.

Importantly, there is the question of what gender in archaeology is, or should be about? In turn, this is linked to notions what scientific archaeology is, or should be about. Certainly, there is no agreement on this, in particular not within gender archaeology.

Central to feminist theoretical gender archaeology is a critical analysis of taken-for-granted – the questioning and rethinking of categories, dichotomies and central nodes used in archaeological practice, schemes of classification and interpretation of the material record. Categories; like that of woman, man, masculinity, femininity or, by the way, sex and gender,

needs to be investigated – they are no stable analytic categories ready to employ in analysis. Gender archaeology is thus – from a feminist theoretical perspective – a method that uses critical analyses to investigate the archaeological practice and the past – thereby improving archaeology as scientific practice.

However, there is no consensus that critical perspectives are the best platform for scientific archaeology, especially not feminist critique. In Sweden (as in Britain or the UK), there is currently an overall wish to ‘move’ away from critical and feminist theoretical perspectives – to a ‘doing’ of archaeology, that is: interpretation of materials and contexts without critical analyses of concepts and categories used (Engelstad 2004). Many gender archaeologists want to move away from feminist theory, as they consider it a hinder to scientific (objective) archaeology. They claim that feminist theory/critique has only to do with contemporary politics and equality issues within society – feminist issues that should not ‘steer’ scientific archaeology. Noticeably, history repeats itself.

Gender in archaeology - and as category of equality work

The concept of women is central to feminist politics and feminist theory. However, for feminist theorists, the concept of women as category is also a major problem as it is impossible to formulate precisely (Alcoff 1997). Thus, we get the dilemma that the point of departure (woman as category of analysis) at the same time needs critical investigation. This has caused sharp debates within feminist theory. For example, it is argued that the feminist (poststructuralist) deconstruction of woman as category (cf. sex and gender) have negative effects on feminism: the emancipatory interests of women, gender equality and political transformation (Benhabib 1995). Similar tensions (though combined with notions of science) exist in gender archaeology. Feminist theoretical archaeology, as discussed, wants a rethinking of concepts such as women, man, sex and gender. Strands of gender archaeology that wish to be set apart from ‘political’ feminist theory want to use gender as stable categories of analysis.

From our viewpoint, feminist theory in archaeological research and feminist equality issues can (and should) be treated somewhat differently. Certainly, the gender balance in Swedish archaeology is the result of a decade of feminist emancipatory politics and feminist research. Obviously, society/politics and science cannot be separated.

However, equality issues (for instance in archaeology) are based on sociological and other disciplinary research, using statistics of wage incomes and so on. Thus, within the field of equality work, women and men as categories of study need not necessarily be deconstructed through critical analyses. To achieve gender equality we can accept gender as category of identity, *because* it rests on well-grounded research within other disciplines.

Within archaeology, on the other hand, feminist theory and critical analysis of concepts and categories like woman, man, sexuality, sex and gender is necessary. Because, simply put, investigating the past is our responsibility as archaeologists – it is our field of expertise. Accordingly, and in contrast to the situation of gender as category in equality work, archaeologists cannot assume that past societies made use of the same categories or schemes of classification as contemporary society. The search of knowledge of the past through materials and contexts depend on our ability to critical investigate the archaeological sources, instead of reproducing ‘a past as wished for’.

Therefore, we have two different, yet compatible perspectives of what gender is or should be about. In societal equality work, we can agree to ‘gender’ as category. In archaeology, on the other hand, we cannot do the same. This is why feminist theory is a necessary point of departure in investigating gender (and concepts of woman, man, child, queer, body, sex, sexuality and so on) in archaeology.

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