

# Homophobia and women archaeologists

Cheryl Claassen

## Abstract

Homophobia has a long, sad but obscure history in the Western world and in the world of archaeology. In this paper I argue that homophobia was responsible for women choosing not to go into archaeology in large numbers until at least 1950. While homophobia is no longer successful in keeping women out of archaeology, it continues to have an impact on the discipline in education, network building, and mentoring.

## Keywords

Homophobia; history of women; sociology of archaeology; mentoring.

## Homophobia and genital mutation

Most writers attribute the paucity of women in archaeology from 1880 to 1960 to the rule of patriarchy, without specifying what it is about patriarchy that excludes women. Most of what we understand as patriarchy, however, is actually homophobia. Since only men are capable of doing certain classes of activities, a woman who succeeds in any one of those arenas must, by nature, be man-like. It is man-like women and woman-like men that patriarchy has fought so stridently to protect Western society from. Homophobia, the irrational fear of gender expansion, has been the discouraging mechanism for women who would be academic, athletic, and feminist. In this paper I explore the role of homophobia in women's choice not to become archaeologists.

## The lesbianization process

The desire to be an educated woman has long brought into question many women's sexuality, and even gender. Classical thinkers attributed sexual and gender differences, as well as intellectual differences, to body heat. Heat expended excessively made men thin.



Greater heat in men increased the blood supply to the brain, explaining its greater size in men and their greater intelligence (Schiebinger 1989: 187). Body heat also explained sexual ambiguities. Classical thinkers told stories of women being changed into men by too much heat or misdirected heat; these women sprouted penises, their wombs shrivelled. While rejecting some of these stories, writers of the early 1600s defined hermaphrodites as either male or female, depending on the amount of body heat (Schiebinger 1989: 188). A manly woman had excessive heat and, consequently, excessive intellect. The intelligent woman, then, was physically abnormal, was masculine, was sick.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, women of the United States were told that, if they became educated and assertive, they would turn into men: either their genitalia would change, or everyone would perceive them as men. Intellectual women unsexed themselves. Those who sought education were 'semi-women' or 'mental hermaphrodites' warned both male and female writers and speakers (Faderman 1981: 235). Medical doctors soon 'discovered' that education endangered a woman's health; specifically, the brain used up the blood needed for menstruation, leading to deficiencies which resulted in everything from nervousness to mental breakdown to organ failure.

Dr Edward H. Clarke, a Harvard professor, was 'probably the most influential spokesman for the continued subordination of women', arguing that 'the only thing the female could not do' if she were to remain healthy 'was to be educated on the pattern or model of man' (Bullough and Bullough 1977: 124). The body could not simultaneously do two things well, and females aged 12 to 20 were encouraged to concentrate on developing their reproductive system. During the menstrual period it was thought to be crucial that the female allow her physiological processes to be unrestricted. Mental activity interfered with ovulation and menstruation (Bullough and Bullough 1977: 125). Clarke maintained that the education of women created a class of sexless humans. Similarly, Dr Ralph W. Parsons, writing in the *New York Medical Journal* in 1907, explained that 'educated' women neglected to cultivate refined speech, had loud voices, laughed with gusto, and sometimes even used slang and profanity' (Bullough and Bullough 1977: 130).

By the middle and late nineteenth century, women were agitating more loudly and in greater numbers for women's rights. They achieved gains that fed national anxieties about a collapse in gender distinctions. If women achieved their goals, what would induce them to marry? Women were not yet knighted with sexual appetites so the worry led to a woman's need for companionship and a home. With no barriers to income, jobs, or rights, what would stop women from turning to each other for companionship and home? Romantic friendships had in fact been widely tolerated in the English-speaking world prior to this period of gender trouble, but these romantic friendships soon became threatening and the subject of unflattering literature and medical research. It was not just the English-speaking world which identified women in romantic friendships as sirens. 'French anxiety about the potentials of female alliances rose to a fever pitch by the end of the [nineteenth] century' (Faderman 1981: 238).

The sociology of sport literature reviews turn-of-the-century attitudes about physical exertion and its effects on women, particularly the notion of play. The physical exertion of thinking was thought to be enough to destroy the health of a woman, and any sustained

athletic endeavour could modify the secondary sex characteristics of a woman. Many parents, young girls, and potential husbands believed this cause-and-effect relationship. A sceptical girl's decisions could still be controlled by believing parents or a peer group as late as the 1930s. So, education and physical exercise were long and widely believed to modify either the actual sexual characteristics of a woman or people's perception of a woman's womanliness.

After the patriotism and work of women carried the United States through the First World War, women's rights efforts were stepped up. The association between feminism – the catchall word for all political and natural inclinations toward non-passivity – and lesbianism in the United States began in psychiatric circles in 1901 (Faderman 1981: 338). Freudian theories of female homosexuality were offered to 'explain' those women who did not want to accept a life of passivity and servitude. Uppity women were depicted as abnormal, not women, lesbian. One writer in 1927 proclaimed that the women's movement was led by 'men women' who seduced the normal young women in the movement and spread lesbianism. The young woman's education 'must preserve her femininity and discourage any masculinizing influence' (Eberhard, quoted in Faderman 1981: 336).

The association of lesbianism and feminism soon moved from a discussion of individuals to an attack on women's colleges. In those locations, women engaged in athletics, developed boyish figures, executive skills, and masculine feelings, all of which threatened to modify the secondary sexual characteristics to the point that lesbianism, as medically recognized, was inevitable. In 1932, William Carlos Williams wrote that lesbianism was 'the "knife of the times", and it was killing women and castrating men' (Williams, quoted in Faderman 1981: 339).

### **Why women would not be archaeologists**

With this information as a backdrop, it is possible to assess the social forces at work in deterring women from becoming archaeologists in the period 1880 to 1940 (see the account in Levine 1994). This early era of archaeology coincides with the psychiatric and medical understandings of the lesbianization process. Surely, many parents and girls of this era knew of these discussions linking lesbianization and education. Archaeology, particularly in its fieldwork, combined the two taboo pursuits for women, athleticism and intelligence. While the first PhD was awarded to a man in the 1920s, it was twenty years later before the first women received one (Levine 1994), and the 1950s saw only five more women complete this step. While these women clearly disregarded the medical warnings and the threatened social stigma, I believe that homophobia, and the assertion of the lesbianization process, is the most suitable explanation for why women entered academic archaeology so late. But, also, this manifestation of homophobia explains why women did not pursue higher degrees in greater numbers once women had taken that challenging step, and why it took women twenty years longer to pursue the PhD degree. Conversely, the 'masculine' woman may have found archaeology a magnet in those years. Clearly, the women excavating at Chaco Canyon from 1929 to 1934 (Mathien 1992) had escaped much of this rhetoric. Perhaps they were the daughters of suffragettes.

*Fieldwork*

In the period 1880 to 1930, archaeology was emerging as a distinct discipline and needed to demonstrate its distinctiveness. Fieldwork was a fundamental difference from most social sciences to which anthropologists and archaeologists could point. Fieldwork in archaeology required the universal man, the Renaissance man. It was fraught with challenges—logistical, mechanical, biological, engineering, social. In fact, excavation was often described in the first few decades of this century as military campaign (Preucel and Joyce 1994).

The words and phrases used are such things as: tactics, strategy, reconnaissance, point of attack, line of command, troops, field of action, and battle. The earliest example is Sir Flinders Petrie (1904) who talks about methods of ‘attacking’ a large site.

(Robert Preucel, correspondence with Rosemary Joyce 1994)

Furthermore, Petrie used military ideas of precision in choosing his field techniques: digging in squares, striving for the perfect cube, the field notes, the regimen of laying out a grid, in the hierarchy of field personnel.

There can be no doubt that the military allusion gendered an archaeologist as male. So too did the metaphor of Hero, applicable to the lone individual who sought to wrest meaning and Truth from the dirt, aided by animal helpers or inspiration in his Quest:

The central figure may be aided in his quest by all manner of supernatural or animal helpers, but he bears the sole responsibility for the outcome of the quest. He brings to bear the tools that his helpers provide, but they cannot effect the resolution of the narrative. . . . [The Quest] changes the Hero, giving him a unique authority; and at the same time, his actions result in the capture of a prize.

(Rosemary Joyce, correspondence with Robert Preucel 1994)

It should be clear now that the practitioners of archaeology had much to lose by the presence of women in the field. The women who did dare to undertake fieldwork threatened either the distinctiveness of archaeology as a discipline (fieldwork could not be that distinctive an activity if women were doing it) or threatened the prevailing understanding of male and female. Women who wanted to do fieldwork were metaphorically not women. Neither were they men. Like true lesbians, a frequent topic of the sexologist of the time, they were inverts, unusual, categorically lesbians.

The New Deal of the 1930s and 1940s offered many new opportunities for employment as an archaeologist. Try as they might (see letter in Claassen 1999), women in university anthropology programmes of the 1930s generally failed to gain employment. In light of the prevailing attitudes about appropriate behaviour for middle- and upper-class women and the advertised physiological and psychological consequences of straying from this wisdom, it may at first appear somewhat incredible that the outdoor, physical labour of archaeological excavation came to be considered appropriate work for unemployed women in New Deal projects. But, when women from Georgia and Alabama gained employment as field workers in the late 1930s, it was black women, not white women (Claassen 1999).

There is a long history of whites de-feminizing black women to maximize the labour

extracted from these women. Arthur R. Kelly and Betty Smith wrote, in their report on the Swift Creek site which was excavated from March 1936 into winter 1937, that the project employed thirty to forty Negro women as field crew in work that was ‘no more exacting physically than was the farm labor to which most of the workers were accustomed’ (Kelly and Smith 1975: 2). Angela Davis reminds us:

This was one of the supreme ironies of slavery: in order to approach its strategic goal –to extract the greatest possible surplus from the labor of the slaves–the black women had to be annulled as woman, that is, as woman in her historical stance of wardship under the male hierarchy.

(Davis 1971: 7)

In this early case then, of women being paid to dig, it is the defeminized woman who is hired, the masculinized black woman. Archaeology made it clear that it expected field labourers to be masculine. By employing women of a degraded class, it was possible to transfer their masculine qualities onto their different race, rather than their gender, and, furthermore, to avoid field-adept, ‘masculine’ white women who were metaphorically fallen women, women-changed-to-men, lesbians.

### **Modern homophobia**

Experiences by and with women during World War II threatened anew the distinction between the sexes, and accusations of lesbianism were often used to scare women back to the home after their war jobs. The feminist impulse was frequently portrayed as an aspect of lesbian sickness (Faderman 1981: 339) involving ‘confusion’ and neurosis. In spite of the anti-lesbian attitude evident in wider US society, the World War II military training manual ‘praised the desire for intense “comradeship” in service as “one of the finest relationships” possible for women’ (D’Emilio 1983: 27). It was the McCarthy era, however, which warned the military woman to avoid the lesbian and made homosexuality grounds for dismissal from the military (Bérubé and D’Emilio 1984). Not surprisingly, ‘the only mass-marketed book written by a psychiatrist devoted solely to lesbianism’, in print from 1954 until 1972, ‘perceived lesbianism as a disease with the potential of undermining the nation’ (Adams 1991). In a later book, the same author pointed out that in their desire for liberation, modern women ran the risk of a ‘psychic masculinization’ which led to lesbianism (Adams 1991).

The homophobia that worked to keep women out of archaeology in its first fifty years has not disappeared. Never far removed underground since the suffragette period, the association of feminism with lesbianism has revived since 1970. It was in that year that *Time Magazine* attempted to discredit, particularly in the eyes of women, the new feminist movement by ‘publicizing the bisexuality of Kate Millet’ (Faderman 1981: 340). Still today it is the athletic woman whose sexual preference is questioned first. Academia, no longer considered to be a lesbian-producing enterprise by medical professionals, still creates women who attempt to do a ‘man’s’ work, and women who are more manly in the eyes of many. The growing attitude of intolerance continues to argue the connection between feminism and lesbianism.

The current schooling of archaeologists has several entry points for homophobia that works to deter the would-be woman archaeologist. Women faculty who are concerned that colleagues might think they are lesbian or are seducing female students will probably be hostile to an aggressive or idolizing female student. Homophobic faculty many be hostile to a lesbian student to punish her for her sexual preference. Sexual harassment of students assumed to be homosexual is often reported on college campus and often omitted from surveys or examples of this impertinent behaviour. Advocacy for women students and faculty is often discounted as lesbianism. In academic settings the use of homophobic epithets is usually motivated by the desire to silence someone. Classroom and scholarly debates have been discounted as ‘man hating’.

Homophobic comments from faculty and peers have threatened, and resulted in, the loss of scholarship and assistantship funds. Similar situations have resulted in students making special efforts to de-sex and de-personalize themselves and to forgo the often emotional/personal relationships with a mentor that can result in protectionism. For the actual homosexual student, keeping one’s sexuality a secret can often mean that the student is not only distant from faculty but also from her peer group, which carries serious ramifications for later professional activity (see the paper by She in this volume).

All of these examples indicate how women’s student careers are impacted upon and in some cases terminated by homophobia. The scholarship they are taught, the scholarship they practise, their access to opportunities, money, education, each is potentially diluted or destroyed by homophobia. Although I have focused on women, many of these comments are similarly relevant to gay men (see, for example, Dowson 1998).

## **Conclusions**

So how did any woman decide to become an archaeologist before the 1950s? Carol Mason (1992) believes the secret lies in the men teaching archaeology in the period from 1930 through 1960. These men were the sons of women who had sympathized with or been suffragettes. But, by 1960, men without these mothers had begun to replace the older professors. I am more inclined to think that the woman who entered archaeology and completed the training programme before 1960 had already refused to be intimidated by the homophobia which attempted to repel her. Since 1970 the woman empowered by her own feminist understanding or the successes of earlier feminists has been the woman best equipped to rebuke the homophobia of her community and our society.

Several of the women participants in a recent School of American Research conference stated that they were attracted to archaeology because ‘they didn’t want to be girls’, ‘because they weren’t girls’, ‘because they wanted to be boys’. Clearly archaeology as a field science, at least until the 1960s, was still gendered male, and, for at least some women, this masculine, unfeminine aura has actually been magnetic.

It is evident that a belief in the lesbianization of professional women and feminists is still with us. Although it seems that in the 1990s homophobia has diminished in its broad-based power to confine or constrain US women from the choice of a career in archaeology or from pursuing fieldwork, certainly it succeeds in individual cases. The loss of any woman student to this type of terrorism is inexcusable. Homophobia takes many outlets

and varies in its level of disruptiveness, but it is never benign. Within the discipline of archaeology women's participation has been strongly governed by homophobia. Whether indifferent or concerned, all women archaeologists are affected by the history and modernity of homophobia. For this reason all professional archaeologists should work to dilute its effects.

*Department of Anthropology, Appalachian State University,  
Boone, North Carolina 28608, USA*

## References

- Adams, K. 1991. Making the world safe for the missionary position: images of the lesbian in post-World War II America. In *Lesbian Text and Context: Radical Revisions* (eds K. Jay and J. Glasgow). New York: New York University Press, pp. 255–74.
- Bérubé, A. and D'Emilio, J. 1984. The military and lesbians during the McCarthy years. *Signs*, 9: 759–75.
- Bullough, V. and Bullough, B. 1977. *Sin, Sickness, and Sanity: A History of Sexual Attitudes*. New York: New American Library.
- Claassen, C. 1999. Black and white women at Irene Mound (with addendum). In *Grit Tempered: Early Women Archaeologists in the Southeastern United States* (eds N. White, L. Sullivan, and R. Marrinan). Gainesville: University of Florida Press, pp. 92–114.
- Davis, A. 1971. Reflections on the black woman's role in the community of slaves. *The Black Scholar*, 3(4): 2–15.
- D'Emilio, J. 1983. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dowson, T. A. 1998. Sexual difference and epistemological privilege in archaeology. Paper presented at the Theoretical Archaeology Group conference, Birmingham, England.
- Faderman, L. 1981. *Surpassing the Love of Men*. New York: Morrow.
- Kelly, A. R. and Smith, B. 1975. The Swift Creek Site, 9Bi3, Macon, Georgia. Manuscript on file, Department of Anthropology, University of Georgia, Athens.
- Levine, M. A. 1994. Creating their own niches: career styles among women in Americanist archaeology between the wars. In *Women in Archaeology* (ed. C. Claassen). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 9–40.
- Mason, C. 1992. From the other side of the looking glass: women in American archaeology in the 1950s. In *Rediscovering Our Past: Essays on the History of American Archaeology* (ed. J. Reyman). Worldwide Archaeology Series, Aldershot: Avebury Press, pp. 91–102.
- Mathien, F. J. 1992. Women of Chaco: then and now. In *Rediscovering Our Past: Essays on the History of American Archaeology* (ed. J. Reyman). Worldwide Archaeology Series, Aldershot: Avebury Press. pp. 103–30.
- Preucel, R. and Joyce, R. 1994. Feminism, fieldwork and the practice of archaeology. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Atlanta.
- Schiebinger, L. 1989. *The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.