

Sexuality: ancient North America

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Sexuality in ancient North America is an emerging field of research among archaeologists concerned with the sexual activities, sexual identities, and sexual relationships of prehistoric North Americans. Sexual orientation, like sex, has often been viewed as fixed and biologically based; however, researchers are increasingly recognizing that human activities and preferences related to sexuality are learned, malleable, and culturally constructed, and that wide variation of such activities and preferences likely existed throughout prehistory. Despite cultural anthropology's long tradition of engagement with questions of sexuality, archaeologists have been much slower to investigate the topic; in the past two decades, however, a body of archaeological research has emerged that takes sexuality as a serious avenue of research (Voss 2008). Sexuality research in archaeology initially developed through applications of feminist theory to archaeological research and has been employed to examine many different kinds of sexual relations, including sexual activities, eroticism, sexual identities, sexual meanings, and sexual politics. Queer theory has become increasingly prominent in archaeological studies of sexuality in the past decade; as a result, themes of gender, sexuality, the body, and personhood are often integrated in archaeological discussions of the subject (Dowson 2000). However, archaeologists continue to grapple with ways in which they can effectively study sex and gender in the archaeological record, particularly in research areas that lack written records to aid in interpreting or contextualizing archaeological findings. As a result, while the examination of sexuality in the archaeological record of ancient North America is increasing, it

remains for the most part an underemployed theoretical and methodological approach.

Archaeologists who study sex and gender have largely moved beyond attempts to solely identify the locations of men and women in the past and are increasingly considering sexuality in ways that go beyond discussion of biological reproduction or of institutions such as kinship or marriage. Recent research has been focused on investigating the lived experiences of people in relation to how gendered identities, sexualities, and broader religious and sociopolitical ideologies were continuously (re)produced in prehistory. The main challenge confronting archaeologists is how to interpret evidence of past sexualities through material remains in research areas that lack documentary evidence, such as ancient North America. Sexual behavior for the most part is nonmaterial and requires no exclusive space or artifacts; thus it is unlikely for archaeologists to encounter any index artifacts that consistently "mark" sexuality for any given culture or time period. Most of the sexuality research in the archaeology of prehistoric contexts uses ethnographic and historical analogs as a starting point for interpreting archaeological data. With the aid of textual or ethnographic data, archaeologists have attempted to identify sexed spaces (particularly in domestic contexts) on the basis of the spatial distribution of specific features, ritual activity, and other artifacts.

North America is unique in archaeological studies for the amount of emphasis placed on ethnographic analogy in the interpretation of its ancient past. Many indigenous groups documented in sixteenth- through nineteenth-century colonial encounters have persisted through the post-contact era, and in many cases still practice ways of life that have been altered but are likely still rooted in tradition. Researchers studying prehistoric North American contexts recognize, however, biases in the ethnohistoric and written records, particularly in accounts pertaining to subaltern groups (such as women and alternative genders). Ethnohistoric accounts were largely composed by Euro-American explorers, conquerors, missionaries, and settlers

across the North American continent, the majority of whom were men. As a result, references to Native American women are uncommon; and, as these accounts were based on observations of societies that the chroniclers had never seen before, the accuracy of their interpretations is questionable. Europeans constructing the first ethnohistories were likely biased in their recordings, as they may not have understood the sexual behaviors or identities of nonbinary genders or may not have had access to observing them. Hostility toward alternative (i.e., non-industrialized) gendered and sexual identities may have affected accuracy in recording as well. Most archaeologists studying gender and sexuality who draw upon ethnographic analogies make careful attempts not to reproduce contemporary assumptions about men's and women's identities and behaviors in their interpretations of the past. Researchers typically recognize that ideological concepts of gender and sexuality arise from cultural constructions and vary from culture to culture, and that types of sexual desire and practice hold different meanings for different individuals and groups—meanings that may not be accurately represented in written accounts composed by outside observers.

Historical circumstances influence the cultural construction and the archaeological reconstructions of sexuality and gender as well. Gendered and sexual identities and practices in native North America were not fixed or static. Historical events such as economic changes, for example, radically transformed both the number of genders that Native American societies of the Northern Plains recognized and the behavior considered appropriate for each (Blackwood 1984). The ideological pressures of Euro-American culture encouraged Native Americans to reject many of their traditional practices and to exercise notions of “proper” sexuality, which supported men's possession of sexual rights to women; as a result, some ancient North American sexual identities and practices may not have persisted into the post-contact era. However, despite the absence of direct written sources and the limitations of the ethnohistoric record, archaeologists have successfully pursued several key avenues of inquiry in their study of sexuality in ancient North America, including sexual identities, sexual representations, sexuality and cosmology, and the human life course.

Sexual identities

One approach used by archaeologists studying sexuality has been to consider the relationship between sexuality and identity in archaeological contexts. While sexual identity is often defined as the choice of sexual partner(s), archaeologists studying sexual identities have broadened the definition to include the ways in which sexual practices contribute to the construction of personal or group identity. Recent research has focused on variability in sexual and gendered identities of native North American groups, debates being centered on the relationship between sexual orientation and gender identification (i.e., whether sexual orientation follows gender identity or vice versa). The two-spirit (“berdache,” or third and fourth gender) figures prominently in archaeological studies of Native American sexual identities. Third genders are expressed by individuals who are biologically male but do not culturally identify as men. Fourth genders are expressed by individuals who are biologically female but do not culturally identify as women. Well-documented ethnographically, two-spirits encompass a range of identities and practices associated with transgender dress, same-sex sexual acts, specialized occupations, and specific spiritual roles. Researchers have disagreed on the sexuality and cultural meanings associated with two-spirits, debating whether they were homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, or abstinent. In addition to a variety of sexual acts and preferences, a range of labor practices and religious roles (e.g., medicinal healers, shamans, undertakers) has been defined for two-spirits. Two-spirit identities often incorporate spirituality, occupational specialization, and sexuality in ways that transcend an individual's sex or gender. Among the Chumash of Southern California, non-procreative sexual activity (or lack thereof) was critical to the identification of the *'aqi* (the occupational guild of undertakers); members included two-spirits, postmenopausal women, abstinent individuals, or biological males who had sexual relations with men (Hollimon 2006).

Archaeologists first attempted to study two-spirits archaeologically through mortuary analyses that identified individuals whose gender differed from their physical sex. Burial contexts

have been examined for evidence of biologically sexed males buried with grave goods that are typically gendered female (or vice versa). In the pre-Hispanic Southwest, a biologically sexed male buried with high amounts of pottery-making implements (an activity typically gendered female) has been identified as a third-gender individual. In another case, a biologically sexed female buried in both a dress and a man's dance kilt is considered likely to have been a fourth-gender individual (Roscoe 1989). Archaeologists have also analyzed activity-induced pathologies or musculoskeletal stress markers (MSMs) associated with repetitive motion from occupational specialization to identify possible two-spirits (Hollimon 2006; Perry 2004). Typically female MSMs on skeletal remains that are biologically sexed as male from ancestral Puebloan as well as Chumash skeletal populations are suggestive of third-gender individuals. Trauma patterns on skeletons from prehistoric California and the protohistoric Northern Plains may indicate fourth-gender individuals; in both areas, traumatic injuries consistent with participation in warfare as combatants have been found on biologically sexed female skeletons. Such "manly-hearted women" were documented ethnohistorically among the Blackfoot and the Lakota of the Northern Plains (Kehoe 1995).

Research on two-spirit identities has recently broadened to incorporate architecture, rock art, occupation, craft, and ritual. Excavations of households in a protohistoric Plains village revealed a unique double post structure that was much smaller than the other earth lodges at the site and was interpreted to be a Hidatsa two-spirit (*miati*) household (Prine 2000). Images of two-spirits are also present in rock art and murals; representations of two-spirit Zuni kachinas from the southwest include figures wearing a combination of male and female hairstyles, as well as a figure depicted with a bow and arrow in one hand (typically male) and a maize cob (typically female) in the other (Roscoe 1989). Two-spirits were recorded in ethnohistoric accounts as well as in the oral traditions of several southwestern tribes, including the Zuni. Many two-spirits are thought to have served as shamans—mediators between the divine and the human. Acting as a shaman was a common religious role assigned to third- or fourth-gender people, as shamans typically are

associated with shape shifters and transformers who can move between worlds, forms, and genders. Among the Yurok of Northern California, third-gender individuals known as *wergern* adopted the gendered activities and dress of women and often served as shamans (Buckley 2002). Fourth-gender individuals who abstained from sexual activity served as curing shamans and were allowed inside sweat lodges, a domain typically restricted only to men. In many native societies, shamanism correlated with social rank and provided individuals with direct access to wealth and high social status.

Sexual representations

Sexual symbolism, including phallic and vulvar imagery as well as depictions of the body and of sexual acts, is broadly represented in ancient North American rock art, pottery, figurines, and other media. A challenge confronting archaeologists who evaluate such imagery is to identify what should be considered "sexual." While some archaeologists have de-emphasized sexual content in the archaeological record, in other cases sexuality is overemphasized (e.g., carved batons or incised lines are automatically assumed to be phallic, and triangles or ovals are considered vulvar without additional context). Archaeologists recognize that certain contemporary assumptions (particularly in industrialized cultures) about sexual display or sexual representation may not have applied in the past (e.g., displays of clothed or unclothed bodies, or depictions of certain body parts may not have been considered overtly sexual by certain groups). In interpreting sexual imagery, researchers also note that they are likely encountering creative or ideological expressions rather than depictions of actual bodies or lived sexual practices. As sexual representations and images are prevalent throughout the North American continent, they have been interpreted in relation to a wide variety of sexual acts, identities, and rituals.

Many images depicted in rock art or other media are considered to be phallic or vulvar representations, and often are interpreted as fertility symbols. Three-dimensional rock art symbols in southern California and northern Baja known as *yonis*, along with other "pit and groove" petroglyphs, are believed to represent

vulvas (McGowan 1982). Mortars inlaid with cowry shells from southern California have been interpreted as vulvar and have been tied to fertility symbolism as well. Phallic effigies and pestles documented in southern and central California, for instance phallic charm stones and pelican stones or birdstones, include dimorphic sexual symbolism (namely a phallus flanked by labia at the base end of the shaft) (Lee 1981). More recent studies of prehistoric rock art and other forms of imagery in North America have shifted away from attempts to solely identify phallic, vulvar, and fertility symbols toward exploring how rock art is involved in the creation and negotiation of sexual identities (Hays-Gilpin 2004). Oral tradition is often used to aid in the interpretation of gendered and sexual motifs that go beyond typically phallic or vulvar depictions restricted to dichotomous sex or gender categories.

Other depictions of the body and of sexual acts are present in pottery and figurines from various contexts. Polychrome effigy vessels from Casas Grandes in the Hohokam region of the pre-Hispanic Southwest include clear representations of secondary sex characteristics such as penises, vulvas, and breasts (see Figure 1). Different activities are depicted in relation to different sexes: birth, nursing, masturbation. Depictions of women involved in activities such as childcare have been found on pottery in other parts of the southwest, including the Mimbres region. Other vessels from this region likely represent third or fourth genders and may be tied to shamanistic rituals. Sexual characteristics, sexual organs, and fertility motifs also feature prominently in Mississippian flint clay figurines from the southeastern United States. Feminine, masculine, and third-gender themes are represented in various figures interpreted as shamans, warriors, heroes, goddesses, monsters, and chunky players (a rolling disk game tied to Mississippian cosmology). The majority of figurines with feminine characteristics have been recovered in the Cahokia region; male figures were distributed more widely (Alt and Pauketat 2007).

Sexuality and cosmology

Themes of sexuality and cosmology are commonly intertwined in investigations of ancient North American sexuality. Archaeologists often use the



Figure 1 Female effigy jar from Casas Grandes, Chihuahua, Mexico (1200–1450).

Source: Reproduced by permission of the Anthropology Department, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, Los Angeles, California.

method of ethnographic analogy to interpret evidence of past sexual beliefs or practices in the archaeological record that may have been related to ancient cosmological beliefs. In many cases, direct historical connections have been made between contemporary indigenous peoples or Native groups encountered in the contact era and their prehistoric North American ancestors. Cosmological beliefs and creation stories have served as an interpretative basis for objects or depictions that may not be considered overtly sexual, but likely were tied to sexual beliefs and practices. Origin stories of Native groups in the Pacific Northwest that encompass themes of sexuality, adultery, and violence include references to shellfish, clams being associated with men and chitons with women (Moss 1993). Ethnographic accounts suggest that Tlinglit elites were discouraged from eating shellfish; thus considerations of sexuality and cosmology have complicated the interpretation of what would normally be considered mundane subsistence refuse, particularly for archaeologists accustomed to strictly economic analyses.

Sand paintings of the Luiseño, an indigenous group of Southern California, depict various aspects of the universe, for example the night sky with the Milky Way, sacred beings, and the spiritual phases of human personality; and they are associated with puberty ceremonies. Upon completion of

the ceremonies the sand paintings are destroyed; but the themes depicted in the paintings survived in rock art sites in the San Diego area (DuBois and Kroeber 1908). Young girls are thought to have painted angular and diamond-shaped designs on rocks immediately following the puberty ceremonies. Ethnographic analogies drawn from historic-era Eastern Plains creation stories have aided in the interpretation of Mississippian objects that likely held sexual meanings; the incised designs on finely crafted Ramey Incised pottery from the Cahokia region likely broadcasted sexual relations between masculine sky-world beings and feminine underworld beings (Alt and Pauketat 2007).

The human life course

A final category prevalent in archaeological studies of sexuality in ancient North America concerns human life transitions. Most of this research is centered on puberty (including menstruation) and fertility. A small number of studies have considered childbirth and nursing in their discussions of the human life course, primarily through representational imagery. Detailed birth scenes are depicted on Mimbres pottery from the pre-Hispanic Southwest; one bowl recovered from southwestern New Mexico revealed an infant emerging face forward (unusual in human birth), with its arms up (virtually unknown in human birth), suggesting that the painter was likely a male unfamiliar with the birthing process, as birth is the province of women in most human societies (VanPool and VanPool 2006). Other archaeological studies have sought to identify evidence of rituals and activities related to life transitions. Attempts to increase fertility through the consumption of specific substances, puberty ceremonies, and proscriptions placed on menstruating women were widely documented ethnographically, and archaeologists have uncovered evidence likely related to such activities in various regions of North America. Cupules—that is, petroglyphs consisting of small concave holes pecked or ground into boulders or bedrock—have been recorded throughout California; ethnographic studies suggest that powder produced from grinding the cupules was painted on women's bodies in order to increase their fertility, or was consumed by women who had trouble conceiving. Cupules have also been associated

with ritualized puberty ceremonies in southern California (Hector 2009).

The female menstrual cycle is ritualized in many traditional Native American groups; throughout their reproductive lives, women are often secluded from other members of the community and prohibited from partaking in certain activities while they are menstruating. Recent research in the southeastern United States has reoriented the discussion of prehistoric structures typically identified as sweat lodges toward entertaining the possibility that some were menstrual huts (represented archaeologically by the remains of smaller structures on the edge of villages). According to most accounts, taboos on certain foods, activities, and physical contact with others are typically relaxed after transition to menopause. Some native groups believe that women come into their full social and spiritual power at the time of this transition, although no studies have documented activities or practices related to this transition archaeologically.

SEE ALSO: Figurines: Europe; Figurines: Mesoamerica; Queer Theory; Rock Art; Sex and the Human Skeleton; Shamanism, Archaeological Representations of; Third Gender

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