

WOMEN IN PALEOLITHIC & NEOLITHIC TIMES

All major disciplines are now participating in the debate on what was the role of women in prehistoric Paleolithic and Neolithic times. These include historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and mythologists. The old cliché where man is the mighty hunter and drags his woman to a cave is no longer applicable to modern scholarship. Reading through current books, articles and texts on prehistoric times, including archaeology, incredibly there is not even a specific category listed in the index on "women." Women archaeologists are bemoaning that their discipline seems to be the last scholarly one to acknowledge the important role of women in these prehistoric Paleolithic and Neolithic times.

Anthropologists have surveyed nearly two hundred hunter/gathering cultures in Oceania, Asia, Africa and the Americas, and have developed some fundamental points on these studies. While hunting was almost exclusively done by males, it was inefficient as a means for providing food. Meat from the kill comes in irregularly and infrequently, and cannot be stored adequately. Kung Bushmen of Botswana hunt strenuously for a week, and rest the other three weeks. Thus, women's gathering of the food stuffs not men's hunting, sustains the tribe of these present-day Stone Age cultures. Hunting by men provides twenty percent of the nourishment, but women regularly produce eighty percent of the tribe's total food consumed. These conclusions can then be transferred backward to the hunting/gathering societies of prehistoric cultures. Women in these ancient times must not have relied on the men for food. Through teeth analysis it has been discovered that grain, nuts and fruits were the major foods not meat. It was long thought that the "Ice Man" found in the Italian Alps in 1991 was a hunter who had died on a quest for big game. New analysis of his hair shows that most of his proteins came from vegetable sources, which his teeth corroborate. He ate very little meat, and in the months before he died, his diet did not include meat. Successful gathering demanded and developed skills of discrimination, evaluation and memory. The range of seeds, nutshells and grasses discovered at primitive sites in Africa

indicate careful and knowledgeable selection rather than random gleaning.

Anthropologists have also fixated on man as the inventor of the first tools to use as weapons of the hunt. Most forward-thinking scholars are now attributing to women inventions that previously were credited to men. Many are now saying that hunting was a later development than gathering, and thus women were the earliest inventors of tools. Women used bones and stones, which have been found, but lengths of wood they used to dig up roots have not survived except for the ones that were pointed and fire-hardened. Artifacts of axes, spears, and arrows used in hunting are numerous, which is the reason that men have hitherto been given more credit than women.

Women in their roles of gathering, preserving, and storing food stuffs would undoubtedly have invented weaving and pottery making. Since it is thought that most prehistoric women did not live beyond their twenties, there would not have been older women to take care of the small children when women were gathering food items. As necessity is the mother of invention, a woven sling or swag bag that could be draped over the shoulder and head could serve dual purposes: containing gathered items and holding children, our modern day purses and back packs. This swag bag and other types of bags could be woven from plants and animals such as flax or wool. Once small items were made by weaving, then creating textiles for coverings, garments, and lodging were done.¹ The oldest extant piece of cloth is from 9000 b.c.e and will be discussed under the Neolithic section. For liquids to be carried and stored, pottery from clay was the natural product, probably first made by women, who would have observed certain dirt that hardened when exposed to fire. Students and scholars at the Buster Hill Experimental Farm in England are researching how this might have occurred serendipitously or through prolonged planning.

¹An interesting book to ferret out more information on this subject is Elizabeth Wayland Barber, Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years.

Linguistic experts research how language is developed and conveyed. Children basically learn their words from their mothers and only secondarily from their fathers. Socialization of children usually takes place more with females than with males through the need to organize care, meals, play and rituals. When all these ideas are dovetailed together it is perhaps not surprising that women are now being given credit for creating language and social organization. Over time rudimentary speaking and communicating skills were advanced as the brain became more complex.

Who first invented the calendar? We can determine which civilization (ancient Sumer) but which gender was it? In their pioneering work on menstruation, The Wise Wound, Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove stress the connection made in primitive societies between the lunar and menstrual cycles. As all women have these innate body calendars, and a woman would have noticed the relationship between her own body cycle and the lunar cycle, then it is suggested that women must have been the first to invent a calendar.

While hunting for one week out of the month did not provide the majority of the meals in prehistoric times, it did allow for cooperation between the sexes. Hunting did not mean fighting as most forms of hunting did not involve aggressive personal combat. Instead it meant preying on slow-moving animals like turtles, wounded or sick animals, females about to give birth, or on carcasses killed and abandoned by other fiercer predators. Men and women relied on each other's skills before, during and after the hunt.

Other roles that women were probably significant contributors in the prehistoric centuries were: counselors, wise women, leaders, storytellers, medical care givers, magicians, shamans, and lawgivers. When we get to the earliest Neolithic civilizations in which settled agricultural societies occurred, we find women in these positions. Evidence of women occupying these positions is garnered from artifacts and later extant writings.

It has been determined by many scholars that men and women did not live together during

these Paleolithic times. There was no ownership of women and no demands on women's sexual exclusivity. Men in hunting and gathering societies did not command or exploit women's labor.

NEOLITHIC PERIOD

From the point of view of women's lives perhaps the Neolithic period is the most important phase of prehistory. As the Paleolithic period waned, women were enjoying equality with men, which was undoubtedly due to women's economic contributions. The chief characteristic of the Neolithic age (circa 10,000-7500 b.c.e.) is the domestication of plants and animals, and the establishment of agriculture as the main form of food production. Invention of settled farming techniques has usually been assumed to have been made by men, but more than likely women were the ones making the discoveries. The transition from foraging to farming was a long arduous process, after a lengthy trial and error period. Moving men into the major food producers with the domestication process would have been too dramatic. Women probably recognized the best soils and chose the land to be cleared for regular growing of crops. Studies of the roles of women in different types of agricultural communities show a remarkably consistent pattern. Horticultural societies, in which hoes or digging sticks are used for making holes to plant roots or seeds, women, were usually more responsible, and this would have been the earliest pattern of development. Only in societies where plough agriculture is practiced and animals are kept on a significant scale, do we find Personal aspects of females (i.e. adornment) most of the agricultural work done by men. Anthropologists conclude this is true of present-day societies too. In Africa where farming is predominately carried out with the use of ploughs, the work is mainly done by women. Why then did farming eventually become a male preserve, where men owned the farmland and the tools? By the time of the earliest written records, circa 3000 b.c.e., this had occurred, about five thousands years after the introduction of farming. In tandem with these changes in farming practices to male, was the transition to patriarchal societies. In the earliest

artistic depictions of plowing and milking, males are pictured doing these tasks. Women do these chores when it is on a small scale and men do them when the crops and products are for sale. Women were the ones shown making milk into cheese and yoghurt. Probably facilitating this transferring of the males to farming production was the spinning and weaving of wool and flax into cloth by women for commercial sales.

As more land came under cultivation with usage of the plough, farming became more labor intensive and larger in scope. Women therefore would have needed to have more children to fill the increase labor demand. As women spent more time pregnant and caring for their children, then they had less time for farming activities, and so by default men took over many of their tasks. Women no longer contributed as much to the economic structure of the household, and consequently their rights and status were lessened. Women's economic contributions have always been critical factors in maintaining their equality, an important leitmotif throughout the history of women.

Animal raising produced another interesting mix of duties. When the herds were large, then it was the men who took care of them. If just a few animals were kept for the household, then the women managed them. From the earliest records of cattle herding, raiding neighboring tribes was almost endemic, clearly a variation on hunting. Some scholars think this is one of the reasons for the origins of warfare, because for the first time people owned a resource that was both fairly easy to steal and financially rewarding to do so. In tandem with raising crops and animals, water resources and their management might have led to hostilities too. Other scholars postulate that the origins of war are due to the capturing of women and turning them into slaves to work in the textile trade. Extremely large caches of wethered or castrated sheep bones have been found in various regions of modern Turkey, and since the wool from castrated sheep is better, then these slaves were making cloth for the commercial trade.

In conjunction with these significant changes in the economic structure of society, would

be the transition from matrilineal and matrilineal descent to patrilineal and patrilineal descent. There seems to be a very strong ethnographic correlation between male-dominated farming and patrilineal descent and patrilineal residence. A male farmer will teach his sons the necessary skills to assist him and carry on after his demise. In a matrilineal system it is the male's sisters' sons rather than his own sons that inherit these herds, land, and equipment on his death. As individual land ownership is less common amongst hoe agriculturalists, then matrilineal and matrilineal residence are important. In conclusion, the discovery of agriculture at the beginning of the Neolithic period appears to be a positive step for women. By the end of this time, when civilizations arose, the opposite effect was demonstrated.

Prehistoric women's role was wider and more significant than has hitherto been realized and acknowledged. The difficulty of interpreting archaeological data, which in most circumstances is not gender-specific, will slow up the process of giving women credit for the positive contributions they made in the prehistoric period. Future technology will hopefully advance this research and interpretation.