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Archaeological Dialogues 19 (1) 75–80 © Cambridge University Press 2012

doi:10.1017/S1380203812000116

Women archaeologists in 20th-century Britain. Response to Rachel Pope *Catherine M. Hills**

This is a response to Rachel Pope's paper on processual archaeology and gender politics. As a female archaeologist in England I have experienced much of what she describes: I was educated in England in the 1950s and 1960s, I have been a lecturer in Cambridge since 1977, and I was present at the 2006 Personal Histories event in Cambridge which sparked Rachel's thoughts. But my own experience has been different to Rachel's in many ways. I belong to a different generation and have had a different life: but I think it is important to recognize how context-determined all accounts of the past are, and how difficult it is to avoid oversimplification and bias. It is easy to use the evidence which supports an argument, and discard what does not, from which a very different picture might be created – as indeed Rachel is arguing, in parts of her paper. If we cannot achieve that for living memory then how can we approach the real complexity of life in the distant past? So this is my alternative take on some of these themes, as another, contrasting, version of events.

I was educated in England in the 1950s and 1960s and I do not recall that gender was an issue for me personally. There was the expectation Rachel describes that women would marry rather than pursue careers, and some of my contemporaries did marry young – but my friends and I saw all of that as irrelevant to us, and about to be swept away by the rising tide of women's liberation. The most vexed topic discussed in relation to education was not gender but the 11-plus – the division between the academic sheep and the secondary modern goats at an early age. As successful sheep in grammar schools we had by and large a good education of the kind parents now bankrupt themselves to find in independent schools, but this did not apply to the unsuccessful majority, the issue which was the driving force behind the introduction of comprehensive education in the 1970s.

I, and my family and school, took it for granted I would go to university and pursue a career, although I did think that one day I would also marry and have children, since like successive generations of young women since

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I thought it was possible to have it all and escape what I recognized as the frustration of my mother and her generation.

Of course my parents helped: both would have gone to university themselves had not the Second World War and marriage intervened, and there was never any question of different expectations for daughters and sons. Another positive factor (in retrospect) was single-sex schooling – not universal but widespread at secondary level. At an all-girls (or -boys) school all possible roles are occupied by individuals of that one sex, those roles therefore are demonstrably not dictated by gender; the quiet studious people, the ones who always put their hands up, the ones making trouble at the back – all are the same sex. You might well be intimidated by another woman – teacher or contemporary – but girls were not made to feel they were intrinsically less able because they were female, and most of us did take away a degree of self-confidence.

My first real setback was failure to get into Oxford – after an interview with Kathleen Kenyon, then principal of St Hugh's College and the best-known UK woman archaeologist at the time. At university I certainly met for the first time with head-on sexism – but from male students, not institutionally. At both Durham and London I was taught by women as well as men, most notably by two Anglo-Saxon archaeologists who both became professors – Rosemary Cramp and Vera Evison. This was important as such role models preserved my possibly naive perception of the equality of opportunity within archaeology, and going forward with such confidence may have been a key factor in achieving success.

I do not share Rachel's experience of attending lectures and conferences dominated by men where women are mocked if they dare to speak. I have been going to archaeological lectures in the UK and Europe for forty years (or more) and I do not recall ever witnessing or experiencing gendered discrimination or intimidation. I think both male and female audience members often keep quiet in discussion because they do not want to join in the display of ego and irrelevance, hoping for rapid adjournment to a smaller forum for real debate. There could also be a difference between subject areas. Early medieval archaeology has, and continues to have, many well-known female specialists, both in universities and elsewhere, in the UK and Europe. Conferences on this period always have many women participants. Perhaps Rachel is right and Roman and Iron Age archaeology are more dominated by men? But Classics includes many notable women scholars.

My original engagement with archaeology was in the field in the 1960s and here I did encounter male dominance. The big research digs did usually have male directors and site supervisors, a woman running the finds shed and quite a lot of women diggers, sometimes patronized – 'women do trowel well'. Later, working as supervisor and then site director, there was a level of intrinsic machismo which I only recognized as stressful when I came to Cambridge and found, contra Rachel, a haven of non-sexist polite society. This has been my main experience for all the years I have been here, both within the department and in the university at large. One of the problems I have with Rachel's paper is that she presents a negative view of Cambridge which is not borne out by my own experience, although there are certainly

women in this university who would agree more with her than with me. Belonging to a women's college (Newnham) certainly helps: as with school, here is an environment where, perhaps paradoxically, gender can be ignored.

I only became acutely aware of male bias at a senior level when I was briefly head of department and discovered I was usually the only woman at any meeting I attended (this would no longer be true). This reflects the real bias in Cambridge which successive working parties have analysed and deplored: women's promotion has always been far slower than that of their male colleagues and so they have remained a small minority of university senior staff, a situation which has at last recently improved. I noticed this in relation to myself only when all my contemporary male colleagues had become professors while I remained a lecturer. This is, I think, not just due to my own blindness but to priorities which I think other women – and some men – share. I have been interested in, and have devoted my time to, teaching and researching archaeology, as well as unavoidable admin, and also my non-academic life, especially my family. I did not set out with a game plan for my own career, choosing what to do according to its likely benefit to my promotion, as everyone is now advised to do. It is not surprising (and now a problem) that I have not been very successful in a game I was not playing. It is a mistake to measure success only in terms of promotion.

It is also true that I had children in my late thirties at precisely the point where I could have been moving on professionally, and like most other women before and since found that combining family and work is much more difficult than anticipated and demands compromise on both sides. Rachel does have a point about the success of childless women, although amongst the women professors I know in Cambridge as many do have children as not.

Rachel discusses the lack of women archaeologists in UK universities in the 1960s and gives specific examples of women who she feels left the profession in the post-war period. The wider context for this is that there were few archaeology departments in the UK and few posts in those that existed for either sex. People stayed in one place for all or most of their career, thus vacancies occurred very seldom. The idea of paid posts for academics was still emerging – regretted by Tom Lethbridge as making academics financial slaves and conformists (Lethbridge *nd*, chapter 9). Grahame Clark assumed that all academics had a private income (Daniel 1986, 212). Some of the women mentioned as not having posts would not have wanted lectureships: Gertrude Caton Thompson might have been interested in the Disney Chair but not in any more junior post; she would not have wanted to constrain her life by commitment to teaching and admin – her attendance at the college governing body was not consistent, as also probably at Faculty Board. Jacquetta Hawkes's life as a writer, married to Jack Priestley, does not suggest that she was pining for a university post. Peggy Piggott (Guido) married an Italian and moved to Sicily, returning after his death to write books on prehistoric and Anglo-Saxon beads.

There are points in the discussion where Rachel lets her polemic lead her into inaccuracy in dismissing women who appear to contradict her thesis. Aileen Fox established archaeology at Exeter between 1948 and 1956. She was married to Cyril Fox, but he was not 'titled' in the hereditary sense

but awarded a knighthood for services to archaeology, like other ‘titled’ archaeologists of the 20th and 21st centuries – Wheeler, Renfrew, Cunliffe, Mellars – most of whom have very far from aristocratic backgrounds. The most recent such honour has been awarded to Rosemary Cramp. I heard of Cramp’s DBE the day I read Rachel’s paper, and was astonished to discover her statement that Anthony Harding had founded the department of archaeology at Durham in 1972. This statement derives from an ambiguous and misleading comment by Clark (1989, 148), evidence of the caution with which his work should be read. In fact, it was Rosemary who took an existing small research department and as professor in the 1970s and 1980s transformed it into one of the largest and best teaching departments in the country. This is one of the achievements for which she has been honoured. Rachel is a Durham graduate – how can memories be so short?

At Cambridge in 1945 Dorothy Garrod as professor of archaeology had a staff of two lecturers and two assistant lecturers. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s teaching staff fluctuated from three to five, rising to six with the appointment of David Clarke as assistant lecturer in 1973, to the dizzy heights of seven in 1977, the year Ian Hodder and I were appointed. Slowly our numbers inched up to eight and then 11 during the 1990s – finally the transfer of the four ancient Near East posts in 2007 brings the total to 15. Of these, six are currently held by women.

Assessment of the role of women in Cambridge needs to take account of the distinctive structure of the university. Within Cambridge the recognition of university teaching posts as the main career path developed only during the later part of the 20th century and many key figures had careers based in colleges, not departments. Not all male Cambridge archaeologists had teaching posts: Eric Higgs was a ‘senior assistant in research’ while David Clarke had a Fellowship at Peterhouse but held an assistant lectureship for less than three years before his death. Over the past half-century there has been a gradual shift from an academic community dominated by college fellows to one where the university structure has come to resemble that at any other UK university, but it is still possible to have a distinguished research career at Cambridge solely as a college fellow – for example Oliver Rackham at Corpus Christi and many fellows of Trinity.

When I was appointed I was the only woman university teaching officer until the appointment of Gina Barnes in 1981 and then Marie Louise Sorensen in 1987. But I never felt that I was the only woman in the department because there were indeed other women there. Joan Oates and Kate Pretty were long-established when I arrived; Jane Renfrew arrived in 1981. Joan did become a lecturer later; Kate instead held posts in New Hall before becoming principal of Homerton, pro-vice-chancellor, and chair of the Faculty Board of Archaeology and Anthropology for many years. In 1977 in reality, therefore, I was not alone. It is, however, true that all the professors, except Garrod, are and remain male, with at last this year one woman appointed reader (MLSS).

The Archaeology Department has always been a part of a larger faculty, including the museum and the departments of Social and Physical/Biological Anthropology. Until 1968 the department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic was also part of this faculty. Both Social Anthropology and ASNC have had,

and still have, many female staff, including professors Whitelock, Strathern and Moore. The museum has women curators, the research community as a whole has always had many women active in teaching and research as well as many female graduate and undergraduate students. So it is now, and has been in my time here, an environment where women are welcome and as much a part of the fabric of the place as men. I was not here in the 1960s; I can see Clark's 1989 account presents a very male image of the place – but that is a very clearly biased account.

Finally I come back to Rachel's starting point, the 2006 event. There were interesting presentations, much as described, which probably did fairly represent the memories of 1960s archaeology of the presenters. But the reactions projected onto the female audience were not mine. 'The older women around me spoke in hushed voices'. No – only as far as politeness demands when people are speaking. A 'palpable sense of unease': I don't recall that. I understand the focus on the masculinity of the panel and their version of history, and did note it myself, but what struck me far more forcibly – and what I was saying, not very softly – was that this was an absurdly Cambridge- and theory-centred version of the archaeology of England in the 1960s and 1970s. To me, and to others – of both sexes – in the audience the idea that archaeology was created in the studies of Cambridge was ridiculous. There were important theoretical debates; Cambridge was and remains a major national and international player in the discipline. But those debates did not just happen in Cambridge – what about London, Edinburgh, Oxford and elsewhere in the UK and abroad? London University has played a key role in the development of academic archaeology in the UK, especially since the founding of the Institute of Archaeology by Mortimer Wheeler which has and always had many women staff – some mentioned by Rachel.

But above all, what about archaeology in the field? The 1960s and 1970s was an exciting time to be involved in archaeology in the UK, because so much excavation was in progress – research and rescue. The basis of the system of commercial archaeology which has been in place until now grew from the rescue archaeology of those days. Our knowledge of medieval, Roman and later prehistoric Britain has been transformed by the excavations of those days and since: research excavations at Fishbourne and Wroxeter, urban rescue at Winchester and many other towns, enormous landscape digs like Mucking. Cambridge figured here only insofar as some excavators had Cambridge degrees – Biddle, Cunliffe, Addyman – but they had started digging before university, dug while students almost despite their course, and carried on afterwards, while other leading figures – Barker, Rahtz – had no connection with Cambridge. A different history of 20th-century English archaeology would start from those excavations, involving hundreds of diggers and specialists, visited or viewed by a large public, rather than from a handful of men theorizing in Cambridge. Of course it would be a mistake to ignore the latter – but they should not be seen as the only moving force in the subject.

Coming back to the subjectivity and partial nature of individual perceptions, Rachel and I had different experiences of the 2006 event, and, insofar as she attributes to 'senior women' reactions I did not have, her

perception is not wholly correct. She has herself been influenced by the Cambridge male-dominated history she is contesting, which has caused her to exaggerate its reality and therefore the need for its deconstruction.

References

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