

REVIEW

GENDER AND HIDE PRODUCTION

*Edited by Lisa Frink and Kathryn Weedman, 2005, Altamira Press, Walnut Creek, CA
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Gender and Hide Production is the first volume to explicitly address what was almost certainly a ubiquitous activity in the human past. The intention of the editors is to contextualize both the processes of hideworking and the study of hideworking. That is, they seek to write a historiography of archaeology, in part to explain why hideworking, though essential to survival, has been largely ignored while studies of hunting and hunting implements abound.

The volume covers considerable ground geographically. Authors in the first half of the volume rely upon archaeological and ethnohistoric evidence, focusing on the Great Plains (Gilmore, Habicht-Mauche, Scheiber, Hollimon, Kehoe) and Alaska (Frink, Cassell, and Steen). The second half of the book deals with ethnographic evidence from western Canada (Baillargeon), South Africa (Webley), and Ethiopia (Weedman) and explores the implications of this evidence for archaeology.

The introduction to the volume is regrettably brief, with only four pages on the general issues facing archaeologists dealing with gender, e.g., the prevalence of ahistorical perspectives on women's roles in the past and the role of analogy in archaeological interpretation. These issues are treated in the concluding essay by Suzanne Spencer-Wood but are not dealt with in any detail by other contributors.

Kevin Gilmore's chapter on Franktown Cave in eastern Colorado provides a useful description of Great Plains hide production as recorded ethnographically, followed by a formal analysis of one of the moccasins recovered at the site, which he suggests may be a marker of Algonquian ethnic identity.

Judith Habicht-Mauche contributes a chapter on the protohistoric Garza complex of the Texas High Plains, where she finds that women's production of dressed bison hides provided the material basis for men's alliance- and status-building activities. Habicht-Mauche suggests that women's labor, including that of captive women, was increasingly co-opted as the importance of trade and exchange relationships grew along with the intensification of bison exploitation.

Laura Scheiber's discussion of materials from the Donovan site in Colorado complements Habicht-Mauche's work by illustrating the range of activities associated with bison processing. Scheiber does a good job of showing that the hunting and initial butchering of an animal formed only part of a series of labor-intensive activities that included secondary butchering, grease and marrow extraction, meat drying, and hide processing.

In her study of early historic Arikara of the northern plains, Sandra Hollimon documents the loss of women's status with the rise of Euro-American trade in bison hides and fur. Men controlled the distribution of high-quality hides for exchange (p. 82) and were the primary agents in trade relationships, limiting the extent to which women could participate in or benefit socially and economically from interaction with traders. Hollimon observes that the destabilizing effects of contact may have actually *improved* opportunities for some nonelite women to garner prestige and economic power as expert hideworkers. Trade with Euro-Americans and access to non-Native status markers may have provided an alternative route to upward mobility

otherwise limited by the hierarchical and ascribed social system of the Arikara (p. 87).

Lisa Frink's chapter on the effects of Russian and American trade in western Alaska echoes the theme of earlier chapters on the Great Plains, i.e., that intensification of trade relationships with non-Natives privileged Native men and resulted in the devaluation of women's production. Frink notes that imported goods, while benefiting men—as in the case of firearms, which increased hunting success—actually caused a loss of status for women. With the advent of manufactured clothing, for example, women lost a primary claim to status and authority, i.e., their skill and productivity in skin sewing (p. 100).

Mark Cassell examines endscrapers and discard patterns at a whaling station at Point Belcher in northwest Alaska. This site was briefly occupied by John Kelly and his male Iñupiaq employees during the winter of 1891–92. Cassell observes that the Iñupiat continued to use “traditional” endscrapers made of chert into the late 19th century, even though they had adopted Euro-American trade goods for other tasks. Evidence for endscrapers indicates to Cassell that Iñupiaq labor was central to the functioning of Kelly's station and demonstrates that labor had become commoditized by the demands of Euro-Americans working in the whaling and fur trade industries.

In her study of hide chewing, Susan Steen examined sets of human mandibles from Golovin Bay and Nunivak Island, Alaska. She evaluated the mandibles for evidence of musculoskeletal stress markers, i.e., increased robusticity (size) or rugosity (textural remodeling) at muscle attachment sites. Her results confirm the observations of Margaret Lantis and others that Nunivak Island women did not use their teeth as tools.

Alice Beck Kehoe discusses endscrapers used by northwestern plains women and notes that lithic typologies often obscure the presence and number of expedient endscrapers made and used by women by classifying them as “utilized flakes.” Kehoe includes extensive quotes from 20th-century ethnographers to illustrate the hide production process on the Great Plains.

In an ethnographic chapter that cuts across the Great Plains, Plateau, and Rocky Mountains, Morgan Baillargeon discusses the sacred aspects of tanning. Of interest to archaeologists is the observation that women used tanning tools that had been curated, in some cases for four or more generations. Baillargeon focuses on the process of transforming a hide into an object with power and energy, a process that he terms “quicken- ing.”

Baillargeon observes that the skull and brain are perceived as the seat of the animal's soul; therefore the use of the brain to tan the animal's hide is essential to the process of revivification.

Lita Webley's ethnoarchaeological study of the pastoralist South African Khoekhoen is perhaps the strongest contribution to the volume. After a review of hide preparation, Webley describes the many uses of hide in Khoekhoen society. She then examines archaeological materials from Spoegrivier Cave, on the Atlantic coast of South Africa, and interprets them in light of her ethnographic data.

In her discussion of Konso and Gamo hideworkers in Ethiopia, Kathryn Weedman provides a detailed exploration of the relationship between marriage and residence patterns and scraper style. In what is the most material-oriented contribution to the volume, Weedman finds greatest diversity in scraper style when hideworkers in a village are unrelated, versus the Gamo case, in which hide production is a skill passed through the patrilineage.

Suzanne Spencer-Wood's concluding essay evaluates each chapter as an “implicitly” theoretically situated critique of androcentrism in anthropology. Writing from a second-wave feminist perspective, Spencer-Wood describes the two contributions on Africa (Webley, Weedman) as “liberal egalitarian feminist” (p. 200), while the majority of the chapters are classified as “postmodern feminist” (pp. 200–201), though I wonder whether the authors themselves would describe their contributions in such terms.

Each chapter in *Gender and Hide Production* is relatively short, providing a brief introduction to the practice of hideworking in a specific cultural context. Authors of many of the chapters have discussed their data in greater detail elsewhere, and for that reason this volume is an excellent entrée to the literature. Without exception, however, “gender” for the contributors equals “men” and “women.” Authors engage with normative forms of socioeconomic organization, a topic that until the early 1990s was termed the sexual division of labor. They do provide diachronic studies that consider the effects of social change, as well as the role of agency in individual decision-making—topics that earlier work on the division of labor neglected.

Perhaps one of the most significant contributions of this volume is how explicit it makes the labor requirements of hideworking. Though most archaeologists would agree that producing a useable hide is labor intensive, I suspect few would be able to describe in any detail each step re-

quired. The essays in this volume provide vivid examples of not only the work involved in preparation of the hide itself but also the numerous associated activities, such as collection of raw material for scrapers, production of pegs for stretching the skins, preparation of plant or animal substances for tanning, and production of awls and needles for piercing and sewing the hides. Many of these activities leave archaeological remains in the form of artifacts and the spatial patterning of activity areas.

Gender and Hide Production makes the time and energy demands of this activity apparent, and by doing so gives us a better idea of how central hideworking was—and still is in some communities—to subsistence activities, social organization, and ritual practice. The editors have succeeded in their efforts to contextualize hide production cross-culturally; archaeologists will be hard pressed to continue ignoring the significance of hide production in the human past.