Women Hidden in In-Between Spaces: Using Brothels to Expand the Archaeology of Gender

Addey Susanne Dominguez

University of New Mexico - Main Campus, adominguez3@unm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/ugresearchaward_2019

Part of the Archaeological Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation

Women Hidden in In-Between Spaces:
Using Brothels to Expand the Archaeology of Gender

Addey Dominguez
University of New Mexico
February 11, 2019
Space is incredibly vital to the field of archaeology. While various forms of space exist, archaeologists tend to polarize private and public spaces. By focusing on these two spectral extremes however, archaeologists are missing vital insights into social interaction and organization that fall towards the middle of the spectrum. In between the private and the public, we find the residential yet simultaneously commercial spaces that shed light on hidden parts of past life that have yet to be uncovered. Such insights can fill the gaps within the archaeological construction of society. While there are many gaps to be filled by the study of the in-between spaces, this essay will focus on one in particular: the archaeology of gender.

The history of archaeological studies of space began with an interest in large, great, impressive structures. Archaeologists, historians and looters in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were fascinated with artifacts and structures, particularly those found in Egypt. The focus fell mostly onto the most extravagant parts of the archaeological record: the colossal hand of Ramses II at Memphis, the Temple at Karnak, the Sphinx, and the Pyramids of Giza (Brier 1999:1). The tendency to focus on the larger, more magnificent spaces percolated into other regions of study including that of Mesoamerican archaeology. Within Mesoamerican archaeology, a focus on step-pyramids, ball courts and plazas (which are all aspects of elite society) also dominated the field during the formation of the Mesoamerican speciality (Atwood 2006:32). Jerry Fleisher correctly notes the traditional approach towards such spaces, known as monumental architecture or public space, stating that, “Interpretations of such public arenas often focus on elites that use them to construct and legitimize power and authority” (Fleisher 2014: 1). The interest within archaeology in public space, or monumental architecture, correlates directly to a study of elites, what was culturally expected of the elites and, according to some, broad political and economic changes of the society (Thompson 2009: 446). Often, as in the case of
Egypt and Mesoamerica, focusing on the architecture of the elites means ignoring many other vital players in a society.

Traditionally in anthropology and archaeology, women have been thought to occupy private spaces rather than public, making the invisibility of women in the monumental structures expectable. Alan Barnard explains that for some time women “were long represented as ‘muted’, as profane, as objects of marital exchange, and so on, and not as prime actors in the centre of social life” (Barnard 2000:145). Typically, the centre of social life would be the public spaces aforementioned. Sherry Ortner’s essay on gender in society, as described by Barnard, developed the “universal belief founded on the structural opposition between nature and culture” (Barnard 2000: 147) and that men tend to occupy the public while women occupy the private. Further, “women’s reproductive roles tend to confine them to the domestic sphere. Thus women (and to some extent children) represent nature (and the private), while men represent culture (and the public)” (Barnard 2000:147). Following this outdated logic, women would therefore appear in private, residential spaces within the archaeological record.

Private spaces usually take the form of homes within the archaeological record. Archaeological study of homes usually consists of “evalua[ting] the functions of rooms, the organization of space, and the role of household economy” (Hesperia 2006:431), as well as a focus on food processing and consumption (438). Archaeological remnants of such activities could include food storage rooms, drinking vessels, cooking ware, and dining ware. Studies of private space is becoming more popular within archaeology, with the realization that public spaces do not complete the picture of average life within a society and exclude important players. Through study of private spaces we can learn more about the individuals that make up a society. We see their foodstuffs, tool assemblages, how they delineated space within their home,
functions of each room, gender separations (if any) and how they place their home with reference to other homes. It would be possible to assume as well that the study of private space sheds light on the role of women in society.

Through the study of private space archaeologists have widened their lense on the story of past peoples. By joining public space studies and private space studies, we can learn the political and social organization of a culture, the way the people viewed their elite, the basic diet, and how individuals interacted with their family. But claiming that archaeologists have then completed their task and have looked in every possible space for insights into past societies and the role of women, would be grossly incorrect. Margaret Conkey critiques the assumption that women exclusively occupy the private by stating “The value of these studies begins with a recognition of female labor in a broad range of activities (Benedict 1993), many of which were once considered exclusively male domains” (Conkey 1997:1). Women can be found in spaces outside of the private, even if they are still not present in the public. Archaeologists must turn to a different kind of space to understand the nuances of female roles in society, to move further away from categorizing women as ones that live in the private, and to possibly discover that women have not always been confined solely to the private while men ruled the public.

We can uncover the hidden parts of past women’s lives within the in-between spaces of archaeology. In-between spaces are those that are private yet public, residential yet commercial at the same time. Such spaces can be found in structures in the archaeological record like inns, taverns, brothels, prisons or any structure that falls to the middle of the public-private spectrum. As a case study, archaeological locations such as brothels in ancient Greece provide an excellent example of how in-between spaces help fill in the gaps of the archaeological record of gender. The identification of brothels reflects relatively new scholarship within archaeology and the
exact process for making accurate identifications of brothels is still under debate. But through the developments in the identification process, we can locate what makes a brothel an in-between space, how it complicates the woman-private standard, and demonstrate how the study of an in-between space can aid in filling gaps of the archaeological record.

We turn to brothels as an example of an in-between space that has shed light on aspects of society that have been ignored by the private-public dichotomy. The debated definition of a brothel helps us identify the qualifiers for an in-between space. Allison Glazebrook offers that, “Although Greek comic poets describe commercial places focusing on access to prostitutes, archaeological evidence suggests instead that places of prostitution were multipurpose with access to prostitutes being only one commodity of many” (Glazebrook 2016:170). This definition allows us to assess many structures within the terms of a brothel. Any place in which prostitution takes place, can be considered a brothel or at the very least a place of prostitution. An important component of this definition in identifying other in-between spaces is the multipurposeness of the structure, meaning we will find domestic artifact assemblages as well as commercial ones. Thomas A.J. McGinn offers a narrower definition stating that “a brothel is an establishment where two or more prostitutes can work simultaneously and whose activity forms the main, or at least a major, part of the business as a whole” (McGinn 2002:9). With this definition, the structure in question must include prostitution as one of the main components of the space and the number of prostitutes is of importance. Drawing from this, a structure with evidence of multiple rooms, possibly exceeding an average family size could be determined as an in-between space. From Glazebrook’s and McGinn’s contrasting definitions, it can be implied that in-between spaces are not polarized, subject to ambiguity and will contain a mixture of both domestic and commercial artifact assemblages.
Glazebrook discusses which structural and artifactual items within the commercial and domestic assemblages might indicate the presence of prostitution within a structure. First of her possible indicators is the location of a space within a city. As she explains, “Structures associated with prostitution are commonly located near a port, agora, or a city gate” (Glazebrook 2016:180-181). Because prostitutes needed to attract customers, locating a brothel in a high traffic area would make economic sense. Other features within her criterion are small rooms, multiple entrances, drinking and dining ware, “female-specific items” (such as cosmetic vessels and ornamentation), and easy access to water. It is important to note that the presence of only one of these items does not adequately identify a structure as a brothel. At the same time, the presence of each of the items is not necessary in order to identify a brothel. In-between spaces will have an array of artifacts that make it both residential, like drinking and dining ware, and commercial, like the location of the structure on a busy street.

Building Z in Kerameikos, Greece, is an example of an in-between space that gives valuable insights into what distinguishes the private space from an in-between space. If the in-between space is in part residential than it is important to illustrate that the in-between space has value in illuminating different aspects of women’s lives than the aspects found in the private space. Bradley Ault explains the long history of Building Z, with its five phases of construction and use (Ault 2016:75). Despite its many phases “the structure is located directly south of the Sacred Gate, within the line of the Themistoclean city wall and the recessed gateway itself, at the southeastern limits of the excavations just below Hermes Street” (Ault 2016: 75). Following Glazebrook’s criteria, the central locality of this space, right outside the Sacred Gate, is an indicator that Building Z may be a place of prostitution. Additionally, the space has a “water supply from an elaborate tile-lined well located in the northern portion of the courtyard [that]
was supplemented with three cisterns that lay along a north-south line to its west” (Ault 2016:85). Glazebrook notes that, “water use may be a useful indicator of spaces of prostitution because washing and sexual intercourse were connected in Ancient Greece. According to Herodotus, it was necessary for Greeks to wash after intercourse before entering a sanctuary” (Glazebrook 2016:181). If Herodotus’s statement is accurate, then ample water storage and easy access to water, as seen in the cisterns and water supply in Building Z, may indicate a space where sexual intercourse was prevalent. We can see that unlike domestic space, the in-between space of a brothel differs in terms of location and available resources.

The archaeology of gender has become increasingly popular in the field since the 1980s (Conkey 1997:3). Erica Hill explains that one purpose to studying gender in the archaeological record is “the continued critical assessment of assumptions, inferences and research questions” (Hill 1998:7). As seen through Barnard’s explanation, the assumption has been that women will be found in the archaeological record within private spaces. The study of gender within archaeology is pertinent to challenging such assumptions. Hill notes that the archaeology of gender challenges the assumption that women did not ever occupy male spaces (Hill 1998:3). Since men have dominated the public spaces of archaeology, the presence of women has been overlooked but “Motivated by a rejection of the equation of human behavior with the behavior of men, a primary purpose for undertaking a gendered archaeology is to identify or assert the presence and activities of women on prehistoric sites” (Conkey 1997:3). Archaeology has been stalled in finding women in spaces outside of the private, possibly because of an overlooking of the in-between spaces. As seen with the brothel example, women participated in ancient Greek society in a way unseen by the domestic and commercial archaeological record. Operating out of brothels, women participated economically, could gain positions of power, manufactured, ran
food services and businesses within ancient Greece. It is possible that archaeologists have not been able to find women in the record, because they were looking in the wrong places.

Archaeology has developed greatly from its beginnings when young excavators revelled at the greatness of past civilizations by focusing on their largest monuments. A turn to private, residential spaces offered more of a complete picture of society, but still left questions to be answered. Such questions can be answered by studying in-between spaces. As seen through the example of Building Z, the identification of brothels shows us that identifying in-between spaces is indeed possible. Using brothels as one example of the information that in-between spaces can offer us, the study of such structures gives archaeologists insights into the archaeology of gender that was unattainable by polarizing the public and private. With future research and scholarship, other in-between spaces such as inns, taverns, prisons and others will hopefully aid archaeologists in finding women in the record, and possibly be surprised by what roles they find them in.

Works Cited


Brier, Bob.

Conkey, Margaret W.

Fleisher, Jeffrey.

Glazebrook, Allison.

Hill, Erica.

McGinn, Thomas A.J.

The American School of Classical Studies at Athens.

Thompson, Victor D.

Wallace-Hadrill, Andrew.