



# CSTT AND GENDER



HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO  
HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET  
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

## Centre of Excellence in Changes in Sacred Texts and Traditions

A research centre funded by the Academy of Finland

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Layout and design: Rick Bonnie

Cover photo: GoaShape



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Photo by Jerry Kiesewetter

# INTRODUCTION

**Saana Svärd and Hanna Tervanotko**

University of Helsinki

We first got the idea to do something on gender at the 2016 CSTT annual meeting in Saariselkä, where, during the joint sessions, there was some discussion on gender both as an analytical category for research and as a factor in the scholarly community in general. The Centre of Excellence in Changes in Sacred Texts and Traditions (CSTT) is a large community and the research topics we operate with resonate only to a certain extent with those of our colleagues. Some of the most fruitful and engaging discussions within the entire group have been those that

somehow address philosophy of research and involve everyone.

Both aspects, research categories and community, are relevant for the CSTT. On the one hand, some researchers within the CSTT directly inquire about gender in antiquity. For instance, Saana Svärd's project analyzes construction of gender in ancient Mesopotamia and Jessica Keady examines masculinities in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Many more scholars of the centre have at some point published on gender, including the director of the CSTT, Martti Nissinen.

On the other hand, any research that deals with cultural objects left behind by ancient people is necessarily dealing with gender to some degree, as gender (just like social class) is generally a significant part of human societies.

Apart from the research themes that touch directly on gender, the CSTT is a scholarly community made up of people who are gendered. According to the website of the CSTT (as of June 15, 2017), the CSTT has 45 members, 23 women and 22 men. It is one of the largest research centres of its kind and in many ways aims at being at the forefront in questions of well-being and work-life balance in academia. Given that the experiences people have in life are often dependent on their gender, this aspect is relevant. Becoming aware of all dimensions of gender and the ways in which it may influence research is significant.

We invited four colleagues to react to these topics during a panel we or-

ganized at the CSTT annual meeting. We wanted to have a representative from each of the four teams, as well as gender balance among the presenters. In the end, we had four short (ca. 15 minutes) talks. The talks took two different approaches to our theme. Three of them focused on methodological reflection and one was more of a personal reflection on gender and academia.

The three papers all addressed methodological questions pertaining to their respective fields of study and gender. Francis Borchardt talked about “A Gender Theory Critique of Historical Criticism” [in this volume titled “A Gender Theory Critique of the Historical-Critical Method”], Rick Bonnie’s title was “(Engendering) Changing Traditions in Archaeology – Past and Present” [in this volume titled “Gender in the Archaeology of Greco-Roman Palestine”], and Saana Svärd gave a paper on the topic “Gender and Methodology in Assyriology.” Meanwhile, Anneli Aejme-

laeus's talk, "Stories from Real Life," shared with the participants the gendered experiences and observations she has had during her career across three countries and several decades. This divide in the themes reflects one of the most difficult issues related to gender. People have great difficulties in talking about their experiences and possible issues when their own careers are at stake. If a gender identity – whatever it is – contains a possible threat to an established way of doing things, talking about it does not always provide an answer but may lead to further stigmatization. It is especially hard for young scholars to talk about gender-related questions in academia. We are thus very grateful to Anneli Aejmelaeus for agreeing to share her thoughts with a broader audience.

The short papers were followed by a vivid conversation among CSTT members and some reflections by our guests Eva Mroczek and Seth Sanders. They reacted in particu-

lar to the "lived aspect" of gender equality in scholarship. They pointed out how academia still somehow favors men. For instance, it is not unusual to see all male panels (or "manels") being organized even in those subfields where gender balance is, generally speaking, quite good. Seth Sanders encouraged the participants of the workshop to consider in the future whether they want to contribute to the situation by participating in all male panels and advocated attempts to generate change by actively challenging such frameworks. Finally, the respondents pointed out another form of imbalance that occurs in academic meetings, that of sexual harassment. For instance, at the SBL annual meeting, the existence of sexual harassment has been recognized in past years and an informal group called "SBAllies" provides support for members experiencing or witnessing such instances. SBAllies can be contacted via their website ([click here](#)).



Photo by Priscilla Du Preez



# A GENDER THEORY CRITIQUE OF THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD

**Francis Borchardt**

Lutheran Theological Seminary Hong Kong

What in the world does gender have to do with the historical critical method? Because I write in as the representative of the CSTT's Team 3 in this forum, I'm expected to somehow connect a discussion of gender with "Literary Criticism in Light of Documented Evidence". This is not exactly an easy task. Gender is usually thought of as a contextual discussion, and even by gender scholars is conceived as a category that has only entered scholarly and popular consciousness in modern

and postmodern times. Meanwhile Literar-Kritik, or more broadly, the historical critical method, which encompasses much of what the CSTT's Team 3 does, makes claims to exist outside of a given context. It is concerned only with revealing the history of the text and behind the text. Or, at least that is how it presents itself. And that is precisely the topic of my discussion. Surprise! I've taken an opportunity to turn this into a discussion about methodology.

In this brief discussion I'd like to invite us all to think about the historical critical method from the perspective of gender theory. This reflection is not meant to be a one-way critique of historical critical methodology (which I have, and to some extent still do employ) from the perspective of a gender theorist (which I am not). Rather, it is an attempt to engage in a dialogue between gender theory and historical critical theory (for, despite claims that might be made to the contrary, it is in fact representative of a theory, even if inexplicit) in order to elucidate premises, methods, and outcomes. In so doing I would like to challenge scholars with an affinity for the historical critical method to think about both what sort of pursuit they are engaged in and how they position themselves and are positioned within the guild of scholars of biblical studies and early Judaism and Christianity. The reflection is rather conjectural: I will posit that within our academic guild, historical

critical methodology and those who engage in it are constructed as the masculine norm, with the result that all other methods of analysis of text production and interpretation are feminized. The consequence of this masculinization of the historical critical approach is manifold. Not only does it end up generally attracting and rewarding masculine performers within the guild, but it also tends to ignore the context within which its knowledge is produced. This in turn leads to a tendency to pass over certain fundamental questions which might strengthen the claims it makes to discovery of the history of and in a text.

Before proceeding I would like to point out that I do not think either of these objects of discussion are the result of conscious reflection by historical critical scholars. Nor do I believe there is necessarily a broad desire to exclude the free enquiry into diverse topics related to ancient scriptures. Further, I would not ar-

gue that there is a conscious wish to construct an ancient literary world that is entirely male. There are many female historical critical scholars, and many of them along with many male colleagues are “woke” to the concerns brought up by gender theory. Rather, on the analogy of the insights on masculinity raised by gender theory since the 1980’s, I want to suggest that historical criticism and the scholars who engage in it are trained within a system that reinforces the normative value of historical critical enquiry, which ends up devaluing and feminizing other types of criticism.

So, what do I mean when I posit that historical criticism is constructed as masculine criticism in the field of biblical studies and early Judaism/ Christianity? Here a brief review of some of the assumptions of gender theory would be helpful. The basic assumptions important for my analogy are these:

1) Gender is not the same thing as

anatomy. Although there may be certain anatomical features associated with what is determined to be masculine or feminine, the meanings with which these anatomical features are invested are social constructs. Thus to be masculine does not necessarily equate with being anatomically male, and to be feminine is not the same as being anatomically female. If we think of pejorative terms for people who transgress constructions of gender, like “tomboy” or “nancy boy” we begin to get the idea.

2) Given that gender is constructed, the definitions of what is masculine and what is feminine differ across settings and change within settings over time. To perform or express masculine traits in a relatively wealthy Western setting might be very different from doing so in a poorer setting in the Global South.

3) Nevertheless such binary constructions persist throughout diverse times and places as a means to

assert power of the masculine over the feminine, despite the fact that the binary construction is a simplification of the range of human experiences.

4) The persistence of this binary construction is brought about not through explicit instruction, but through institutions unconsciously modeling what is masculine and rewarding those who perform what is masculine, while sanctioning those who perform what is deemed feminine. It should be pointed out that this is especially true of subjects determined to be masculine. So, a “man” wins status by performing masculine acts, and loses status by performing feminine acts, thereby edifying him with the dichotomy.

5) The result of such a construction, perhaps a natural outgrowth of the edification which primarily goes through masculine subjects, is that the masculine becomes “normal”, while the feminine becomes “abnormal”, “marginal”, and “subordinate”.

This normalization of the masculine manifests itself throughout a given society. Political decisions and paths to social advancement all assume masculine actors and reward masculine performance. While they might not exclude anatomical females from successful negotiation of society toward success, they tend to do so only insofar as the anatomically identified females can internalize masculine performance. Even this has limits, though, as the power dynamics created by gender construction tend to reward anatomically female actors for accepting the marginal role they are assigned. It is the rare feminine person who is able to negotiate performing masculinity in a way that is praised rather than sanctioned for this transgression. In this way, the masculine is reinforced as the universal.

It is this final point which invites us to examine the place of historical criticism within the field of biblical studies as occupying an analogous

place to masculinity. As has often been pointed out in methodological critiques, historical criticism, due to its roots, whether in the Enlightenment, the Reformation, or even the Renaissance, frequently makes knowledge claims which give the sense that it is a-contextual. The practice is deemed scientific. The method is performed outside of time or place. The results are universally applicable, as relevant to Bangalore as they are to Berlin. Yet, just as masculinity and masculine performers frequently do not realize that their gender role (and the power claimed by it) is less the result of nature than the outcome of continuous reassertion of dominance in social and political contexts, so too does historical criticism tend to overlook that its claims to knowledge belong to modern Western constructions perpetuated within dominant Western faculties, conference organizers, and presses. It thereby marginalizes and subordinates approaches that do not make the same claims to universali-

ty. Therefore, feminist approaches, post-modern literary studies, and discussions of rhetorical strategy (to name but a few approaches) are all feminized and less frequently rewarded. While those methods might be deemed suitable for a specialized study, a thematic conference, or an edited volume, they are not thought to make the fundamental contributions to the understanding of a text which demand critical engagement and either repetition or refutation. There is even a dichotomy asserted in some circles between historical-critical approaches, termed exegesis, and all other approaches, which if they are provided with any label at all, are called hermeneutics. Moreover textbooks and reference works, which receive the broadest audiences invariably reinforce the normalization of historical critical inquiry once again because it is asserted to be a general or even universal sort of knowledge. This has a silencing effect on other approaches, and perpetuates less engagement

with the works and scholars responsible for them.

Beyond the broad chilling effect historical criticism's masculinity has on the field, the problem manifests itself in at least two notable ways: the identification and rewarding of those engaged in historical critical research, and the results to which such research comes. Because historical criticism makes claims to be dispassionate and without dint of postmodern contextual concern, there is little attention paid to the identities claimed by those engaged in such research. If historical criticism is merely the application of a set of methods applied to the texts under discussion, then it does not matter whether that analysis is being done by a straight white male, a queer black female, or a gender non-conforming Japanese person. The problem is that when attention is not given to who is doing the research, what is presumed as "normal" in one sphere of life fills

the lacuna in this other area of life. So, in fields like pentateuch, synoptic gospels, or the so-called deuteronomistic history, which tend to be dominated by historical-critical concerns, at least the most prominent scholars are largely males of European descent. Now, it might be that this is entirely coincidental or a relic of previous generations when biblical scholarship was more thoroughly tied to seminaries and faculties of theology and particularly to pastors, who were predominately male. But, I suspect that at least part of this has to do with the normalization of masculinity on the one hand and historical critical scholarship on the other. Therefore those who rise to prominence in historical criticism end up being those who most conform to the idea of the masculine norm within binary gender constructions.

The masculinity of historical critical scholars might directly link up with the second issue I'd like to highlight:

the masculinity of the questions asked and the answers offered within the scholarship itself. Here I again return to the claims of universality and seeming denial of context present in historical criticism and arising out of its construction as the norm. This can have the effect of framing questions without awareness of the modernness of those questions. So the impulse to look for the “original text” and to treat the “original text” and each successive stage of development as reflective of changed circumstances in the ideology or materiality of the world in which they were composed is thoroughly tied in with modern ideas of authorial genius, and with Ranke’s 19th century regard for primary sources. Likewise, the decisions made concerning the relationship between proposed layers of composition typically reflect Western aesthetic concepts of coherence which favor rational linear storytelling that adheres to generic paradigms. In addition, even as in the case of Team

3’s work, wherein there are two or more examples of text change from manuscripts, versions, or other witnesses, there is a presumption of relationship between them, which demands arguments for hierarchy, again based upon a modern notion of intellectual property and stability of text transmission which renders difference as abnormal. In all of these examples the problem is not really the question asked. We all ask questions of the ancient world using anachronistic concepts and vocabulary. In this case, though, it is the framing of that question and the answer arrived at in terms that do not admit the modernness and the contextualized nature of the pursuit. And it is precisely this lack of awareness or refusal to acknowledge the modernity of the question that I would argue is analogous to the normalization of the masculine in human experience.

The historical critical method does not offer explanations for itself

because it is not expected to. Unlike other methods, which are marginalized due to their perceived particularity, the universalizing claims of the historical critical method insulate it from the need to take note of and then defend its context. This seems to me to be awfully similar to the widespread construction of the masculine in society.







Photo by David Rodrigo

# GENDER IN THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF GRECO-ROMAN PALESTINE

**Rick Bonnie**

University of Helsinki

Since the early 1980's, gender research has relatively quickly entered the realm of archaeology and gradually developed into its own subject area in the field.<sup>1</sup> To a large degree, however, this shift first took place in archaeological sub-disciplines far removed, so it seems, from Near Eastern, biblical, or classical archaeology. The latter have only very slowly and unfortunately still rather sparingly introduced research

on gender roles and identities. To be sure, the field has developed and improved substantially over the last two decades.<sup>2</sup> This is shown, for in-

- 2 For biblical archaeology, see C. Meyers 2003; Alpert Nakhai 2007. For classical archaeology, see Revell 2010. Revell observes discussions on gender starting from the early 1990s, but all focusing on the Roman West. This appears to relate to the general division in the field of classical archaeology, where the archaeology of the Roman West is in general much heavier theorized than that of the Roman East. Explanations for this division have usually pointed to the former's closer

1 Conkey and Spector 1984. For overview, see Stig Sørensen 2000; Nelson 2006.

stance, by the works of such eminent scholars as Beth Alpert Nakhai, Carol Meyers, and Jennie Ebeling, as well as the substantial scholarly interest in the recent workshops on “Gender, Methodology, and the Ancient Near East” organized by Saana Svärd and Agnes Garcia-Ventura.<sup>3</sup>

One notable result is the publication of a special journal issue on “Gender Archaeology” in last year’s *Near Eastern Archaeology*. Yet, the absence of any article related to the classical periods in this journal issue remains worth noting.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this has something to do with the old adage that Near Eastern archaeology does not go beyond Alexander the Great’s conquest of the Near East. However, my own experiences with

relationship with prehistoric archaeology and the near absence of written sources. See Trigger 2006, 216.

3 For a comprehensive recent bibliography, see Garcia-Ventura and Zisa 2017. See also Asher-Greve and Wogec.

4 *Near Eastern Archaeology*, vol. 79, no. 3 (2016), ed. by S.L. Budin and J.M. Webb.

regard to the archaeology of the Hellenistic to Byzantine eras in Israel/Palestine (the period and region I am most acquainted with) are that discussions on gender remain rather invisible in the scholarly literature.<sup>5</sup> In the next couple of paragraphs, I will consider some of the causes for this lack of archaeological discussion on gender roles and identities.

## I. RELATIVELY FEW CONTEXTS WITH SEXED BODIES

Gendered practices are most often studied in archaeological contexts with sexed bodies, such as funerary contexts of osteologically-sexed individuals, visual representations

5 See, e.g., Edwards and McCollough 2007. While the word “gender” occurs numerous times in chapters in the section “Neolithic through Persian Periods” (ca. 120 pp.), it occurs nowhere in any of the chapters in the section “Hellenistic through Byzantine Periods” (ca. 260 pp.). Notable exceptions to the absence of discussion are Baker 2002 and E.M. Meyers 2003.

such as sculpted portraits or mosaic or frescoed scenes, or inscriptions referring to women and men.<sup>6</sup> The reason for this type of evidence seems obvious: when an individual can be securely identified through human remains, figural representations or words, then its context and surrounding finds (e.g. burial furnishings) can tell us a lot regarding gendered practices in the past.

To give one example, based on research by Hilary Cool, that has been discussed by Penelope Allison: while the Roman author Pliny the Elder made clear that jet jewellery was considered a female attribute and male jewellery was frowned upon in imperial Roman society, the evidence from male-sexed funerary contexts in the provinces shows that males frequently adorned themselves with jewellery.<sup>7</sup> This exam-

ple illustrates how archaeological studies are able to nuance the views derived from textual sources alone. Moreover, such studies are able to demonstrate variation in gendered practices within a single empire, thereby also contributing to discussions on the socio-cultural heterogeneity of imperial populations.

However, it is precisely these types of evidence that are either largely absent or are impossible to be studied in depth. For instance, the extremely restrictive Israeli custom regarding the excavation of tombs and burials,<sup>8</sup> makes a thorough scientific study of funerary contexts almost impossible. Moreover, it has the indirect effect that few archaeologists in the region actually specialize in this particular subject, nor do they focus their attention in the field to this type of evidence (and in

6 See Allison 2015, 104–5, with earlier literature.

7 Plin., *HN* 36.141–42. Research by H.E.M. Cool (2002); cited and discussed in Allison 2015, 105.

8 Israel's Attorney General stated in a clarified ruling in 1994 that human remains were not archaeological artefacts. For more information, see Hallote and Joffe 2002.

fact, for practical reasons, often try to avoid it). On the other hand, for the Hellenistic to Byzantine periods, visual figurative representations in general are relatively rare compared to other regions, which to some degree is caused by the observance of religious regulations. The same holds for epigraphic material with the near absence of building inscriptions for the region, which stands in stark contrast with the evidence from Asia Minor, Italy, Greece or even Britain.

## II. A LACK OF CRITICAL THEORY

Yet it is neither absent nor abnormal in archaeology to focus on gender outside the realm of funerary contexts, visual representations, and inscriptional evidence.<sup>9</sup> Two such reasons for this are: 1) that the latter evidence tends to relate primarily to elites; and 2) that they provide a symbolic (perhaps even idealizing) gendering of male and female iden-

tity and practice. However, studying gender through material culture without sexed bodies or visual or written representations is challenging and cannot be pursued without theoretical models, comparative research (from different regions, through ethnographic research), and clear methodologies.

This is, however, where I see one of the biggest hurdles for the study of the classical periods in Israel/Palestine, as critical archaeological theorizing has remained rather underdeveloped over the years. Instead, emphasis remains on what sometimes has been called “dirt archaeology,” which highlights mainly practical training and experience in fieldwork and the applied knowledge of material culture (and, more and more, the adoption of novel scientific techniques). This stage of data-gathering through excavation then is frequently confused with a theory-driven analytical stage to make sense of the gathered data,

9 For discussions, see Stig Sørensen 2000; Allison 2015.

leading to such false claims as excavation provides “hard facts.” Yet, while this particular tradition of scholarship is not necessarily a bad thing, it should be remembered that it has profound implications for how archaeology is understood and conducted.

Thus, up to the late-2000s, it was not uncommon to hear and read about views that are strongly embedded in a cultural-historical approach, in which the interpretation of finds and sites was often dictated through a reading of roughly contemporaneous literary evidence.<sup>10</sup> This approach wrongly assumes some kind of inherent socio-cultural meaning (or significance) to the finds in question, while in reality such meaning in objects is constantly negotiated and can only be accessed through a careful, comparative, and critical study of archaeological context. This not only has strong implications for exploring

10 See Trigger 2006, 211–313, for an overview of culture-historical archaeology in a world context.

representations of gender, but also for those of identity and ethnicity in general, which, as a result of the cultural-historical approach, tend to be highly generic in nature.<sup>11</sup> Recently some scholars have started to deconstruct this picture using postmodern theories developed in archaeology,<sup>12</sup> though their work tends to have the unfortunate result of criticizing and minimizing the interpretive strength of material objects.

### III. DEPENDENCE ON QUESTIONS DERIVED FROM LITERARY TEXTS

This brings me to a third observation; that is, much of the archaeology that is done on the Hellenistic to Byzantine eras in Israel/Palestine still tends to be guided by texts and

11 For example, deducing from evidence of particular types of finds at a given site, the cultural nature of that site (e.g. “Jewish”) or the presence/absence of a particular sex (e.g. were women present at Qumran?).

12 See, e.g., Miller 2010.

textual research. I am not referring here to how archaeological interpretations still tend to be grounded in our reading of roughly contemporary texts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the rabbinic corpus, and Josephus. Instead, what I mean is that the questions we ask and try to answer through the archaeological remains are almost always framed by our reading and understanding of temporally and geographically closely-related textual sources.<sup>13</sup>

A case in point is much of the archaeological research conducted on first-century Galilee, which often has as its starting point anything related to the historical Jesus, Josephus's narrative of Herod's tetrarchy, and the First Jewish Revolt. The same holds for representations of gender at Qumran as studied through the archaeological remains, which has primarily focused on the question of the presence or absence of women

as related to the celibate Essene community that is presumed to have lived there.<sup>14</sup>

In short, our questions for archaeological remains in general tend to be framed by those aspects highlighted by the ancient literary sources. The result is a rather narrow and limited archaeology that does not engage to the fullest extent with questions raised by broader humanities, social science, and natural science fields.

#### IV. LIMITED EXCAVATION REPORTS

The absence of certain types of evidence, lack of critical theory, and dependence on literary texts for asking the "right" questions, as discussed above, all seem to have had a profound impact on how gender has been addressed. Yet the broad strokes with which (Jewish) life in

13 Steve Rosen (2006) has called this "the tyranny of texts".

14 E.g. Magness 2002. See also Philo, *Apologetica* 14–17; *Jos. BJ* 2: 120–1; Pliny, *NH* 5.17.4 [73].



Hellenistic to Byzantine Palestine has often been constructed from archaeological remains also has a significant effect on how data is collected and published. When detailed contextual information and scientific analytical methods are not too often used for the interpretive work done by scholars, this has implications for the degree of precision by which archaeological sites are being excavated and documented and the level of detail with which found objects and structures are being published.

Thus, although the exceptions are becoming more frequent, it is still a common occurrence that excavations and their reporting focus almost solely on a conventional description of stratigraphy, architecture, art, and pottery typology, which then is contextualized in a historical framework. There tends to be an aura of objectivity surrounding these excavations and reports, as if the meaning of the architecture and finds is just a matter of time and is

natural to anyone observing them. Yet, anyone who has stood in the field knows that the entire act of excavation is interpretation from the start. The aura of objective, observable facts waiting simply to be rediscovered that hangs over these excavations has the unintentional effect that other research angles and interpretive means are still often disregarded and left unreported. Yet, these other research angles and interpretive means are highly valuable for offering deeper insights into such aspects as gender roles and identities, for instance.

## **V. WHAT NEXT?**

After having sketched out some (there are definitely more) of the causes for the lack of discussion on gender in relation to archaeology of the classical periods in Israel/Palestine, I would like to end with some more practical considerations and recent laudable initiatives in the field.

**From isolation to collaboration.** One thing is to broaden the discipline and to engage in the ongoing debates in the wider field of archaeology. Obviously this is not an easy task for anyone, as many of us at the same time need to be trained in biblical scholarship, the ancient languages related to it, and other aspects in the study of religion. No, I am not arguing here for a return to the notion of the scholar as a homo universalis. Instead, I argue for more cross-disciplinary collaboration among scholars. Archaeology is interdisciplinary collaboration by definition, and for textual scholars to get the most out of it they should embed themselves in and work together with this community.

**Diversity in the scientific community.** Archaeology is perhaps, more than any other discipline, defined by its praxis — i.e., traditionally, fieldwork by the tough and adventurous white male archaeologist — and so to truly diversify archaeology means

to actively seek a more diverse representation of its praxis. This can be accomplished, for instance, by giving more emphasis to gender balance in field projects, but also by paying active attention to the challenging (and sometimes cruel) realities of archaeological fieldwork.<sup>15</sup> This not only changes our notion of archaeology and archaeologists, it also stimulates new ways of looking at excavations and their findings, as well as instigating new research directions. Too often archaeology is stereotyped and personified by the tough and adventurous white male explorer, equipped with only a trowel and a shovel.

Fortunately, recent initiatives in the field are actively trying to change this image. I already mentioned at the beginning of this blogpost the efforts of a few eminent scholars and recent workshops dedicated to this work. Yet there are others as

15 For some of the larger challenges, see Muckle 2014; Scott 2017.

well. One of them is [Trowel Blazers](#), created by Becky Wragg Sykes, Brenna Hassett, Victoria Herridge and Suzanne Pilaar Birch, which is an active research community encouraging the participation of women and other underrepresented groups in archaeology and other geo-sciences.<sup>16</sup> Another laudable effort with similar aims, but more concentrated on the archaeology of the ancient Near East, is the recent “Initiative On The Status Of Women,” led by Beth Alpert Nakhai, within the American Schools of Oriental Research ([see website here](#)).

### **Open the discussion on gender.**

The above initiatives have already done a lot in terms of opening the discussion, activism, and science outreach in relation to women and gender in archaeology. Yet, we should not leave it all up to such initiatives, but also think for ourselves how we can contribute to a change in the field. For instance,

try to be aware of potential gender imbalances in terms of cited sources in publications, conference panels or collaboration partners, and do your best to correct this imbalance. The same holds for aspects of science outreach. The most used knowledge source in the world, Wikipedia, is highly imbalanced in terms of gender representation. While there are plenty of events now being organized in order to correct this, please also take the time to create and edit Wikipedia pages yourself. It is easy and does not take more than a few minutes ([see tutorial here](#)).

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16 See Wragg Sykes et al. 2016.

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Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

# GENDER AND METHODOLOGY IN ASSYRIOLOGY

**Saana Svärd**

University of Helsinki

Although Mesopotamian women have been an object of study for more than a hundred years, most early publications treated women as an isolated category.<sup>1</sup> “General” history was male history where exceptional women occasionally intruded. In most of these studies the

1 For the full form of the text with appropriate references and bibliography the reader is invited to consult: Saana Svärd: “Studying Gender: A Case Study of Female Administrators in Neo-Assyrian Palaces.” In *The Role of Women in Work and Society in the Ancient Near East*, ed. by B. Lion & C. Michel. *Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records* 13. (De Gruyter, 2016), 447-58.

position of women was seen from an ethnocentric Western perspective.

Ethnocentric and androcentric studies on women were challenged when studies relating to gender emerged in the 1960’s. The different approaches that developed under this rather large rubric can be described as “waves” of scholarship. These waves are more methodological than chronological, but the birth of the first wave is usually placed in the 1960’s.

In a nutshell, the aim of this first wave was to write women “into”

history. In historical research, the endeavors of men had been the most important object of study and this is what the first wave set out to change. Assyriology was mostly oblivious to these developments. Nonetheless, the 33rd *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* (1986) in Paris had “women” as its theme.

After the 33rd RAI, the number of articles and books concerned with women or gender markedly increased. Here one should note, however, that the field of Assyriology is not uniform. In the case of Neo-Assyrian studies, much of the textual evidence became widely available only during the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, the first wave of gender scholarship in the field of Neo-Assyrian studies appeared later.

The second wave of feminist scholarship began in the late 1970s. No longer content to merely write women into history, many scholars now concentrated on studying the

subordinate status of the female gender. This was done from two interconnected perspectives. Some assumed that women were always and everywhere a universally oppressed group. Other scholars believed that matriarchy was the historical reality of the ancient world and that patriarchy developed only in the late prehistoric and early historic periods. This view, of course, concentrated a great deal of attention on the study of the ancient Near East, where written history began. The weakness inherent in both perspectives is the idea of a uniform entity of patriarchy, which can be applied to or assumed for all of the ancient Near East. Defined as male power, patriarchy is not an unproblematic framework for understanding gender, as it disregards other kinds of variables (age, class, specific location in time and place, etc.). Basically, the concept of patriarchy is like a blanket of snow across the vast geographical and chronological landscape of the ancient Near East, obstructing from



view the myriad details and variations relating to gender.

One of the main achievements of the second wave was the development of the notion of gender, or the idea that biological sex is distinct from a socially constructed identity (gender). This influential idea was explicitly included in the title of the Helsinki *Rencontre* in 2001: “Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East.” This RAI was a landmark similar to the 33rd RAI in Paris. Although the aims of the Helsinki RAI were not theoretically ambitious, it still marks the emergence of the second wave for Assyriology. Nonetheless, the impact of the second wave remained marginal. Although the number of books and articles steadily kept increasing, there are very few Assyriological studies that engage with oppression theory or matriarchy theory or use the strict dichotomy of sex/gender. One could argue that in many ways, gender studies in Assyriology skipped the second wave

altogether. The first-wave project of writing women into history was accepted as a worthwhile research goal at the Paris RAI, if not earlier, but it seems that it took so long for the ideas of gender research to reach the Assyriological community that most scholars who were interested in the topic skipped the second wave and proceeded directly to using the more sophisticated methodology of the third wave.

The third wave of women studies began in the 1980’s. Even more than the previous two waves, the third wave is a collection of manifold approaches, which are primarily connected to each other in their determination to deconstruct the basis of scientific knowledge production. Queer studies, masculinity studies, performativity, possible duality of gender structure and many other issues relating to the body and sexuality are all part of the third wave. The main point of agreement of the third wave relates to the nature of

knowledge production. Instead of seeing the researcher as someone who is seeking to uncover the truth that is “out there,” they advocate the framing of research as a project for making sense of different phenomena. This includes the knowledge that defines normative gender roles and sexuality. When knowledge production is seen in this way, as *production*, the traditional dichotomies of research – male and female, sex and gender, matriarchy and patriarchy, public and private, power and oppression – become suspect and the question arises, are these useful categories for producing knowledge?

Some studies on ancient Mesopotamian women employ these views or partially engage with them. Many of these studies have used iconographical and/or archaeological evidence as their main source material. For text-based research, traditionally understood as the core area of Assyriology, studies that engage with

third-wave ideas are few. Although the number of scholarly articles and books on gender in Mesopotamia has steadily increased, such research questions are still on the margins of Assyriological research.

All in all, the discipline is mostly marked by first-wave studies, namely writing women into the history of ancient Mesopotamia. This is, of course, absolutely necessary. At the same time, however, first-wave studies have a number of problematic aspects. Essentialism is certainly one of them. Pursuits that have been seen by researchers as “essentially female,” such as child-rearing or textile work, are often the focus of first-wave studies. For instance, child-rearing is an important topic of research, but researching child-rearing does not necessarily tell us anything about the construction of gender. Femininity and masculinity cannot be reduced to essentialist concepts, as masculinity and femininity are always cultural constructs.

Therefore, cultural differences need to be properly acknowledged and grappled with.

Thus, for good reason, third-wave research has shifted its focus from the study of women to the study of gender systems. The dynamic relationships of gender systems as part of other cultural and social systems form a challenging and fruitful new area of research. A methodological emphasis on intersectionality is based on the idea that women cannot be studied alone, because gender is part of all social relations.

The problem of current research on Mesopotamian gender systems is twofold. On one hand, the naïve belief in objectivity in humanistic research has come to an end. On the other hand, modern methods and theories cannot be used indiscriminately on ancient material. Many of the more specifically third-wave approaches are not ideally suited for fragmentary Mesopotamian material.

A case in point is the work of Judith Butler, which is at the center of many third-wave approaches. In second-wave studies, it was common to find an essential difference between “sex” (traditionally seen as referring to biological bodies) and “gender” (the meaning attributed to these bodies by society). Consequently, Butler’s idea of gender as a repeated social performance and not as an expression of pre-existing identity was groundbreaking in many ways. It can be said to be the most significant contribution in recent decades of feminist studies. Butler’s work has its roots in philosophy and is certainly thought-provoking, but it is difficult to grasp how it can be fruitfully applied to the meager textual remains of Mesopotamia.

Personally, I have found the work of sociologists Candace West and Don Zimmerman to be more useful. In their now classic article “Doing Gender” (1987), West and Zimmerman write that “female” and “male”

are not the binary, static, opposite categories that a rigid sex-gender division would imply. Rather, gender is “done” by individuals in social situations. It is portrayed through interaction, which produces it while at the same time naturalizing it. In a nutshell, it is a process that transpires in all forms of human interaction.

The idea that gender does not exist independently of the actions creating it is especially valuable for the study of Mesopotamian women. Assyriologists have few texts at their disposal that would describe Mesopotamian views on masculinity or femininity. However, the texts and artifacts that remain from Mesopotamian cultures all provide information on social interactions. Following West and Zimmerman, I suggest that all of these actions produced gender. Interactions between people convey much more than just gender as well. On the basis of principles of intersectionality, it follows that by

analyzing more closely the interactions between individuals we may gain a better understanding of the interplay of gender, ethnicity, class, and so forth.





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Photo by Alex Block

# STORIES FROM REAL LIFE

**Anneli Aejmelaeus**

University of Helsinki

When I finished my doctorate 35 years ago, I was the ninth female doctor of theology in Finland ever, and the second in Biblical studies, the first one having been my colleague Raija Sollamo. You can imagine that the field was heavily male-dominated. Since then the situation has radically changed, the male doctors being already in the minority among the most recently finished doctorates in the field of theology.

My teacher Ilmari Soisalon-Soisalo – whose memory and 100th birthday we just celebrated with an international symposium

at the beginning of June – was the first professor in Biblical studies to supervise female doctoral students (first Raija and then me). The significance of this fact never occurred to me before, because I did not expect that there would be any difference between male and female students. My teacher certainly did not make any such difference. All that mattered for him was thorough knowledge of the Biblical languages and the quality of research done by his students. He was actually very strict and could be very straightforward in his comments, but he was never partial or unfair.

In fact, Finland is a pioneer in gender equality, opening to women the rights to vote and to stand for election already in 1906. The Constitution of Finland also includes the prohibition against discrimination based on gender, and specific legislation, the *Act on Equality between Women and Men*, was passed in 1987. When I entered my studies at the University of Helsinki, there were no longer any official barriers for women to proceed in academia. The final obstacle for female theologians was removed when female ordination was accepted in 1986, and the first ordinations took place in 1988, when I was also ordained among the first women in Finland.

So, I believed that we had perfect gender equality in Finland. I did not experience any problems and did not see that, in spite of the general progress in society, there was – and still is – what is called hidden discrimination. Hidden discrimination can be encountered in different areas:

in social interaction in the working environment, in the relationship between superior and subordinate personnel, in the division of labour at work, in recruitment, and in academia especially in all kinds of assessment procedures connected with applications of research funding and positions. I will comment on the last-mentioned later in this paper. The problem with hidden discrimination is that it is hidden – it is hidden in motives behind decisions and in actions that on the surface appear to be totally appropriate.

I did not know anything about this, until around the time when I was applying for a docentship (comparable to *Privatdozentur*). This is the phase in which a woman in academia (or a young scholar in general) might become a threat to someone, when she is about to become a colleague. What happened was that some of the professors of the faculty wanted to limit my competence as docent (*venia legendi*) to Septuagint studies



instead of Old Testament studies. It sounds like a small thing, but it was symptomatic. No fresh doctor or docent has a very wide competence, but it is easier to belittle the competence of a woman. Nevertheless, I was granted docentship in Old Testament studies, but the Faculty had to decide it by voting. This story had a happy end, but I soon had other experiences which did not always end happily.

I once exchanged with a prominent international female colleague about experiences with male colleagues, and it was our common experience that it was not so difficult to get along with the older generation of male colleagues. As many of them did not know how to deal with female colleagues, they just ignored us and let us mind our own business. When the old gentlemen retired, the next generation of male colleagues was more difficult, because they were already used to having women around and competing with them.

They did not know what to do either with a female colleague who had opinions of her own, even different opinions from theirs, but they did not hesitate to show their superiority and to try to downplay the work of their female colleagues.

I have experienced many different generations of male colleagues, but I must say that I was able to work under fairly ideal circumstances, not only at the beginning, but also during the final phase of my career. I have had great cooperation with my colleagues in Helsinki and I have felt myself totally comfortable with them and respected by them.

However, I do not think that it is a question of a change that comes with time, so that gender equality gets more and more perfect with time. The working climate of a Faculty or a Department depends to a great deal on the kinds of individuals who work and especially have leading positions there. It is unfortunate that highly creative people – “ge-

niuses” – are often difficult people, even with narcissistic personalities. If such persons are allowed to determine the working climate, both male and female colleagues suffer from it. Anything can happen to those who do not belong to the favourites of the narcissistic boss. But it seldom happens openly, which makes it difficult to cope with. The only thing you can do – is to run away!

A good working climate – including gender equality – does not come about by itself. It takes people who have become conscious of the problems, who have created a sensitivity to other people’s well-being, and find it important to nurture good practices and a healthy working climate. In the CSTT – thanks to Martti Nissinen – we have tried from the very beginning to create a tradition of good practices and we also want to be open to criticism in order to further develop this tradition.

Nevertheless, more or less hidden discrimination does exist in aca-

demia – out there in the wide world, but also in Finland. There is a book about it: Liisa Husu, *Sexism, Support and Survival in Academia: Academic Women and Hidden Discrimination in Finland* (Social Psychological Studies 6, Helsinki 2001). As I said, hidden discrimination is difficult to deal with, because it is difficult to pinpoint it. This is especially the case when it is a question of applying for academic positions or research grants when the decision is based on expert statements. The reasons given are always those acceptable in academia, and it may be extremely difficult or impossible to show that some other motives played a role in the decision.

I have been assessed numerous times during my academic life and would like to tell a few instructive stories that might work as warning examples to those of us who write or read expert assessments, and for those who will be again and again assessed in the future, it is good to be

prepared for the worst! We would like to think that expert assessments are perfectly correct and truthful. But even experts are only human beings – sometimes extremely human.

I have a long history of applying for professorships: I have applied seven times and been the second choice every time but once. I also applied for an Academy professorship (which is a research professorship granted by the Academy of Finland) a dozen times, ending up on the short list about five times but never reaching the goal. As a result, I have a career of 25 years as a professor behind me, so that I don't actually have anything to complain about. But that is not the point.

The first time, in the 1980's, when I applied for a professorship and ended up the second choice, that was a great success. I was a fresh docent, the youngest of the five applicants, and the two international experts placed me second after Timo Veijola, who was self-evidently the one to

be chosen, because he was so much ahead of us all. You can imagine that I was happy with the second position, but of course the other applicants were not.

The second time I applied for a professorship, I ended up the second after my husband. I could not complain this time either. We kept it in the family!

The third time I ended up the second choice on the list of the Faculty, I nevertheless got the job: that was in Göttingen in 1990. The reason why I am sharing this is the interesting fact that one of the experts for Göttingen was the same reviewer who had written the assessment for Helsinki. This particular expert wrote very nicely about me for Helsinki; he wrote that if it were in his power, he would give me a Septuagint professorship. A few years later, when I had applied for a Septuagint professorship in Göttingen, the same expert placed before me another person who was actually no Septuagint

scholar at all. This time he did not write nicely about me. He wrote that I had done no independent scholarly work at all; my doctoral thesis had been so closely supervised by my teacher that I could not be regarded as an independent scholar.

Obviously, something had happened between the two assessments. No doubt, the expert had received some disinformation. The phenomenon is not new! I have also heard the same allegation from other directions. Of course, I followed in the footsteps of my teacher – in the sense that all doctoral students do – but I applied his methodology independently to new areas of study. In fact, most of the time when I prepared my dissertation I lived far from Helsinki, so that the opportunities to discuss my work with my supervisor were few.

Another thing that happened is that the Faculty had obviously made their choice before asking for the expert reviews, and the reviews were supposed to support the decision of

the Faculty. As far as I know, this is normal practice in Germany. All in all, I do not know why I was placed second and I do not know why I was appointed by the ministry. Was the reason for both that I was a woman or that I was a foreigner or something else? Equally difficult to understand is that this appointment from the second position was used against me later. Nevertheless, since I had been serious about my application (and at that time did not know about the assessments), I accepted the call and spent in Göttingen – teaching and doing Septuagint research – all together twelve years that were not easy but most significant for my career.

The general understanding is that decisions about academic recruitments are made based on academic merits alone. Nevertheless, there are situations where a Faculty definitely wants to have a certain person, whatever their merits. The regulations are different in different

countries, so that the freedom of the Faculty to recruit whom they want may be legitimate in some places. Anyhow, the decisions are officially backed up by corresponding assessments. It happened to me again later a couple of times in a few other universities that I was placed second after a clearly younger male colleague whom the Faculty obviously wanted to have, and the reviews were written – or at least interpreted – correspondingly.

In most cases the assessments are written in a favourable tone, the difference being seen just in the degree of praise or in the emphasis on certain aspects of competence. It has however happened to me a few times that the so-called expert assessment has been totally polemical, destructive and evil. In Finland, the candidates have in some cases a chance to disqualify an expert in advance, however it is difficult to anticipate a polemical assessment. The reviewers are also expected

to disqualify themselves, but this mostly happens in cases in which the review could be expected to be too favourable and not if the opposite is the case. When you get a polemical assessment about yourself, there is not much you can do. It is hard to prove that the assessment is wrong. Complaining about the decision normally does not help. The female candidate just spoils her reputation by complaining.

As for the Academy professorship, I kept applying in a time when it was often said that there were not enough women among the Academy professors. Most of the time, there was even a woman representing theology on the committee. I was shortlisted four or five times, and had some great reviews by world-famous scholars – although also a polemical one. Twice there was a male colleague from the Faculty of Theology applying simultaneously for the third term, and both times they were granted the third terms

(adding up to 15 years in Academy professorship). During those years, I was granted project funding by the same committee twice, so that I could build my research team, which was great, but I suffered from lack of time for my own research. It would have been much more effective to be able to work full-time with the research group. Was there discrimination, and if so, for what reason? Hard to say.

With these stories, I do not want to discourage, but rather wish to encourage those among us who will be writing many applications and getting assessments about themselves in the near future. It is not a catastrophe if you need to apply a few times more. And you should not despair if you get bad reviews – although it does hurt. All unfairness, bullying, and discrimination hurts. What you should do, if anything of that sort happens to you, is that you should find a person with whom you can talk about it confidentially,

someone who can go through the assessments with you, or whatever is the problem, and tell you what is right and what is wrong and what you can learn about it.

But before anything happens, there are certain prophylactic measures that you can take. The first thing to prevent bad reviews is to do good work. Do not let half-finished work out of your hands. It also helps to keep up the motivation if you find pleasure in your research and do it because you have great interest in it. Another thing to do is that you should network, so that your future reviewers know you and the good work you do. But this is something the young people today know a great deal better than I did when I was at the beginning.





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