

## Distorting the Past. Gender and the Division of Labor in the European Upper Paleolithic

Linda Owen

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### Reviewed by MARTA CAMPS

Departmental of Anthropology, Center for the Advanced Study of Hominid Paleobiology, The George Washington University, 2110 G Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20051, USA; [mcamps@gwu.edu](mailto:mcamps@gwu.edu)

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The hunting of big game in prehistory has always been thought of as an activity that would be carried out by strong and able men, who would have the role of meat-winners (since there was no bread at that time), while women were busy taking care of young children and picking up some berries and a few other sundries that would then complement a diet based primarily on big game meat. Hence the importance of 'Man the Hunter,' and the less-regarded and dependent role of 'Woman the Gatherer.' Owen demonstrates that this simply was not true.

The image described above was created by multiple factors, such as ethnographic accounts written by men who studied hunter-gatherer groups in the present day—Owen's examples of these focus mainly on high-latitude groups in North America—and the fact that, until recently, big game remains were more easily appreciated by archaeologists in general to name just a couple. This volume shows that, most likely, the role of large game hunting in Paleolithic subsistence was actually rather limited when compared to those activities thought to be—until recently—much less important and relevant than large game oriented hunting.

If we were to believe the accounts that support the aforementioned image, we would have to admit also that Paleolithic men were clearly over-worked, even during old age. The very same 'Man-the-Hunter' was not only busy hunting, but also was the sole tool maker—because many researchers assume that women did not produce stone tools—and that these same men were the only ones who protected their kin and the site, even when away hunting. Particular enlightening here is that Owen shows that the concept of men being the only ones who manufactured stone tools is an assumption made even by contemporary skilled female flintknappers. This illustrates, of course, how deeply entrenched these ideas presently are, even for people who are active in the field and can clearly see and document that women also can flintknape and make good caliber tools.

*Distorting the Past* early on lays out the extent to which ethnographic reports are biased and offer inaccurate data. This is, in fact, one of the factors that make Owen's study an important contribution to archaeological research and to the study of the Paleolithic, not just in terms of gender issues, but more generally speaking. Ethnographic reports have two different types of problems. The earliest reports were written primarily by men, who would have brief encounters (if any at all) with the groups they were writing about—and supposedly mostly, if not only, encounters with the men of the group. These reports were based on

unsystematic observations mainly about activities carried out by men, due to the fact that feminine activities were considered rather irrelevant. Later studies suffered from the fact that the groups observed had been in contact with "the modern world" for centuries, and thus did not resemble the groups that were being ultimately studied in many ways, i.e., the prehistoric hunter-gatherers. Owen offers examples of case-studies that demonstrate that many of the these two types of reports are simply incorrect.

Owen's review of these ethnographies questions many stereotypical ideas usually taken for granted by archaeologists and it offers examples of many accounts which lay out the concepts that resulted in the transfer of generalizations often applied to men and women in the modern world to their counterparts in the Paleolithic. What is important to note is that these accounts have not been written by men alone, as there are cases where the authors or co-authors are women. I must admit that a few of these accounts are really funny, but the smile they produced disappeared rapidly, when I considered that while most women working on the Paleolithic would not believe such concepts for a minute, perhaps other people who read these accounts from personal interest, as well as younger students, might well believe the accounts to be accurate. Thus is perpetuated the erroneous ideas that nowadays plague the field.

*Distorting the Past* is largely centered on studying the activities often associated with women (gathering, hunting small game, fishing, etc.) and offers extremely detailed studies of these tasks. It stresses their importance not only in terms of dietary factors, but also notes that these activities supply those groups with materials that were used to make clothing, containers, tools, etc. The analyses of the activities and their importance, using a vast array of information sources, clearly show that the traditional feminine activities had much more importance in terms of subsistence than generally thought.

It also makes clear that assumptions about female biology and the typical factors which are usually put forward to attribute to them the roles of gatherers, child bearers, and minders, and to disassociate them from any prominent roles in the subsistence strategies of their group are more the excuses that support biased accounts and studies than solid data from ethnographic or archaeological investigations. In many cases, these claims are supported by little or no evidence at all, and in most of them, they are gross generalizations which are clearly false, as these factors and their effects vary greatly in the way they affect women's lives.

Owen puts women in the picture, a picture that until recently only showed strong men hunting big game. The so-called "typical scenarios" need to be revised by taking into account modern and more detailed archaeological research, which have offered a vast array of new information about issues such as subsistence factors other than those related to the hunting of large prey. Although Owen does not put women completely into large prey hunting scenario, which is something that the reader might expect, this may be because it is erroneous to assume that diet in prehistory was dominated by big game. Rather, Owen convincingly shows that both men and women could have had a large variety of roles, depending on a long list of circumstances and factors. She does mention that women who were not pregnant or nursing would have been completely able to take part in those big game hunting activities, but the importance of women's role in the diet and subsistence in general during the Paleolithic is mostly asserted by showing the importance of the so called "feminine activities." One wonders if any men who were not fit to chase big and dangerous animals would have joined or assisted women in daily household chores.

Personally, I approach "feminist" perspectives to life in general with a bit of caution, because I could not disagree more with those whose aim is not to correct the extant bi-

ases that put women in a lower or less important position in many activities or situations than men, but instead, try to institute the reverse position, that women are superior in just about everything. In this respect I found Owen's study to be exemplary because it does not attempt this type of "make-over." If present biases about the roles of men and women in prehistory are to be corrected, it will not happen by trying to demonstrate that the correct version is to be found at the other end of the stick. Clearly, avoiding this pitfall is one of the strengths of Owen's study.

This volume is far more than an attempt to correct current ideas about the roles of men and women in hunter-gatherer societies in the Paleolithic. Due to the large body of extremely detailed information that it contains on all the factors (other than large game hunting) that are grouped under subsistence activities (plants, small game, fish, etc.) and the myriad of categories and variants that are included under those main headings, I believe *Distorting the Past* will be of great importance not only for Paleolithic scholars and researchers, but also for those working on ethnography and in the field of cultural anthropology in general. A very large references section and detailed appendixes on plant foods and plant uses also add to the value of a very interesting and praise-worthy volume.