

THE OTHER GENDER: THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF AN EARLY 20TH CENTURY FRATERNITY

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ABSTRACT

Studies of gender within historical archaeology have largely focused upon the experiences of women rather than dealing with the issue of how gender is constructed and changes through the course of an individual's life. In this paper, the relationship between age-status and gender role within the early 20th century, all male community of Zeta Psi fraternity is explored. The men of Zeta Psi balanced their need to maintain a sense of male identity while also adjusting to the domestic necessities of running an all male household. Archaeological, documentary and oral historical data are utilized to understand how the brothers of Zeta Psi maintained a shared sense of masculinity while also instituting a gender-age status system within the house.

INTRODUCTION

The study of gender within historical archaeology has generally come to mean the archaeology of women (e.g. Gilchrist 1994; Seifert 1991; Wall 1994). While it is clear that "remedial" research is necessary to counteract traditional androcentric biases within archaeology, a nuanced study of shifting and multiple gender ideologies, and the recognition of genders and gender roles beyond simple "male" and "female" dichotomies has remained elusive.

Gender, as defined by Conkey and Gero (1991) and others (Seifert 1991; Moore and Scott 1997; Wall 1994), is a socially constructed phenomenon that is historically situated and constantly negotiated by individuals. "Gender, then, is a constitutive element of human social relations, based on culturally perceived and culturally inscribed differences and similarities between and among males and females" (Conkey and Gero 1991:8).

Gender roles, and the expression of gender, are also culturally negotiated and shift through time. Gender roles shift not only through the broader tapestry of history, but also during the course of an individual's life. Childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and elderly adulthood, are all examples of stages of life, that depending upon the cultural context, can carry different gender expectations and obligations. Throughout their lifetimes, individuals constantly

negotiate their sense of identity, with gender comprising part of that identity.

It is this shift from one gender role to another within the life of an individual that I focus upon here, drawing upon a historical archaeological study of a single-sex community, the 1920s fraternity house community of Zeta Psi, located on the U. C. Berkeley campus. While the sexual composition of the fraternity population consisted only of men, within the fraternity community multiple definitions of male gender, based upon status within the house, were constructed and represented.

GENDER EXPECTATIONS AND ROLES IN THE FRATERNITY HOUSE

Outside of the fraternity house, the members of Zeta Psi lived in a cultural setting that in most situations recognized a simple dichotomy between the biological sexes and the genders associated with them. Women predominately acted within the domestic sphere, with meal preparation and service, cleaning, entertaining of family, mending and childcare being recognized as activities that marked "femaleness." Men served as the central authority to their families, and outside of the home, interacting in the commercial world with other men.

It is well known that different socioeconomic, ethnic and regional influences led to many different variations in the way that manhood and

womanhood were expressed, and many alternate lifestyles that did not conform with these ideas existed. However, as young men of European-American descent who were raised in upper-middle and upper class households, the fraternity men were likely to have defined themselves, and potential mates, according to these gender expectations.

While the brothers may have seen their gender roles in the broader community as clearly defined, the nature of fraternity life would provide a gender-contradictory structural arrangement. All of the brothers shared a common career: they worked as students outside of the fraternity "home," and in a sense, were fulfilling an expected adult male role. However, within the fraternity, there were many "domestic" household tasks that needed tending.

One way that the fraternity covered a portion of traditional "women's" work was to hire a cook and servant to prepare and serve meals. From at least 1900 through the 1930s, cooks and servants hired by the fraternity were Chinese or Japanese men (Beales n.d.). These immigrants were typically feminized by white American society. Therefore, using members of these ethnic groups to fulfill a "woman's duty" would make cultural logic to members of the fraternity, and would not be contradictory.

Despite the presence of the cook and his aid, there still remained many "housekeeping" tasks that were required for the house to be maintained. The fraternity drew some assistance in these matters from their "Mothers' Club," which consisted of the brothers' mothers. These women met periodically at the house and discussed what rooms needed repair, which furniture should be reupholstered, and what housekeeping gadgets should be purchased. The Mothers' Club did not clean the house or scrub the bathrooms (Beales n.d.; Zeta Psi Archive 1933/4). Clearly, it was necessary for these tasks to be reassigned within the all male community in a way that did not ultimately threaten traditional gender expectations. This dilemma was resolved in the form of the development of two age/class/rank associated gender identities or roles for the brothers, representing "subadults" and "adults" within the house.

The fraternity became ranked by age and class status into two major groups: upper classmen and lower classmen. Upper classmen represented the

elders of the house, and fulfilled the gender role of adult males. They were the "leaders" of the house. They sat at the head of the communal table during meals, disciplined the younger members of the house, and served as the primary representatives of the house to the broader university community (Beales n.d.; Forkner 1996; Zeta Psi Archive 1933/34; Zeta Psi Fraternity 1977).

The lower classmen, particularly uninitiated freshmen (freshmen were initiated at the end of their first year), represented the "youths" of the house. They expected to be supervised, mentored, and disciplined by the upper classmen until they had achieved that status, and became the elders to new groups of lower classmen. As part of their responsibilities, the lower classmen were expected to clean the house. Saturdays were spent polishing furniture and woodwork, cleaning floors and scrubbing the bathrooms. If the upper classmen perceived a deficiency in their efforts, the lower classmen were punished with a naked dunking in a tub of ice water (Forkner 1996; Zeta Psi Archive 1933/34). This form of punishment was only forced on lower classmen.

In addition to their cleaning and maintenance obligations, the lower classmen also were the hosts to the Mothers' Club during their meetings. The mothers met over a social tea, an event Wall (1994) has argued became an activity almost exclusively within the women's realm by the mid-19th century. As the members of the house responsible for tasks usually associated with women, the lower classmen were the obvious house representatives at these events.

THE MAINTENANCE OF A "MALE" IDENTITY

It would be tempting to describe the lower classmen within this household structure as being "feminized" or symbolically acting as the women of the fraternity house. However, if the lower classmen were merely symbolic "women," it is unlikely that they could successfully make the transformation from lower classmen to upper classmen after their sophomore year. In any given year, the new upper classmen (juniors) would become the equals of individuals they had once been lower classmen with (seniors), and had then served under as upperclassmen. For this transition to be smooth, it was important that all of the men within the community identify one

another foremost as "men," not as men and feminized men.

In contrast, the Chinese and Japanese servants, while biologically male, would never be seen as equal "men" by the fraternity brothers. Ethnocentric biases and racism would forever keep these men feminized in the eyes of the fraternity members. The brothers' view of the Chinese and Japanese servants as "feminine" or "childlike" was prevalent throughout several of the oral histories collected for this project.

The archaeological record provides some insight into the ways that fraternity brothers maintained a shared sense of "maleness" and brotherhood that allowed the participation of both upperclassmen and lower classmen as equals or near equals. The three activities that I will focus my discussion upon are the activities of social drinking, dining, and cross-dressing as part of fraternity skits.

Alcoholic beverage containers were the most frequently recovered artifact from the site. Alcohol consumption, whether to excess or in moderation, is a common social medium, both in the past and present, both within and outside of fraternity contexts. In consuming alcoholic beverages in a social setting, the brothers of Zeta Psi were not different from broader American society.

The 128 alcohol beverage containers from the site date to the period of Prohibition. Although alcohol was illegal, it is well known that alcohol consumption did not cease during Prohibition. While a number of liquor and wine bottles were recovered from the site, the majority of bottles recovered from Zeta Psi were beer bottles. Not all consumption of beer during Prohibition was necessarily illegal. Legally available were products sometimes referred to as "near beers". These were similar to modern alcohol-free beers. Near-beers were available commercially, but were sometimes altered by consumers who would inject them with ethyl alcohol, so they would still provide a buzz (Blaidsell-Sloan 1996:13).

Alumni remembered fraternity brothers frequenting speak-easies in Emeryville and obtaining liquor through bootleggers. One of the products recovered from the site was a "Gordon's London Gin" bottle. At least two Gordon's bottles were recovered from the site. Gordon's gin was one of the liquors sold by bootleggers in the Berkeley area (Beales n.d.). John Beales, a Zeta

alumni from the class of 1929, remembered buying Gordon's London Gin from bootleggers and later burying the empty bottles behind the fraternity house. This act of defiance, that of consuming illegally procured alcohol and colluding to hide the evidence, serves as a means of binding the brothers together.

Importantly, the instances in which social drinking by fraternity brothers took place were within the context of small or impromptu social gatherings whose participants were limited to fraternity members. "Beer busts" included Zeta Psi brothers from other universities, but not outsiders to Zeta Psi. Socials, another occasion when social drinking is mentioned, were open to brothers and their dates. Once again, the emphasis is on participation by the brothers, not outsiders (Beales n.d.; Forkner 1996; Zeta Psi Archive 1923, 1933/34).

Perhaps the most evocative artifacts recovered were numerous "hotel" porcelain sherds decorated with a green Zeta Psi crest. Many different vessels in this pattern, including dinner plates, bread plates, berry bowls, serving bowls, teacups, demitasse cups, and saucers were recovered. Brothers dined together at breakfast and dinner, with upperclassmen sitting at the head of the table, and lower classmen at the foot (Anonymous Alumni n.d.).

The fraternity was no different from other households, in that their ceramic assemblage while serving as a testament to their socioeconomic status, also conveyed ideological meaning to its members. To brothers dining together, the image of the fraternity crest on the dinnerware reinforced their sense of community and brotherhood with one another, providing an important visual reinforcement of their ties. The fraternity crest is not merely a decorative device, but has important meanings to initiated members of the fraternity (Zeta Psi 1977).

The crest of the fraternity is composed of imagery that symbolizes the shared traditions and values of the fraternity, and represents the responsibilities of the brothers as they progress through initiation, school and after. The crest also contains the letters "TKΦ," which are the Greek spelling of the fraternity motto. As an initiate, a new brother becomes introduced and indoctrinated into the meanings of the fraternity's symbolic structures. A new brother, looking at the crest during a meal, is having the new principles

and structures of the brotherhood reinforced, and is sharing that experience with other brothers.

A small set of adornment related artifacts were intriguing because they are items usually associated with women. These included a gold hat pin, two glass beads and ornate buttons typical of women's clothing. I had initially wondered if these few artifacts represented a small female influence within a predominately male house. However, upon perusing the historical photographs of fraternity members from the 1920s, another explanation presented itself. Among the archival photographs from the current Zeta Psi house were a number of photos documenting men dressed as women in front of the fraternity house (Zeta Psi Archive 1923).

Cross-dressing for skits and parties remains a facet of fraternity life. By mimicking women, and therefore defining them as "other," and different, men may have reinforced their image of maleness and brotherhood. I have found no record of contexts in which cross-dressing may have taken place, and given contemporary gender and sexual orientation preferences that are associated with cross-dressing, many alumni were reluctant to talk about this facet of fraternity life. It seems clear from the photographs that the purpose of cross-dressing was parody rather than emulation of female characteristics. Through cross-dressing, upperclassmen and lower classmen could reaffirm their shared identity as male.

CONCLUSIONS

In closing, within the Zeta Psi fraternity, the all-male community redefined itself as having members who represented subadult brothers and adult brothers. The subadult brothers fulfilled those roles within the house that would ordinarily be perceived by them to be women's work. Upper classmen, or the adult brothers, fulfilled the role of the head of the house, or the role they would perceive as the traditional adult male role.

While maintaining this split in gender status roles, brothers ensured that all members of the house participated in activities that reinforced both their sense of community and sense of masculinity. Through a reconsideration of documentary, oral and archaeological material from an engendered perspective, it has been possible to see ways in which fraternity brothers constructed a sense of identity while also reassigning household labor that was ordinarily divided along sex lines. Although the brothers of Zeta Psi lived in a community that would be ordinarily perceived as merely "single sex," it is clear from this reanalysis that multiple gender identities can be constructed within any population, despite its "biological" composition. By creating archaeologies that focus on simple men/women dichotomies, archaeologists risk missing the more dynamic and fluid nature of an individual's identity.

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