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## Materializing and Embodying Sex and Gender: Interpreting Gender and Sex Variance in Iron Age Pre-Roman and Roman Britain Mortuary Contexts

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Materializing and Embodying Sex and Gender:  
Interpreting Gender and Sex Variance in Iron Age Pre-Roman and Roman Britain Mortuary  
Contexts

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## Introduction

In the fields of archaeology and bioarchaeology, gender and sex binaries have long been used as starting points and often are narrowly defined through Western culture and values. This traditional approach tends to overlook variance unless something “unusual” is found. This study considers gender and sex through a critical Feminist lens, giving greater attention to variance, ambiguity, and variability compared to traditional modes of inquiry and praxis in the field of archaeology. Because gender and sex are both socio-culturally and historically informed, it is imperative that archaeologists not assume a normative binary construct and give equal consideration to nonbinary identities; this requires close attention to context in the archaeological record (Geller, 2005). For example, Montserrat’s (2000) study of Roman society suggests that a strict male/female binary gender system was not followed. This paper builds upon the exploration of gender and sex variance in the archaeological and bioarchaeological records from both Pre-Roman and Roman mortuary sites in Britain and beyond. This study cross-examines the material culture and skeletal remains from the Hillside Farm and Harper Road burial sites to assess a nonbinary gender and/or sex system throughout the Iron Age. This work prompts an ongoing reassessment of the often automatic assumptions that the gender and sex binary system is universal, regardless of space and time. The marginalization of non-binary individuals and gender systems in (bio)archaeology risks obscuring significant identities in the past. It is important to understand burials and their associated grave goods to establish personal and cultural identities of the individual(s), which may be interpreted as reflections of the society’s ideas, beliefs, or social structures. Before closely examining the Hillside Farm and Harper Road case studies, below I outline some core theoretical concepts for understanding the gender and sex (non)binary system both in the past and present.

## **Understanding the Non-Binary in Past and Present Reconstructions**

When we talk about gender, it is essential to remember that it is a social construct that varies across time and region, which shapes the ways that an individual is expected to act and dress in their society. In some cultures, like the Chumash, multiple genders are recognized, which hold different identities within different social groups (Power, 2020). In Chumash society, two-spirit is accepted as a third gender category designated to individuals assigned male at birth who live as women but encompass both male and female genders as well. Two-spirits in Chumash tradition were and are occupational experts responsible for undertaking and other funerary responsibilities (Hollimon, 1997). Their status as funerary and mourning ritual authorities emphasizes their spiritual power which the members of their society invested in them (Hollimon, 1997). However, many ethnographies identify women, men, and two-spirits as undertakers which suggests that the gender of the undertaker could be altered while performing such tasks, reverting to their “original” gender once the task is completed (Hollimon, 1997). The intermediary gender position of two-spirits is regarded as an indication of their spiritual position between earthly and supernatural realms, allowing them to mediate between human and divine worlds (Hollimon, 1997).

How individuals with multiple genders act and their expression of gender(s) through clothing and other material culture may be different than the gender(s) that others in their society perceive them to be (Power, 2020). A non-binary gender structure refers to a gender system that does not follow a binary system, and non-binary as a gender category refers to genders that do not align with the strict male/female dichotomy common in Western societies (Power, 2020). For example, when studying Imperial Rome, Montserrat (2000) theorized that some individuals in Roman society were not considered in terms of a male/female binary gender system (Power,

2020). One of Montserrat's (2000) examples were the Vestal Virgins whose lack of procreative activities likely indicated their transcendence of a binary gender system (see also Power, 2020). Additionally, those unable to procreate were also not considered male or female either (Montserrat, 2000). Montserrat's theory aligns with the Roman literature of the time, where women of power were often considered masculine (Power, 2020).

Today, the term 'non-binary' is a gender category often lumped under the umbrella term of 'transgender', however, some non-binary people in contemporary Western society do not identify as transgender for a wide range of reasons (Power, 2020). The term 'transgender' refers to individuals who identify as a gender that does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. Notably, in Western cultures, gender is generally determined by an individual's assigned sex at birth. However, there are several exceptions to "the rule", as many cultures employ non-binary gender systems (Power, 2020). I must also assert that sex and gender are not linked in any way except socially (i.e., sex does not determine gender unless society says it does). Additionally, intersex individuals make up more than two percent of all live births, if not more (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Intersexuality is determined by the presence of culturally determined sex characteristics which are not typically associated with the sex binary of male or female (Power, 2020). The Intersex Society of North America (2008) stated, "Nature doesn't decide where the category of 'male' ends and the category of 'intersex' begins, or where the category of 'intersex' ends, and the category of 'female' begins. *Humans decide.*" As such, presumably, there should be evidence in the archaeological record of sex and gender variance that existed in some form in the ancient past.

During skeletal analysis in bioarchaeology, morphological variance and quantifiable dimorphism (distinct differences in size or form between sexes) are often used to indicate the sex

of the subject (Geller, 2005). The human female pelvis is usually wider to aid in childbirth and therefore the pelvis is often used by bioarchaeologists as a marker of sexual difference (Geller, 2005). Unfortunately, in archaeological contexts the pelvis is often very fragmented, resulting in the assessment of sex through other, more subtle skeletal elements with respect to their dimorphism (Geller, 2005). Some cranial features studied for morphological difference when present are the nuchal crest, mastoid process, supraorbital margin, glabellar region, and mental eminence (Geller, 2005). Age also often affects sex estimation; that is, it is not an exact science and there is a lot of gray areas. It is often difficult to estimate the sex of subadults because their skeletal systems have not yet developed traits diagnostic of sexual difference (Geller, 2005). It has also been documented that post-menopausal individuals have often been misidentified as male since post-menopausal changes yield larger crania in older females (Geller, 2005). Importantly, in cases of sexual ambiguity, an assignment is still recorded as either a male or female “determination” rather than “estimation,” reflecting the investigator’s bias toward a universal gender/sex binary (Geller, 2005).

In bioarchaeological studies, intersex, non-binary, and transgender identities have seldom been considered. This is often attributed to the lack of methods surrounding the investigation and assessment of sex and gender variant individuals’ skeletal remains (Power, 2020). The categories most often used in the osteological estimation of sex are simply male, female, unknown or intermediate, and juvenile (Power, 2020). However, the field is adapting and employing new methods to aid in more accurate and contextually informed sex estimation. In the Harper Road burial from Iron Age Roman Britain, an individual was long presumed to be female through skeletal and grave good evaluation, until aDNA analysis showed the individual had XY chromosomes (Redfern, et al., 2017, p. 257-261). Such ancient DNA studies and analysis can

provide additional ways to identify varying gene arrangements that are often concealed in traditional skeletal analyses (Geller, 2008). This further promotes elaboration on the presumed linkage between biological sex and gender in past societies (Geller, 2008).

As archaeologists and bioarchaeologists, it is also crucial that we ask if it is even possible to determine, even estimate, intersexuality (or sex in general, for that matter) from skeletal remains (Geller, 2005). The skeletal structures of intersex individuals often have only slight differences from the skeletal structures of ‘non-intersex’ individuals (Geller, 2005). These skeletal differences are often observed in vertebral areas, specifically the lumbar and thoracic regions, as intersex individuals have significantly higher rates of scoliosis (Geller, 2005). However, most intersex conditions are only evident through molecular testing (Geller, 2017). Therefore, for intersex individuals of the past who had no external bodily differences or infertility, their genetic variance may have had no significance in their lived experience (Geller, 2017).

Additional to the fields’ restriction of the ways by which we may come to understand the body by privileging contemporary Western interpretations of skeletal analysis and the supposed ‘objective’ methods of the natural sciences (Geller, 2005), interpretations of sex and gender in mortuary and bioarchaeological analyses have commonly relied on the assumption that associated grave goods and burial contexts can be ascribed a gender marking based on a binary biological sex category of just male or female (Ghisleni, Jordan, et al., 2016). Several researchers have studied and commented on the inclination of archaeologists and osteologists to preserve the physical-social divide of a binary gender and sex system (Ghisleni, Jordan, et al., 2016). Because bodies are malleable, the skeletal structure forms through the process of lived human action, not a fixed attribute of anatomy (Ghisleni, Jordan, et al., 2016). As such, the usual outcome of such

biases and practices lead to the dismissal of ‘unsexable’ remains and ‘neutral burials’ or remains and burials which do not easily align with masculine or feminine patterns of grave good distribution from investigations of gendered arrangements in mortuary contexts (Ghisleni, Jordan, et al., 2016). The ambiguity of gender and sex variance characteristics as discussed above, further obscure assigning sex as a discrete classification. Practitioners in the field must recognize the reality that some cultures from the past (and present) have not always based sex differences upon genitalia, associated fluids, reproductive capabilities, or perceived sex and/or gender in a binary system (Geller, 2005). In accepting that the line between male and female may not be a discrete separation but a permeable boundary, archaeology is forced to re-evaluate the viability of gender and sex binaries, as the case studies presented below emphasize.

### **Reconstructing a Non-Binary Gender/Sex System for Pre-Roman and Roman Britain**

An interred individual on the isle of Pryher, off the coast of Cornwall at the Hillside Farm site was highly fragmented and determined to be an ‘unsexable’ adult. This Hillside Farm burial is also the only known burial containing both a sword and mirror from Iron Age Britain (Jordan, 2016). Mirrors and swords have been interpreted as elevated status, gendered grave goods, which cut across regional divisions in the pre-Roman British Iron Age (Jordan, 2016). Swords and mirrors have commonly been understood as elite status symbols which classified binary gender identities associated with male and female individuals (Jordan, 2016). This interpretation is based on the patterned distribution of such goods in burials where sexing was possible, with early Iron Age British graves with swords being found with probable males, and mirrors being found with probable females (Jordan, 2016). Scholars have identified the presence of iron/bronze swords or mirrors in inhumation or cremation burials as a minority rite across the island, which was focused on marking both high status and gender (Jordan, 2016). The discovery of both a

sword and mirror in this single inhumation at the Hillside Farm site upends this pattern and brings into question the long-held assumption that pre-Roman (and Roman) society in Britain understood sex and gender as a strict binary, which is frequently applied to past (and present) discussions of British Iron Age mortuary contexts (Jordan, 2016).

Another archaeological example of a potentially misidentified non-binary individual was found at the Harper Road Burial in Southwark, London. Here, the skeletal remains of an individual were originally assumed to be female based on both their bone structure and grave goods until aDNA confirmed the individual had XY chromosomes (Power, 2020). The grave goods present in the burial were traditionally associated with women; they include a ceramic flagon at the individual's head, a decorative neck ring, and a bronze mirror at their feet (Power, 2020). This individual was approximately 21-38 years old and of probable European ancestry, likely having grown up in Britain (Power, 2020). This burial is dated to about 50-70 AD, so the individual likely lived through the conquest of Britain by the Romans (Redfern, et al., 2017, p. 257). Therefore, during their life, they were likely influenced by both Roman and local traditions, which informed the use of female-gendered grave goods and their gender/sex expression perhaps both in life and in death (Power, 2020). Redfern et al. (2017, p. 257) concluded that the individual may have been an intersex person and/or a transgender woman. It is probable that the individual was perceived as a woman in their society, or at least by those who buried them (Power, 2020). Montserrat's study of Roman and British sex and gender systems suggests that individuals who did not or could not reproduce would likely have been identified as a third gender, which parallels this individual who would have been unable to reproduce in the way that is typically attributed to biologically sexed females (Power, 2020). As such, this Romano-British person from the Harper Road Burial may have considered themselves

to be a type of non-binary gender, *transcending* the definitions of gender or sex which were assigned to other Romano-British men and women who successfully bore children (Power, 2020).

### **Gender and Sex Variance as Sources of Power and Prestige**

While many cultures have rejected and marginalized non-binary individuals and gender systems, other cultures show evidence that non-binary identities held significant power and prestige. For instance, the presence of the neck ring uncovered from the Iron Age Roman-Britain Harper Road burial suggests the individual held a prestigious status and powerful role in their community (Power, 2020). The neck ring ornament was atypical in its decoration with a wreath of feathers or laurel leaves. The design is similar to the feather pattern of peacocks which signified immortality in Roman religion and were also associated with Juno, the goddess of female fertility and marriage (Power, 2020). However, the feathers have also been interpreted as a victory wreath meant to imitate the Roman armillae often found in Britain as a potential form of rebellion against the male military symbolism which was evident in Roman culture at the time (Redfern, et al., 2017, p. 260-61). Either way, both interpretations support the theory that this individual who is thought to be intersex was influential in their community. Montserrat's theory on the sex/gender systems of Rome points to the interpretation that the individual likely was classified as 'powerful' which would have also classified them, to some extent, as 'masculine' (Montserrat, 2000). In addition to the grave goods already mentioned, there were Samian ware sherds (red pottery produced in Gaul during Roman rule) (Power, 2020). Samian ceramics were highly valued, as they were repaired and restored more often than any other goods (Willis, 2011, p. 171-180). The Hillside Farm burial's high-quality ceramics and other goods, including the craftsmanship of the sword, sheath, and mirror point to their wealth, status, and power, perhaps

because of (not in spite of) their gender and/or sex variance in their Romano-British society (Jordan, 2016).

### **Burial Practices as Mirrors of Society**

Swords and mirrors as important grave goods to signify different personal and cultural identities were a feature in burials from many parts of the Iron Age world. Burials from Early Iron Age Greece with swords and other weapons have often been classified as ‘warrior burials’. However, not all individuals buried with such weapons were warriors in the literal sense. Many Macedonian tombs from the time had weapons as grave goods, illustrating their commonality in aristocratic burials (Whitley, 2002, p. 219). Macedonian kings were also often buried with weapons, like swords, to signify warrior status (even if they had never fought), as Macedonian kings were warriors by definition and had to be buried as such (Whitley, 2002, p. 219). Additionally, Heinrich Harke (1990) found that many of the graves with the biggest and most elaborate iron weapons were that of adolescent individuals (12 to 14-year-olds), even though they would have been too young to be able to wield such weapons effectively (Whitley, 2002, p. 220). Furthermore, a pathological study of skeletal remains of other individuals from the period and region without weapons, found that many of the individuals had numerous injuries consistent with war wounds, suggesting probable warriors (Harke 1990; 1992). Thus, a significant number of the individuals buried with weapons were not warriors (at least in the literal sense), and many literal warriors were buried without weapons (Whitley, 2002, p. 220). As with most material culture in burial contexts, their connotations may have been symbolic and idealized, rather than based on an actual lived experience (Whitley, 2002, p. 219).

The spread of weapon burials in some Iron Age contexts was likely a symptom of increased importance in the idea of a masculine self and other narratives which reinforced it (Whitley, 2002, p. 219). By examining ‘weapon burials’ like that of Iron Age Grecian and Roman British contexts in more symbolic terms, they may be better understood as metaphors for a masculine standard or ideal (Whitley, 2002, p. 219). Burials with weapons have long been described as exemplifying the relationships of associations between masculinity, skill in combat, and political power, as much honor was given to those who inherited warrior status, and those who had earned it (Whitley, 2002, p. 220). The most infamous ‘warrior burials’ of Greece are in Shaft Grave Circle A at Mycenae, and its graves IV, V, and VI, which are filled with weapons associated with masculinity, in addition to other grave goods (Whitley, 2002, p. 221). However, no osteological studies have been performed on the skeletal remains from these ‘warrior burials’, but it is apparent that not all the remains are that of adult men (Whitley, 2002, p. 223). This would suggest that this “male ideal” may not have been reserved just for biologically sexed males.

Burial and funerary practices provide opportunities for identities to be strengthened or established, as they are often reflections of contemporary ideas, beliefs, or social structures, expressing both personal and societal identities (Whitley, 2002, p. 227). For example, in Grecian and Roman British Iron Age contexts, burying an individual as a warrior (i.e., with weapons) effectively produced ideological assertions about the individual’s status, authority, and gender (Whitley, 2002, p. 227). An analysis of burial practices in Iron Age Greece revealed an age and gender polarity, rather than a masculine and feminine polarity (Whitley, 2002, p. 227). One end of the continuum encompasses young, sexually indistinguishable children who were often interred in pithoi or other large storage vessels, with the grandiose burning and breaking of men

and weapons at the other (Whitley, 2002, p. 227). This polarity suggests men are opposite children, and that masculinity and manhood ideally meant attaining warrior status (Whitley, 2002, p. 227). Adult women were sometimes cremated, other times buried and tended to be positioned between the two poles (Whitley, 2002, p. 227).

## **Conclusion**

This analysis of material and osteological remains from the Hillside Farm and Harper Road Iron Age Pre-Roman and Roman Britain considers nonbinary sex and gender systems in order to provide a more holistic investigation of personhood in Iron Age British mortuary contexts and beyond. Exploring these case studies through a Feminist lens, granted closer attention to variance, ambiguity, and variability compared to traditional analytical modes in (bio)archaeology. Cross-examining material culture and skeletal remains from the Hillside Farm and Harper Road Burial sites allows for a better understanding of the nonbinary gender/sex system for the Iron Age. Additionally, this work urges continued reassessment of the often automatic assumptions of binary gender/sex systems as universal, regardless of space and time. The marginalization of nonbinary individuals and gender systems in (bio)archaeological contexts threatens to obscure significant identities in the past. Such marginalization presents the issue of individuals' remains being assumed to be cisgender, heterosexual/romantic, endosex (opposite intersex), and to align with the Western gender/sex binary until something 'unusual' is found or interpreted (Power, 2020). It is essential archaeologists consider the nonbinary category in studies of burials, associated grave goods, and their specific contexts as it may shed light on personal or cultural identities of the individual(s) and provide a more accurate reflection of their society's ideas, beliefs, or social structures (Whitley, 2002, p. 227). Once archaeologists give nonbinary identities equal consideration in their analyses, we will be able to welcome the

ambiguity of sex and gender, especially in mortuary and osteological analyses, as variability becomes a way to successfully investigate a wider range of identities and effectively expand the field and our archaeological understandings of the past.

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