

# Why queer archaeology?

## An introduction

Thomas A. Dowson

For some time after 'coming out' I strongly believed my sexuality had nothing to do with my being an archaeologist. And with the growing interest in gender studies then, I was determined not to get involved. I know a number of lesbian and gay colleagues, in various disciplines, who have had, and still have, similar reactions. This sort of reaction does not result from being unsympathetic with issues of gender. Rather, it derives from an unspoken social rule whereby academic homosexual men and women are forced to maintain an authority to act by denying or downplaying their sexuality. David Halperin, although writing specifically of himself, describes this situation powerfully for many if not all of us. Homosexual people constantly have to negotiate the problem of how they can

acquire and maintain the authority to speak, to be heard, and to be taken seriously *without* denying or bracketing [our] gayness. It's not just a matter of being publicly or visibly out; it's a matter of being able to devise and to preserve a positive and undemonised connection between [our] gayness and [our] scholarly or critical authority. That problem of authorization to be sure, presents itself in its most acute form only to otherwise socially accredited gay men of the professional classes, but it dramatizes the more general social and discursive predicament of lesbians and gay men in a world where a claimed homosexual identity operates as an instant disqualification, exposes you to accusations of pathology and partisanship (even by other gay men, as we have seen), and grants everyone else an absolute epistemological privilege over you.

(Halperin 1995: 8)

Here Halperin is drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's analysis of the *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990).

Sedgwick explores the consequences of the binary distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality that began to be the primary defining characteristic of men and women from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. Sedgwick argues that the distinction resulted from a homophobic desire to devalue one of those oppositions. Consequently, homosexuality is not symmetrically related to heterosexuality – it is subordinate and marginal, but necessary to construct meaning and value in heterosexuality (Sedgwick 1990: 9–10). In her ground-breaking study Sedgwick argues this asymmetrical relationship between homosexuality and heterosexuality has been at the heart of every form of



representation since at least the start of the twentieth century. And archaeology, as a disciplinary culture, is surely not invulnerable to such social principles. I argue that archaeology, working within such a socio-sexual milieu, re-presents such principles, as ancient as humanity itself (Dowson 1998).

It should come as no surprise then that many archaeologists with a homosexual identity, or even those who are assumed to be homosexual, have been or are excluded from various aspects of archaeology at one time or another. In some cases, this exclusion is blatant and obvious, and can increasingly be challenged today. In others, homophobic actions are more subtle and difficult to prove, but nonetheless present despite, perhaps even in spite of, equal opportunities sentiments. The papers in this volume begin with two contributions that focus on the lives of homosexuals and homophobia in archaeology. The first is an anonymous contribution that powerfully demonstrates how a homosexual identity has impacted on the life of one professional female archaeologist and on those other people she has been in contact with over the years. The second, by Cheryl Claassen, explores the broader disciplinary culture of archaeology and forcibly demonstrates how homophobia excluded women from careers in archaeology in the US until at least the 1950s, and continues to impact the careers of women today.

Homophobia is not simply a matter of abhorrent behaviour directed towards, and thus affecting the lives of, a minority group. As is clear in both She's and Claassen's papers, homophobia affects everyone. And many of us can recount similar anecdotes and experiences. Recently I heard of a young male student who was reluctant to take my undergraduate courses because he feared his peers would discover he was gay. That fear of being thought of as un-manly also affects heterosexual men who suffer the pressures of having to live up to certain expectations of what a man should be (cf. Horrocks 1995). The careers of homosexual and heterosexual students alike are affected by fears of and prejudices about difference or deviance. For this reason alone, archaeology desperately requires an explicit programme for action.

A homosexual identity not only results in personal exclusion, it is also used both explicitly and implicitly to discount a person's research – a point made in She's personal testimony. The heterosexual male archaeologist has an epistemological privilege over the homosexual archaeologist. But that epistemological privilege not only excludes the research of homosexual men and women, it also acts to advantage and legitimize particular constructions of the past.

The past is interpreted in a strictly heterosexual manner. Archaeologists excavate living spaces, huts and houses, among other things, and impose on those units families. They talk of 'owners' and their 'wives'. There is often no evidence produced or discussed that suggests that a male and a female, conjoined in some form of ritual matrimony, and their legitimate children lived in those structures. These 'families' are drawn from our own modern, Western notions of what a family should be. Where 'homosexuals' cannot be ignored, they are deviant or pathological – a threat to the family. The presumption of heterosexuality as the norm means that such interpretations of the past are adopted uncritically and go unchallenged.

But, the privilege afforded a certain dominant group of 'normal' archaeologists in terms of their ways of constructing the past influences all aspects of archaeological practice. These include who can produce the past, the classes of archaeological data that can and

cannot be used, the way in which those data are accessed, the kind of data required, the methodologies by which constructions of the past are produced, and the ways in which those constructions are presented in both academic and popular contexts. Since inception, certain practices, techniques, and methodologies have been established and are now recognized as fundamental to the archaeological enterprise. These practices are the authoritative standards by which all archaeological research is measured, and they constitute a normative basis for the practice of archaeology. In fact 'normativity' has had a long and entrenched position in archaeological thinking. The post-processualist trends of the 1980s may have introduced a more critical and self-reflective approach to archaeology, but none of those critiques stepped away from the normative. An entirely new attitude in archaeology is required.

But the call for a new kind of archaeology is a difficult one. It does not mean learning to construct the past better, but learning new, different ways of approaching the past altogether. Such required learning is disconcerting as it points us forward into uncharted archaeologies. And the thought of 'queer archaeologies' fills even the most liberal archaeologist with fear and dread (as attested by some of the nasty objections I received as a result of my call for contributions to this volume). The normative aspects of current archaeological practice exclude certain ways of knowing about certain pasts. We cannot continue to exclude those pasts, even if the current pasts we negotiate are better than they have been previously.

Queer theory actively and explicitly challenges the heteronormativity of scientific practice. Queer theory derives from, and continues to be grounded in, politics outside academia (see Voss this volume). Queer theory is not a fashionable postmodern condition as so many believe. 'Queer' began as a challenge to essentialist constructions of a 'gay' identity (cf. papers in Simpson 1996). In contrast to gay and lesbian identity, queer identity is not based on a notion of a stable truth or reality. As Halperin explains "queer" does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*' (1995: 62).

Queer theory is not like a theory in the scientific use of the word in that it does not provide a system of ideas used to explain something, as in Marxist theory or Einstein's theory of relativity. Queer theory does not provide a positivity, rather it is a way of producing reflection, a way of taking a stand *vis-à-vis* the authoritative standard.

To effect that positionality queer theory 'takes on various shapes, risks, ambitions and ambivalences in various contexts' (Berlant and Warner 1995: 343). In so doing, it allows for 'reordering the relations among sexual behaviours, erotic identities, constructions of gender, forms of knowledge, regimes of enunciation, logics of representation, modes of self-constitution, and practices of community – for restructuring, that is, the relations among power, truth, and desire' (Halperin 1995: 62; see also de Lauretis 1991). Queer theory is thus very definitely not restricted to homosexual men and women, but to any one who feels their position (sexual, intellectual, or cultural) to be marginalized. The *queer* position then is no longer a marginal one considered deviant or pathological; but rather multiple positions within many more possible positions – all equally valid.

Queering archaeology then is actively engaged in moving away from the normative

character of archaeological discourse. In so doing, it necessarily has to confront and disrupt the presumption of heterosexuality as the norm inherent in archaeological interpretation. In this volume there are four different contributions to the issue of sexuality in archaeology. To begin with Barbara Voss provides an interesting and much needed review of the production of knowledge about past sexualities in archaeology. Greg Reeder then shows how archaeologists working on Egyptian material interpreted the relationship between two men, buried together in an Old Kingdom tomb, as twins. But, as Reeder demonstrates, if we compare the iconography of their tomb with the iconographic trends used at the time to portray husband and wife, according to the archaeologists, a different reading is possible. (There should now be no need to explain why this different reading was not initially entertained.) Eleanor Casella explores documentary and material records of a nineteenth-century Australian colonial prison for British female convicts to show how same-sex relationships can be archaeologically observed. And Yvonne Marshall provides a different way of writing about a set of stone artefacts from British Columbia and Alaska. Here, as in all queer archaeologies, being true to the artefacts we deal with as archaeologists has to do with the way we attempt to represent them.

Archaeologists have ignored sexuality largely because of the presumption of heterosexuality as the norm. It is self-evident, and any discussion is superfluous. With heterosexuality taken as read archaeologists create a heterosexist history of humanity. Queer archaeologies challenge this presumption of heterosexuality. But queer archaeologies are not only concerned with sexuality, as the last three papers in this volume show.

Queer archaeologies challenge all aspects of established normative practice (Dowson 1998). John Schofield and Mike Anderton provide an 'atypical', 'outlandish' archaeology of a Cold War site in England: Green Gate at Greenham Common Airbase. In so doing, their archaeology challenges established methodologies for twentieth-century archaeology and heritage management. Robert Wallis explores neo-shamanism as a marginalized way of knowing about and presenting the past. And, finally, Stefanie Rixecker offers the human body as an archaeological site for biotechnology. These three papers present three different controversial themes as legitimate archaeologies. They are controversial because they do not fit established, normative practices in archaeological and scientific discourse. The positions adopted by these authors challenge the epistemological privilege inherent in archaeology in particular and science in general.

Two of these papers (Schofield and Anderton, and Wallis) raise the issue of heritage management and site presentation. The consumption of the past is as important as its production. The pasts that are produced by archaeologists are consumed by all sorts of people for all sorts of reasons; and are often reproduced in popular material culture where they play an important role in creating knowledge about the past. Professional archaeologists produce their constructions of the past in both academic and popular media, the academic book or paper, the popular book, the museum display, etc. These constructions are further reproduced in popular contexts, such as films, novels, and popular syntheses of the past.

A major theme in these constructions is 'the family'. The recent, Western concept of the family is presented as the norm, and, as it is considered the norm in Western society, those constructions go unchallenged. Archaeology presents this Western idealized notion of the family as being as ancient as humanity. In so doing, the consumption of

these constructions justifies and legitimizes phobias and prejudices in our society today. While archaeology consistently underpins a heterosexual artifice of human prehistory – archaeologists need to be aware of their complicity in Western society's institutionalized homophobia.

Queering archaeology does not involve digging for homosexuals, or any other supposed sexual deviant for that matter, in the past. Nor is it concerned with the origins of homosexuality. It is not a manifesto for promoting homosexuality. Queer theory forces us to explore practices that openly exist in our cultures today, that have existed for a long time in all cultures, but are today branded as deviant or excluded altogether. Queering archaeology empowers us to think what is often the unthinkable to produce unthought-of pasts. Those pasts, those queer archaeologies, allow subordinate groups a voice in constructing their pasts. Just as homosexual people need have no shame of their sexuality and need not fear the disapproval of conservative morality, so too archaeologists producing queer archaeologies need have no shame of their difference, and need not fear the disapproval of authoritative normativity in archaeology. The queer archaeologies presented in this volume represent just a fraction of the work being done to challenge the normativity of archaeology. But, more importantly, it is also hoped they give strength to those who are victimized as deviant, either for being themselves or for doing the research they do.

*Department of Archaeology, University of Southampton  
SO17 1BJ, England, UK*

## References

- Berlant, L. and Warner, M. 1995. What does queer theory teach us about X? *PMLA*, 110(3): 343–9.
- de Lauretis, T. 1991. Queer theory: lesbian and gay sexualities. An introduction. *Differences*, 3(2): iii–xviii.
- Dowson, T. A. 1998. Homosexualitat, teoria queer i arqueologia. *Cota Zero*, 14: 81–7.
- Halperin, D. M. 1995. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Horrocks, R. 1995. *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity in Popular Culture*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Sedgwick, E. K. 1990. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Simpson, M. (ed.) 1996. *Anti-gay*. London: Freedom Editions.