

Engendering Social Dynamics: The Archaeology of Maintenance Activities

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1. Towards an archaeology of maintenance activities

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Introduction

The concept of maintenance activities began to be used in the context of Spanish archaeology about ten years ago (Bardavio and González Marcén 1996; Picazo, 1997; Colomer, González Marcén and Montón, 1998). Its development has continued and expanded ever since (González Marcén, Montón and Picazo, 2005; Alarcón, 2006; García Luque, 2008; Hernando, this volume; Sánchez-Romero and Aranda, this volume) and has even begun to be used in other academic traditions (Dommasnes and Montón-Subías, 2007; Gifford-Gonzalez, this volume).

Initially catalyzed by Gender archaeology challenges to correct 'the appalling absence of concepts that tap women's experience' (Conkey and Gero: 1991: 3), the concept of maintenance activities encompasses a set of practices that involve the sustenance, welfare and effective reproduction of all the members of a social group. These comprise the basic tasks of daily life that regulate and stabilize social life. They mainly involve care giving, feeding and food processing, weaving and cloth manufacture, hygiene, public health and healing, socialization of children and the fitting out and organization of related spaces (for similar ideas, see Allison, 1999; Bray, 1997; Meyers, 2003). These activities always entail specialised knowledge and the ability to sustain networks of interpersonal relationships in which framework they take place. They are also associated with specific technological practices and with the existing values and norms operating socially. Their ultimate function is to guarantee the possible reiteration and recurrence of group activities and to channel any changes in the latter into new reiteration and recurrence patterns or, in other words, into new ways of everyday life management.

When we decided to write this article we wanted to bring together the different papers we had presented at different forums since we began to deal with the subject of maintenance activities. Similarly, we wanted to address many of the issues put forward by colleagues and students over the years which hadn't been sufficiently clarified. Consequently, in this article we will begin by focusing on the existing relationship, as we see it, between an archaeology of maintenance activities, an archaeology of female practices and an archaeology of what is normally grouped under the

rubric of "the domestic". Secondly, we will present different examples which illustrate the structural nature of maintenance activities. Finally, we will outline the criteria that, in our opinion, should guide the archaeology of maintenance activities, with a special focus on the notions of time and space.

Maintenance activities, female practices and the "domestic" sphere

Maintenance activities have for centuries constituted an essential part of the everyday experiences of people's lives and especially of women. We can reasonably assume that, in many societies, women have been responsible for carrying them out and above all for creating and maintaining their associated and necessary networks of relationships (as examples, Meyers, 2003; Hendon, 2005; Sánchez-Romero, 2007; Gilchrist, this volume). However, we are also aware that the attribution of certain activities to the daily practices of women is debatable and has tended to be linked with essentialist or conservative points of view that place women in a limited and limiting scope of social action (Magallón 1999). At the same time, recognition of the diversity of cultural formulae in the material organisation of gender systems invokes caution in relation to this aspect (Moore 1988). Consequently, these practices may have not been always carried out by women in prehistoric societies, as indicated for instance by studies of mortuary evidence related to gender roles (Hamlin, 2001: 132-3). In fact, we think that in the origins of humankind the whole group -men, women and children- would have been involved in most of these practices as they formed the core of social life. Progressively, and for reasons that are lateral to the argument of this paper, these set of practices became an integral part of women's heritage in most traditional and historical societies (see, for instance, Hernando, this volume). Consequently, we really considerer that it is actually possible from a historical and ethnographic perspective to recognise certain basic patterns which associate women with this range of activities. On the other hand, where we referred (and refer) to maintenance activities as female activities we did (and do) not include all the activities potentially or effectively performed by women but only those, common to many women, that are related to the maintenance of the life cycle, from birth to death. This starting point does not seek to establish universals but to highlight the significance of the structural function of these activities in creating, recreating and transforming social forms.

Irrespective of how this set of tasks were carried out, what we also wished to emphasise was the fact that these practices have been overlooked by traditional archaeological accounts and considered non essential for historical interpretation because they were associated with women's activities in the present. In this sense, the study of maintenance activities has followed along the lines initiated in the 70's that sought to value female activities in historical -and archaeological- explanation (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974; Dahlberg, 1981; Conkey and Spector, 1984).

This absence of archaeological discourse seems paradoxical because empirical evidence on these types of activities constitutes an important part (often the most important) of the archeological record in all cultures and historical periods. By disregarding them, archaeology has in fact generated little knowledge around forms of human work that are universal and generally closely related to the division of sexual roles. By overlooking them archaeology has also failed to focus on the social networks and forms of interaction they have generated; networks and mechanisms that have entailed important forms of communication and connection in social life, superimposed and interconnected with other forms of social relationships. This historical amnesia has weakened historical interpretation by leaving aside a whole series of practices which are inextricably linked to other spheres of social action and form an inseparable part of the complexity of human groups.

Alongside the issue concerning maintenance activities and female activities we have frequently also been asked about the relationship between maintenance activities and the sphere of activities that are grouped under the term "domestic". Although we shall come back to this subject later on, we would like to point out now that the maintenance activities category constituted an attempt to disassociate the characterisation of these activity patterns from the often used "domestic activities" category because of the limiting nature of this concept in that it is associated with a particular space.

Maintenance activities: foregrounding social dynamics

By using the term maintenance activities we seek to stress the fact that the common factor of this basic pattern of female activities lies in the structural function -both material and symbolic- that they have exercised and continue to exercise in all human groups.

This structural function has taken on and takes on different forms. It encompasses a wide range of activities and may take on the form of distinct organisational combinations as regards the specific tasks that are associated with it and the spaces where these tasks are performed. Nevertheless, maintenance activities and their spaces show, both historically and

ethnographically, a constant set of similarities and are expressed in common forms of relationships and knowledge management.

Different archaeological studies have already demonstrated how fundamental these set of activities are in foregrounding social dynamics in any community (Brumfiel, 1991; Hastorf, 1991; Gifford-González, 1993; Montón, 2002; Hendon 2007; Sánchez-Romero and Aranda, this volume; Aranda et al., forthcoming). Given that we consider them to be of central importance we decided to also seek them out in the historical discourse where they had been especially left aside. Hence, first in 2005 and more recently in 2007, we organised seminars (which gave rise to most of the contributions presented in this volume) to explore their structural character not only in processes of social continuance but also during periods academically regarded as times of historical change. Instead of considering them as similar and monotonous, as a constant rather than a variable, we wanted connect them with the social, economic, political and ideological transformations that confer dynamism and creativity to societies over time. And, in fact, most of the contributions to the seminars made clear that the rhythm and consequences of economic and social transformation could not be fully understood unless we take into account the crucial role played by changes affecting the every day forms of maintenance activities.

Important archaeological research had already highlighted the fundamental role of activities such as cooking and weaving in social transitions. For instance, in 1991 Elizabeth Brumfiel brought to light how central these tasks were in the transition from pre-Aztec to Aztec society in Central Mexico (Brumfiel, 1991). Similarly, a recent study of the Northeast Iberian Peninsula found close links between these activities and the emergence of political inequality in Iberian societies (corresponding to Iron Age on the Iberian Peninsula) (Curià, Masvidal and Picazo, 2000). The majority of dwellings on the Iberian sites in this region have similar features as regards their size and form of construction. They appear to have been multifunctional spaces for everyday activities used for producing and transforming food products and for making essential tools for the maintenance and caring of the social groups that inhabited them. During the process of emerging social complexity certain changes were documented even in the smaller settlements. In some settlements, evidence showed an increase (possible centralisation) in cloth and food production inside certain architectural structures. Although the archeological artefacts found in these buildings are the same as those found in other dwellings (spindle whorls, loom weights, grinding stones) they are usually recovered in larger quantities. These evidences may be interpreted as proof of textile and food production intensification, surpassing the domestic scale of production characteristic of the previous period. It is now, during the period known as the Middle Iberian era, when elites emerged. These elites lived in large residences and they appear to have taken over parts of production as a strategy for establishing the social hierarchy.

At around the same time there is evidence of a greater number of war conflicts among communities (the construction of fortifications and more warrior tombs), of the control of ritual practices (in “public buildings”) and of the centralisation of certain production processes, starting with some forms of work related to maintenance activities. The presence of cloth and food production intensification in certain buildings is possibly due to the pressure that elites put on domestic groups, and most specifically on women. In doing so, they increased production and consumption linked to forms of control and exhibition of social wealth. In this respect, increased food production could have been linked to a form of redistribution in ritual feasts within specific contexts. Although it seems that the Iberian elites did not exercise complete control over textile and food production, the increase in productivity linked to these maintenance activities may have involved the existence of some form of dependent work, probably done by women. It therefore seems that in this case, as in other well known historical examples, the onset of stratification was based, at least in part, on the manipulation and control of that forms of social relationships imbricated in processes of creation and maintenance of social life.

We were also convinced that maintenance activities also played a key role in structuring society’s symbolic resources and dynamics. In fact, some of our most recent studies have highlighted how artefacts employed in the management of everyday activities may be used as ideological resources in funerary rituals. This is what we discovered after studying the funerary records of the Bronze Age Argaric communities of Southeast Spain (c. 2250-1450 BC) (Montón-Subías 2007; Aranda et al. forthcoming). One of the most characteristic features of the Argaric world is the funerary ritual they adopted to bury their dead: the inhumation of corpses in urns, pits, cists and artificial caves called “covachas” under the floors of their dwellings. Some of the corpses were buried with a series of artefacts used as funerary offerings. After studying these grave goods, researchers came to the conclusion that there were clear social inequalities in the heart of these communities and unequal access to economic resources and politico-ideological power.

In fact, some of these grave items were actually tools used to perform maintenance activities. Among them, our attention was drawn by the prominent and almost exclusive presence of awls in female tombs, something already noticed since the beginnings of Argaric research (Siret and Siret, 1886; Lull and Estévez, 1986; González-Marcén 1991). Unlike male exclusive tools, the presence of awls in female tombs cuts across age, social, space and time boundaries. After interpreting this phenomenon, we came to the conclusion that the presence of awls in female tombs was necessarily related to roles socially perceived as belonging to the female gender and to the activities –probably maintenance activities- that influenced this perception.

Given these findings we connected the presence of awls with the symbolical need to mark a mainstream female identity in funerary rituals.

Maintenance activities, time and space

Apart from the different forms of work they involve, maintenance activities require and at the same time create social relationships which have a dynamics, a time and spatial organisation of their own. This time we are referring to is quotidian time. Its predominant feature is that it is recurrent and as such involves a particular and differentiated form of temporality. The way textile activities were carried out in ancient Greece is a good example of the temporality we are referring to. In Ancient Greece spinning was a repetitive task that demanded a lot of time: several hours were needed to spin by hand a sufficient amount of thread to weave on a loom for an hour. Spinning and weaving were (and still are in many places) tasks that could be interrupted, which enabled women to do other tasks which were commonly assigned to them. So women spun while they did other things: look after the children, bring in the livestock, travel, share a moment of conversation, cook, etc.

Considering this time and its practices also requires an analytical perspective sensitive to microscalar developments (Picazo 1997, Foxhall 2000). In fact, the focus on maintenance activities also stemmed from our discontent at some of the interpretations carried out to explain different prehistoric moments in the Iberian Peninsula. Irrespective of the different historical approaches adopted, they focused on a limited and recurrent number of subjects: population growth/ depletion, agricultural production, technological development and colonial presence. However, less attention has been given to evaluating how these factors are specifically reflected in the material evidence from archaeological records.

For example, researchers have hardly touched on matters such as: Why and how agricultural production increases? In what terms can we refer to technological breakthroughs? How can a community increase its population? How did all these changes affect the restructuring of daily life within prehistoric communities and at the expense of what or of whom? As a result, the study of prehistory has basically centred on macrohistorical variables. This in turn has favoured to a type of discourse that is incompatible with the presentation of human actions, given that people are replaced by abstract social trends. In contrast to this, the time scale of the day to day is the scale of people’s experiences, concrete historical experience, which is transformed (recreated) throughout their lifetime.

In our specific case, these questions, which seek to interpret social dynamics on a small scale, arose when we began a research programme on peasant communities in the Vallés region in the Northeast of the Iberian Peninsula (Colomer, González-Marcén and Montón 1998) during the Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age. The main form of settlement throughout prehistory in the Vallés featured numerous pits

dug into the ground with no or very few specific remains of solid masonry dwellings. The majority of these pits were primarily used to store agricultural produce, although a few of them were used as work areas and as refuge and consumption areas. These pits were latter on used as rubbish dumps.

After analysing how the space was structured in relation to maintenance activities and the production processes of artefacts related to these activities in the Can Roqueta settlement we found that important changes had taken place between the Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age. Whereas during the Bronze Age the entire settlement is structured around the maintenance infrastructures which are scattered indiscriminately anywhere in the village, during the Iron Age we found spatially differentiated, production, consumption and possibly rest areas. At the same time, the archeological findings pointed to an increase in cereal production during this transitional period. To our surprise we found that this increase was not associated with technological innovations related to maintenance practices, which had remained unchanged. This increase in agricultural production must have been brought on by a reorganisation of daily life and it could only have taken place at the expense of the people involved in maintenance activities. This agricultural intensification was probably accompanied by a demographic increase. If we assume that there was an increase in population during this transition it follows that this was brought about at the expense of women, either through a relaxation of birth control or due to improved conditions for infant survival. Either each woman had more children (with possible changes in family structures) or the maintenance activities related to the general health of the group managed to lower infant mortality.

In the case of the Vallés, the relative degree of resilience of these groups which had lasted since the Neolithic period was finally interrupted and this interruption was manifested in the growing social pressure on the way maintenance activities were organised.

The space of maintenance activities

In archaeology, the characterization of the life styles of a community is inextricably linked to the methodological strategy that seeks to determine its spatial organisation. In fact, the space that is marked out and denoted by archaeological remains, the way its different elements are combined, the interconnections between one space and another, all these factors may be considered to be the material expression of a logical way of organising activities. They configure a concrete (not an abstract) organisation which determines and is at the same time the outcome of the constant and changing relationships that were generated in the space in question. Archaeological

spaces are not therefore abstract spaces but lived in spaces that once contained human life and were created by it. Consequently, in order to determine the spatial relationships of the objects that comprise an ancient space of relationship (a hamlet, a village, etc.) we need to look at how they are related to the activities that were carried out inside them.

Based on the certainty that maintenance activities are what effectively ensure the creation and day to day recreation of all human groups we need to look at how these activities generate material demands and conditions which are then reflected in the spatial distribution of archaeological sites.

But maintenance activity spaces cannot be identified a priori in archaeological analysis. The elasticity of the concept does not allow us to do so. Hence, the space of maintenance activities has to be a more open space than that which is traditional associated with the domestic domain. In fact, we have chosen to use the term maintenance activities in order to emphasise the fact that the common factor is this basic pattern of female activities does not stem from one space – the domestic space – which is culturally and historically dependent, but from its structural function – both material and symbolic – which has existed and is to be found in all human groups. This structural function has taken on different forms for different ranges of activities. It may lead to different organisational combinations of the specific tasks associated with it as well as of the spaces in which they are carried out, although a continuum of similarities has existed between maintenance tasks and spaces, historically and ethnographically speaking. It is not the space as such that delimits the actions but the practices and the relationships of the maintenance activities that determine the location of the space. We need to study these spaces by looking at their internal organisation and compare and contrast them with spaces set aside for other social practices, which may or may not coincide with the spaces occupied by maintenance activities. It is in these spaces that a large part of the experiences and practices of the women of the past must have taken place. Spaces which determined the frameworks of their day to day relationships and which gave rise to the sets of tasks that sustained the dynamics of the group.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have briefly reviewed some of the most important aspects related to our maintenance activities approach. We have commented on its definition and on its relationship with related approaches, we have contributed archaeological examples to show its intertwined social nature and we have provided some notes about associated time and space. In doing so, we have tried to explain the specifics of such approach to the study of prehistoric and ancient societies and to demonstrate the structural social nature of maintenance activities, a sphere where specialised knowledge, expertise and essential technical skills converge with specific social norms and values to sustain the day to day functioning of human groups.

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