

Section 1 – The Foragers

What Makes Us Human

Division of Tasks

Early human society was fluid, with survival always the goal. It was, in general, divided by gender. Women and children formed a home group, which focussed on protection of the children and nursing mothers, foraging, perhaps trapping small game and birds, and the preparation and cooking of food. This group would have been a sisterhood of equals, but led, in all probability, by the elder women, the grandmothers, who were also the teachers, the midwives and shamans.¹

The other group was of men and older boys, based on the hunt. This group had to be able to respond quickly to the changing circumstances of the hunt, which could, especially when hunting large game, be lethal. A command system developed, probably around the best and most experienced hunters.

These two social models give us the archetypes of the two earliest deities we know of: the Mother Goddess and the God of the Hunt. The former represents the idealisation of the women at the centre of the home group and the latter the idealisation of the hunters.

This ‘two-group’ arrangement minimised the risk to fertile women and young children, and meant that hunters could move quickly and silently, an impossible thing to do with babies or toddlers. Neither group was superior. Each had its area of life, which did not interfere with the other. The hunters could provide meat, animal fat, skin and bone, and the gatherers would catch small game and collect vegetables and grains, nuts, berries, roots and fungi, as well as firewood.²

The division of roles by gender was the beginning of task specialisation, which leads to improvements in performance.³ It is likely that without such a social structure, *Homo sapiens* would not have been nearly as successful as a species.

Discussing this separation of tasks by gender, Steven Kuhn, from the University of Arizona, says:

¹ A woman in this culture could easily be a grandmother by the time she reached thirty. The term should not be taken here to suggest great age, but greater experience and knowledge.

² Possibly, these were not just women, but the older males who could no longer hunt, and the young boys. Alternatively, the older males may have taken the juvenile boys to hunt small game and introduce them to the skills needed by a hunter. It is likely that both models existed, at least initially.

³ Note: NOT genetic specialisation, which is the tendency for organisms to evolve such that they can better exploit specific environmental niches. This tends to make them less able to cope with changes in environment. Human task specialisation made the entire species more adaptable.

'The competitive advantage enjoyed by modern humans came not just from new weapons and devices but from the ways in which their economic lives were organized around...roles for men, women, and children.⁴

Kuhn and co-author Mary Stiner suggest that this division took place in Eurasia between 45,000 and 10,000 years ago.⁵ But the weight of evidence, in archaeology and mythology, suggests that the division of tasks evolved no later than the early part of the Upper Palaeolithic, between 45,000 and 35,000 years ago. It is likely to be one of the adaptations peculiar to the survivors of Toba, which ensured the success of our species.

These divisions between groups were not rigid. When game was scarce or the weather too bad to hunt, the men would join in to help the women to forage, set snares for small game and catch fish in the rivers. When a herd of big game that could feed and clothe the tribe for months was spotted, everyone, men, women, and children, might have joined in to drive them towards the spears or over the edge of a cliff.⁶ In some modern hunter-gatherer cultures, women and children even follow the hunting men, as spectators.

The divisions, which we still find in extant hunter-gatherer societies, may have had a consequence that remains important. When men hunted for bigger game they would travel far from their bases, and inevitably would have come into contact with other people. Should the two tribes come together and cooperate? If they do, who will lead them? There is game nearby – should we cooperate just on this occasion, to improve the chance of success? Suppose the other group is hostile – should we stand our ground and fight for this territory, move on, or just agree on a boundary? These difficult and important decisions, which impacted the whole tribe, would necessarily have been made there and then by men. Perhaps here we see the beginning of political activity between societies, and already the separation of tasks tended to ensure that it would be the domain of men.⁷

Human males and females have morphological, skeletal and physiological differences. Women are on average 20% smaller and lighter than men. Women's pelvises are different from men's, in order for them to pass the large head of a human baby. Instead of the strong, boxy male pelvis, women have a wide, shallow one, which forces their hips out. The legs have to turn in toward the midline, causing the classic reverse angle at the knee so that their tibias can be more vertical.

⁴ Cited at: Lovgren, S. *Sex-Based Roles Gave Modern Humans an Edge, Study Says*. *National Geographic News*, 07/12/06, retrieved from <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/12/061207-sex-humans.html> accessed 12/02/12.

⁵ Kuhn S. and Stiner, M. *What's a Mother to Do?* *Current Anthropology*, Volume 47 No 6, December 2006, pp 953-962.

⁶ In good weather, a drive like this would have been a pleasure for the people, not least because of the anticipation for the feast they looked forward to after its success. At the same time, a large party making as much noise as possible would be likely to drive off any other predators. So this was a relatively safe form of hunting.

⁷ Ortner, Sherry. *Making gender: the politics and erotics of gender*. Beacon Press. 1996.

Women's upper bodies are very much less massive than men's, and their shoulders tend to be narrow.⁸

The differences are not just skeletal. There are two types of muscle fibre, one adapted for the explosive release of large amounts of energy and one for repetitive but long-lasting release. Men mostly have the first type, women the second. Normal, healthy women of appropriate weight carry a greater percentage of body fat than any other land animal except polar bears. Far more of their body mass is fat than in men, enabling them to build up reserves to sustain them through childbirth and breastfeeding. Women's weight is lower down, to help them balance when heavily pregnant and carrying children. Men's weight is higher up, in powerful muscular torsos perfect for running and throwing, and their high centre of balance lets them knock down a prey animal. There are differences in the brain, in areas such as the amygdala. These are all species characteristics: all humans, everywhere, on average, hold true to this model. In other words, women are morphologically suited to one set of tasks, and men to another; women are indeed, on average, better adapted to gathering and raising children, and men to hunting.

The division of tasks by gender and the consequent establishment of two complementary groups with differing roles and responsibilities was an essential part of human development. Since the underlying function of human society is to continue through reproduction and the survival of the young, which was dependent on women, in matters concerning the home and children they had authority.⁹ There was a balance, an equilibrium that allowed the two groups to function independently yet in a co-operative manner. However, the division of tasks exposed men to higher risk of violent death or life-shortening injury. Since age and experience were regarded as important and the elder mothers were probably the oldest and wisest people in the tribe, they were natural candidates for leadership.

Here we see a birth-oriented culture in which the leader, certainly of the home group and possibly of the entire tribe, would have been the most trusted mother. She was sacred in her motherhood, respected for her wisdom, knowledge and shamanistic power, loved by and loving the people around her, many of whom would have been her children.

⁸ We hasten to add that this is on average. Successful women runners tend to have narrower than average hips, straighter than average legs and are taller than average – in other words, their morphology more closely resembles an average male's. All living things exhibit variation and this is just an example of it.

⁹ The reproductive potential of any mammal is a function of the numbers of females, not males. We will encounter this again.