Review of: Seifert, L. & Spencer-Wood, S. (eds) (2025). Mothering and Archaeology: Past and Present Perspectives. London: Routledge. 394 pages, 33 b/w illustrations. ISBN 978-0-367-76264-3.

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"Mothering and Archaeology. Past and Present Perspectives", edited by Laura Seifert and Suzanne Spencer-Wood, brings together a diverse collection of essays examining motherhood across time and space. The volume explores how motherhood has been practiced, controlled, and stigmatized in the past, while also shedding light on contemporary experiences of mothers in archaeology, where caregiving responsibilities are often met with structural barriers, discrimination, and stigma. The contributions are united by a shared commitment to feminist critique, but draw on a wide spectrum of feminist theories. Importantly, the book adopts a broad definition of mothering, which is not limited to biological motherhood, but also includes the social role of mothering. Furthermore, mothering may occur within the private sphere of the household or in public domains such as fieldwork or caregiving professions. This book is the first volume to explicitly address both public and private dimensions of mothering in archaeology, including fieldwork, an area only recently recognized as worthy of scholarly attention. As such, the book marks a meaningful contribution to the growing body of feminist archaeological literature.

The book is divided into four sections, the first dealing with the archaeology of mothering in pre- and protohistoric contexts (chapters 2-4). It begins with Nilgun Anadolu-Okur examining the status of women and mothers in pre-Roman Egyptian society. She argues that women held positions and rights of equal importance to men, a status grounded in discourses surrounding mothers, motherhood, and mothering, which were considered sacred. This is reflected in the cult of female goddesses, fertility rites, and the cosmological principle of Ma'at, representing order, truth, balance, and harmony, and thought to have governed the world. According to Anadolu-Okur, the emphasis on motherhood and childbearing was central to this principle. It ensured that women's roles and responsibilities were highly respected and that their agency extended beyond the domestic sphere. This stands in direct contrast to later patriarchal societies, such as ancient Rome or Byzantium, where women were systematically marginalized. Anadolu-Okur further suggests that aspects of mothering in modern Egypt reflect ancient cosmological principles rooted in Ma'at. While this is a thought-provoking claim, the chapter would have benefitted from a more substantiated exploration of this potential, millennia-long continuity.

This chapter is followed by Katharina Rebay-Salisbury's contribution, exploring mothering in Iron Age Europe from a matricentric feminist perspective. This theoretical framework distinguishes the category of 'mother' from that of 'women' and as such offers an interesting counterpoint to the preceding chapter which closely aligned motherhood with womanhood. Drawing from bioarchaeological evidence and material culture, one of Rebay-Salisbury's central arguments concerns the communal nature of child-rearing in Iron Age societies, challenging the Western ideal of mothers being the primary or exclusive caregivers. Rebay-Salisbury illustrates that childcare was distributed across various members of the community: midwives are depicted assisting at births, while grave goods indicate that medical knowledge was accessible to both men and women. Evidence for diverse infant feeding practices further supports this interpretation: isotope analysis revealed evidence for breastfeeding at some sites, but ceramic feeding vessels containing animal milk residues also suggest alternative feeding options. Taken together, these finds demonstrate that mothering was not only defined biologically in Iron Age societies. Additionally, finds such as child-sized clothing in salt mines point to the presence of infants at workplaces, indicating that children were integrated into community life from an early age and cared for within a broader social network.

The section on pre- and protohistoric mothering concludes with a contribution by Celise Chilcote-Fricker, Diana K. Moreiras Reynaga, Geoffrey McCafferty, and Sharisse McCafferty. Drawing from bioarchaeological, ethnohistorical, and archaeological evidence, the authors argue that concepts of motherhood permeated most aspects of daily life in Postclassic Central Mexico. Aztec society, they suggest, upheld rigid binary gender roles, with motherhood regarded as particularly significant and of equal importance to men's work. As in the preceding chapter, the authors emphasize that mothering extended beyond biological motherhood, as seen in the social role of midwives, who not only assisted at births, but also advised expectant mothers on household management and childrearing. What

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is largely missing from this chapter, however, is a more critical engagement with its sources. Much of the interpretation relies on colonial texts such as the Florentine Codex and Codex Mendoza, which, as the authors acknowledge, are filtered through a colonial, European lens. This issue is aptly addressed elsewhere in the volume, notably in Surface-Evans' and Luna's chapter on Indian boarding schools, where they critique settler-colonial constructions of mothering and gender as patriarchal and heavily biased. While Chilcote-Fricker and colleagues briefly mention inconsistencies between indigenous and colonial sources – for example, indigenous depictions of women in marketplaces despite colonial written claims to the contrary, or bioarchaeological evidence contradicting colonial descriptions of Aztec infant feeding practices – this observation does not sufficiently inform their interpretations. These discrepancies highlight the need for greater caution in interpreting these written sources, as they ultimately describe Aztec society from a colonial, androcentric, Western standpoint.

While the first section focuses on pre-and protohistoric contexts, where the evidence for mothering is naturally more fragmentary, the second section provides four chapters of historical archaeological research on motherhood and mothering (chapters 5-8). It opens with a chapter by Suzanne Spencer-Wood who offers a broad overview of historical transformations in Western ideologies of motherhood from the medieval period to the 20th century. She argues that in the Middle Ages, mothers were perceived as intellectually and morally inferior, their animalistic birthing processes and biblical descent from Eve used to justify their subordination to male authority. Based on this, she traces a series of ideological shifts that gradually raised the status of both private and public mothering. According to Spencer-Wood, a pivotal transformation began with the valorization of the Virgin Mary as a moral model for women, shifting the role of the child-rearer from the father to the mother. This emphasis intensified during the Enlightenment, when new ideals of intellectual equality within companionate marriage challenged older patriarchal structures. Philosophers such as John Locke, who popularized the idea that mothers were central to a child's development and later adult character, contributed to this revaluation. By the late 17th century, when most church members were women, they were increasingly seen as more pious and morally virtuous, leading to the emergence of the Cult of Moral Mothering, which positioned mothers as moral reformers of both family and society. This moral authority, Spencer-Wood argues, laid the groundwork for further developments such as the American Cult of Republican Motherhood and Cult of Domesticity, which continued to valorize women's domestic and reproductive roles. These ideological transformations also expanded professional opportunities in mothering roles, as women increasingly took over paid positions of elementary school teachers, justified through their moral superiority, and founded girls' academies to provide more equitable education. At the same time, both private and public mothering were considered sacred, and paid mothering was seen as destroying the sacredness of mothering by turning it into a sinful capitalist business. Spencer-Wood notes that such ideologies persist until today, evidenced, for example, in the role of 'site mamas' at archaeological excavations, where women often take on informal caretaking roles within the crew (as discussed by Ogden, chapter 13).

While Spencer-Wood's conclusions often appear plausible, the chapter would benefit from greater clarity in specifying the evidence for her claims. Many statements, for instance that 'medieval mothers and infants were considered close to lowly bestial nature because mothers gave birth like other animals to infants who were considered *"unlovely"* little animals' are presented without discussing which societies, social groups, or sources they relate to. Given the complexity of the historical processes she describes, it would be helpful to explicitly address the evidence allowing for such broad interpretations, and to justify the generalizing nature of her claims. Furthermore, the geographical scope of her analysis remains vague in some instances, leaving readers uncertain about the context to which particular statements apply. Clarifying such aspects would make the complex chapter more accessible, particularly for those unfamiliar with the historical context to which Spencer-Wood refers. On a broader level, the chapter raises similar concerns to those voiced in critiques of Philippe Ariès' Centuries of Childhood, which has been criticized for its chronological and geographical vagueness, lack of attention to regional variation, and a tendency towards a unilinear model of historical transformations. Moreover, while the chapter frames ideological transformations as elevating the status of motherhood and expanding maternal authority, it does not sufficiently address the tension between ideological transformations and factual social status. The increasing symbolic importance of mother-

hood did not translate into actual greater social, political, or economic power for women. Instead, these ideologies, as described in the chapter, often reinforced women's marginalization by confining them to narrow domestic and moral roles defined by men, situating their societal value in relation to patriarchal structures. Thus, there is an inherent tension between the symbolic, ideological valorization of motherhood and practical subordination of women, as ideological transformations cannot be regarded as actual improvements in the status of women.

This is followed by a distressing chapter by Minette Church, who describes Mayan child- and motherhood during guerrilla warfare in 19th century Yucatan. The prolonged violence of the Mayan Social War deeply affected family life, shaping the experiences of mothers and children amid trauma, displacement, and insecurity. Children were forced into this violent conflict at a young age, serving as messengers, translators and spies as young as six years old, and being recruited into Mayan militias and Yucatecan federal groups around the age of twelve. Psychological suffering was managed through alcohol, illustrating the brutal realities faced by these children. At the same time, Church demonstrates the efforts of some communities to protect themselves and their children from forced recruitment and labor, employing strategies of diplomacy and strategic migration to maintain some control over their families and lives.

The theme of resistance under oppressive systems continues in the next chapter by Sarah Surface-Evans and Jason Luna, who examine the devastating realities of Indian Boarding Schools. Drawing from documentary and material evidence as well as indigenous personal accounts from Mount Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding Schools in Michigan, the authors illustrate how indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families, languages, and cultures, with the explicit aim of eradicating Native American Identity and reshaping their bodies and behaviors to fit white, Western norms. Girls were forced to conform to Western, middle-class ideas of womanhood and mothering, which contradicted the cultural gender roles, status, and responsibilities held by women in their own native communities. The enforced physical and cultural separation had lasting consequences: children often returned home feeling alienated and disconnected from their communities, now perceived as strangers within their own families. Despite this colonial oppression, the authors highlight acts of resilience and resistance. For instance, students secretly continued to perform their own ceremonies, preserving aspects of their traditions under hostile conditions. This traumatic legacy extended across generations, contributing to ongoing emotional, physical, and psychological harm within Indigenous communities. Only in recent years has this intergenerational trauma begun to be actively addressed, through initiatives such as Indigenous-led parent education programs and community-based research projects.

The section concludes with a chapter by Eleanor Conlin Casella, who describes the experience of incarcerated mothers and their separation from infants in 19th-century Tasmania, Australia. Drawing from historical and documentary evidence from the Ross Female Factory, a women's prison, she shows that mothers were separated from children after nine months of nursing, based on beliefs that 'sinful mothers' would otherwise pass immorality onto their children. Motherhood was treated as a moral threat to be managed, with caregiving responsibilities being transferred to non-biological, institutional caretakers. Casella's archaeological research on the site adds nuance to these records by revealing evidence that mothers actively sought to maintain contact with their children, often through informal negotiations, and even managed to secure extra rations for them. Like Church's analysis in the preceding chapter, Casella powerfully demonstrates how mothering persists even within systems designed to sever maternal bonds, and how maternal agency can manifest in constrained and informal ways.

The third section of the volume shifts focus from historical perspectives to the present-day experiences of mothers in archaeology, both in the field and academia (chapters 9-13). These contributions include much-needed feminist critiques of the stigmatization of motherhood, and address how structural inequities, cultural assumptions, and disciplinary norms continue to shape the experiences of mothers working in archaeology. This section holds particular significance for mothers in archaeology, including myself, as it offers a sense of solidarity in shared challenges, making visible what is often individually felt but collectively experienced. Laura Seifert opens this section by bridging past and present, contextualizing contemporary U.S. government policies on motherhood through the lens of historical archaeological evidence documenting diverse mothering practices in America. She highlights persistent gender inequalities in academia, such as biases in peer-review and funding, and argues that the

goal should not simply be equality but equity, providing individuals with the tailored support and resources they need in their particular situation to achieve comparable outcomes. Her chapter effectively exposes the ongoing medical and cultural challenges mothers face in the United States today.

The following chapter by Tiina Äikäs and Anna-Kaisa Salmi offers a contrasting perspective by examining the Finnish social and research system. Finland is often held up as a model of gender equality, where mothers generally enjoy more structural support than in many other countries. Nevertheless, the authors point out that significant gender imbalances exist. Women in Finland still shoulder a disproportionate share of caregiving responsibilities, parental leave is often unevenly divided, and women still face systematic barriers in academia. These disparities are corroborated both by an online survey conducted by the authors and their personal experiences as mothers working in archaeology. On a more positive note, Äikäs and Salmi highlight that motherhood can also have career benefits. Their survey participants reported that becoming mothers improved skills such as decision-making, leadership, and efficiency; observations also reflected in their workplaces. Additionally, motherhood was found to enrich researchers' perspectives on past societies, bringing valuable insights shaped by their own experiences. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these benefits should not obscure the ongoing challenges and marginalizations mothers face in academia, both in Finland and globally.

The final three contributions in this section take the form of personal reflections by archaeologist-mothers, addressing the complexities of balancing motherhood with a career in archaeology and demonstrating how structural and cultural biases in the discipline continue to shape professional trajectories of mothering archaeologists. Though there is no homogeneous experience of motherhood in archaeology, these accounts resonate with many who face similar patterns of discrimination. Holly Norton reflects on her experience of being a mother in academia, illustrating broader systemic issues that affect many women in the discipline. She describes how an academic position that had informally been guaranteed to her was instead offered to a male colleague, whose wife stayed at home with their kids, after her pregnancy became known. Norton further critiques the challenges that fieldwork poses for mothers, especially within the context of Western archaeology's deeply masculinized culture which glamorizes physical endurance, toughness, and social bonding though heavy drinking.

Expanding on these themes, Beth Hoag and Kathleen von Jena examine the challenges and possibilities of combining archaeological fieldwork with active parenting. Fieldwork, they argue, is especially demanding for mothers and often structured in ways that explicitly discourage motherhood. However, they also describe their experiences of bringing their children to an excavation, which overall appear very positive. By making motherhood visible in spaces where it has long been excluded, they challenge traditional professional norms and envision the possibility of a more inclusive future. Their chapter is therefore particularly encouraging for early-career archaeologists, as it shows ways in which caregiving responsibilities can be integrated into an archaeological career. Concluding this section, Quinn-Monique Ogden discusses the expectation that women will perform unpaid emotional labor by mothering their students or younger colleagues. Her own experience of being 'Mama Quinn' at archaeological sites illustrates the cultural assumption that women will assume care responsibilities even in professional roles, thus expanding the definition of mothering beyond biology (see Spencer-Wood's contribution, chapter 5). Like the other experiences articulated throughout this section, Ogden reflects on how archaeological fieldwork and the demands of Cultural Heritage Management complicate motherhood. Her chapter is also deeply personal, as she touchingly describes her struggles with reproductive challenges and her eventual path to motherhood while still being active in the field.

Following the personal accounts that close the third section, the book concludes with a commentary by Suzanne Spencer-Wood (chapter 14), who discusses how feminist theories have engaged, or failed to engage, with motherhood and mothering in ways that underwrite the contributions throughout the book. She argues that despite the importance of motherhood to many women's lives, mothering remains surprisingly under-theorized in many feminist theoretical frameworks. While the chapter is theoretically dense and complex, it plays an essential role in situating the contributions of the volume, offering a broader understanding of the diversity within feminist theory and the different ways in which mothering is conceptualized. In fact, its importance raises the question of editorial placement. Had this chapter been positioned as an introductory chapter, it might have provided readers with a more

robust theoretical foundation for navigating the case studies and arguments.

Overall, the book offers a fascinating exploration of motherhood across time and place, illuminating how diverse the experience of motherhood was in (pre)history and today. It effectively demonstrates that motherhood is far from a universal experience, but one that is shaped profoundly by cultural, temporal, and geographic contexts. While the volume succeeds in highlighting the diversity of mothering experiences, some chapters, particularly in the first two sections dealing with prehistoric and historic contexts, could have been strengthened by greater nuance. Analyses that cover vast temporal and geographic ranges occasionally risk oversimplification, presenting generalized accounts of motherhood without sufficiently discussing internal variation. For instance, the experience of mothering in early Iron Age France certainly differed from that in late Iron Age Sweden. Moreover, motherhood would have differed not only across time and space but also at an individual level, influenced by factors such as status, age or health. As such, it is problematic to imply homogeneous experiences of motherhood within specific (pre)historic contexts. A more critical engagement with variations would have enriched these chapters and further underscored the central theme of diversity of mothering experiences. Nonetheless, the volume makes a significant contribution to feminist archaeology by foregrounding the often-ignored topic of motherhood, and it opens up important avenues for future research across disciplines.

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