The Child is Now 25 – A Short Introduction to a Special Issue

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This special issue originates from a symposium held at the 2014 Society for American Archaeology (SAA) meeting in Austin, Texas. The topic for the session was the identification and interpretation of the archaeological record of children. The session was titled ‘The “child” is now 25: Recent research into the identification of children in the archaeological record and the development of associated theoretical perspectives’.

This title was our way of acknowledging the important work made by Grete Lillehammer and the publication of her seminal ‘A child is born’ article (Lillehammer, 1989). Although other researchers have previously raised questions on how to identify children in the archaeological record (see discussion in Lillehammer, this issue), the publication of Lillehammer’s article is seen by us and many others as the start of childhood research within archaeology. Anyone who has read that article needs in one way or another to consider children as living humans in the past, and, as such, as substantial contributors to the archaeological record we excavate and interpret.

Since ‘A child is born’ was published, there has been much important research accomplished concerning the identification of artefacts produced by children in the archaeological record. Archaeologists have developed empirical, theoretical and methodological work on the topic (see articles by Lillehammer and Kamp, in this issue).

Today, the child in the 1989 article has grown and become an adult, celebrating her twenty-fifth birthday the same year as the SAA 2014 session was held. Hence, the session was a birthday party. But, the central figure at the party was not the child, but Grete Lillehammer. The session was a way to pay respect to Lillehammer’s exemplary research over the years. We are grateful that so many prominent scholars were willing to join us in this endeavour and are pleased that so many of the authors of papers presented at the SAA session also have contributed to the publication of the session in this special issue.

In the invitation to the SAA session, we called for papers that dealt with current theoretical, methodological and empirical research involving manifestations of children’s artefacts, particularly those items made by children from stone. We acknowledge that this is a limited view. The archaeology of children and childhood involves many other materials and perspectives. But, for the benefit of focus for the session, we chose to invite papers which foremost concentrated on stone and lithics, materials that are close to our own research interests.
The papers given at the session and the discussions following them gave us new insights. It is clear that the child certainly is now present in archaeological research. In many aspects children and childhood have developed into research topics on their own. At the same time children and childhood have still not become part of mainstream archaeology. The recognition of children and their impact on material culture is not yet part of an integrated methodology and theory of interpretation that would provide a more complete picture of ancient societies. Prehistoric children and childhood are still only discussed by a small percentage of archaeologists. It is not clear from the session or the articles presented in this special issue if and how this might change in the future. In that sense the session gave new insights, but didn’t provide a solution to this particular problem (but see articles by Lillehammer and Kamp, in this issue). This is perhaps the main contribution from the session and the articles presented here: children and childhood are now well-established research topics within archaeology and associated new perspectives and future agendas have been formulated. But children and childhood are still not part of the ‘every day practice’ of doing archaeology.

The special issue holds eight original research articles, presented by a total of ten researchers. First we get an introduction by Lillehammer. She reflects on what has become of the once newborn child which now has grown into an adult. In doing so, she also stakes out what the important research avenues concerning childhood archaeology should be in the future. The closing article of the special issue is written by Kathryn Kamp. At the session her role was to summarize the papers presented and from this provide her view of the future of archaeological research on children and childhood. We are very pleased that Kamp accepted the same role in this special issue. She is one of the influential researchers within the field (Kamp, 2001) and her discussion of where the field is and where it needs to go provides us all with an important focus. Kamp emphasizes that children have their own social groups and cultural mores, but are also a part of the adult world. The archaeological child is inherently a complex individual, occupying the realm of childhood, yet also embedded within the world of adults. Kamp concludes that even though archaeologists have reached far over the last twenty-five years on research on aspects on children and childhood, the twenty-five year-old adult is still somewhat premature as an archaeological individual.

The six articles in between Lillehammer and Kamp present a variety of methods and theoretical approaches for recovering and interpreting the presence of children in the archaeological record. You will read about stone tools and technology (Cunnar; Finlay), teaching and evolution (Högberg and Gårdenfors), finger fluting in an Australian cave (Van Gelder), metaphorical thinking and Upper Paleolithic visual cultures (Nowell) and how ethnographic examples can be used to inspire archaeological interpretation (Ember and Cunnar). Since Kamp is discussing all the articles in her text, we will not give a detailed introduction here.

Instead we would like to take the opportunity to express our appreciation to all the authors who have contributed to making this special issue what it is. Thanks! We would also like to thank the journal editor Eileen Murphy for believing in our idea on publishing the session and for her professional guidance to help us along the way. Several peer-review readers have given valuable comments which significantly have improved the articles. Thanks to you all.

References


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