
IN MEMORIAM

ELIZABETH BRUMFIEL, 1945–2012

Cynthia Robin

Department of Anthropology, Northwestern University, 1810 Hinman Avenue, Evanston, IL 60208, USA

Liz Brumfiel was the best friend I ever had in the academic world. Even before I met her, her work, through her publications, had inspired mine. When I finally got the chance to meet her as a young assistant professor, followed by the chance to recruit her into my department, an intellectual exchange that fostered new insight into the meaning of inequality in society grew into a strong relationship of feminist mentorship and friendship, as it did for so many other of Liz's friends, colleagues, and students.

As a first year graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania in 1992, like other eager graduate students, I awaited the annual publication in *American Anthropologist* of the Distinguished Lecture to the Archaeology Division of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). That was the year that Elizabeth Brumfiel's Distinguished Lecture, "Breaking and Entering the Ecosystem: Gender, Class, and Faction Steal the Show," was published. Liz's words intensified and informed my thinking as a graduate student, and in 1999 I began my dissertation with the following quote from her Distinguished Lecture:

"[W]hen archaeologists fail to assign specific activities to these groups [women, peasants, and ethnic groups], dominant groups in contemporary society are free to depict them in any way they please. Most often, dominant groups will overstate the historical importance of their own group and undervalue the contributions of others, legitimating inequalities. In addition, when women, peasants, and ethnic groups are assigned no specific activities in the past, professional archaeologists make implicit assumptions about their roles and capabilities, resulting in the widespread acceptance of untested, and possibly erroneous, interpretations of archaeological data. As archaeologists, we have a professional responsibility to present our prehistories in ways that make distorted appropriations of the past as difficult as possible, and, as scientists, we need to work with models that expose our implicit assumptions concerning human roles and capabilities to critical reflection and hypothesis testing." (Brumfiel 1992:553)

Now written over 20 years ago, this quote still resonates with its initial force, a testament to the power and impact of Liz's work. In the quote above, as in so much of her work, Liz put forward a call to arms to archaeologists to take seriously the roles of traditionally neglected social groups, women, peasants, ethnic groups, and any other marginalized group. As a feminist scholar she was aware of the disabling stereotypes and profound misunderstandings of society that could ensue if researchers assumed, rather than

investigated, what the roles and capabilities of members of marginalized social groups were.

Imagine what it was like for me when I got my first chance to meet her. I first met Liz at a Society for Economic Anthropology conference shortly after starting as an assistant professor at Northwestern. Still fresh and green, I couldn't believe that Elizabeth Brumfiel would want to sit down and have lunch with me and hear about my ideas. In that meeting I realized I had met a very special person, someone who was open, caring, and an intellectual fireball. Anyone who has ever had a conversation with Liz knows exactly what I mean. It is hard to express the joy I felt when Liz joined the faculty at Northwestern in 2003. It was like a dream come true for me and I know that all of my colleagues and students at Northwestern would agree with this sentiment.

Across her career Liz sought to bring the lives of the marginalized to the front and center of archaeological research in order to further an understanding of how inequality worked in society. Inequality mattered to her. She studied how unequal relations emerged specifically through the exploration of the lives of women and commoners living under Aztec and Spanish domination. Her working premise was that marginalized peoples were neither dopes nor dupes, but active and knowledgeable participants in their world. In 1996, she stated this quite boldly, as she was always bold: "One of my basic operating assumptions is that women are not dupes" (Brumfiel 1996a:454). An even more profound extension of this line of thought was, for Liz, that an archaeological analysis based on the premise that people are dupes, unaware of their position in society, not only misses the opportunity to understand peoples' lives and experiences in the past but also misunderstands how power and inequality operate in society. As she stated, "recognizing the economic and political structures that engaged individuals in past societies actually enhances our sense of them as active agents rather than cultural dupes" (Brumfiel 2006a:36). To assume that people are mystified by the operation of domination denies the existence of enforcement, coercion, and sanctions in legitimating unequal relations in society and inhibits anthropological analysis of how inequality works.

Liz was a pioneer in the field of feminist and gender archaeology; a leading social theorist who ushered in a new era of research in archaeology that highlighted the central roles that gender and other social categories played in society (Figure 1). As she demonstrated most forcefully in her Distinguished Lecture, but also within many of her other works, the dominant paradigm of archaeology in the 1980s failed to account for significant social differences in



Figure 1. Liz in the 1980s. Photo courtesy of the Brumfiel family.

society and to take seriously that the actions of *all* actors in a past society were critical to the formation, development, and demise of any human society. The full force of her insights came through the fact that she didn't just espouse theory for theory's sake—her theoretical insights were always forcefully grounded in empirical research. As one of a handful of pioneers who attended the now historic Wedge conference in 1988, she set forward this new agenda for archaeological research in her chapter for Joan Gero and Margaret Conkey's signal volume, *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory* (Brumfiel 1991). Clearly articulated through an empirical case study about Aztec women and their roles in society, Liz demonstrated how dangerous and erroneous prejudicial assumptions about Aztec women's lives could be, and how archaeologists could muster archaeological data to answer questions about women's lives that would build stronger understandings of Aztec society and inequality. In her chapter for Rita Wright's *Gender in Archaeology: Essays in Research and Practice*, Liz tested, through archaeological evidence, whether residents of the conquered polity of Xaltocan in central Mexico passively accepted the dominant ideology of the Aztec state (Brumfiel 1996b). Looking at figurines from Xaltocan before and after the Aztec conquest, she found no appropriation of Aztec ideology. Through subsequent ethnohistoric research she discerned documentary evidence that corroborated her archaeological evidence indicating that "commoners had no special enthusiasm for [Aztec] imperial



Figure 2. Liz at Teotihuacan, Mexico, 2006. Photo courtesy of Lisa Overholtzer.

religion" (Brumfiel 2001:309). Her Presidential Address to the American Anthropological Association (Brumfiel 2006b), entitled "Cloth, Gender, Continuity, and Change: Fabricating Unity in Anthropology," mustered a wide range of ethnographic, ethnohistorical, and archaeological data to demonstrate the agency and variability in the social, economic, and political roles of women weavers in Mesoamerica through time.

Liz earned her B.Sc. and Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and her M.A. from the University of California, Los Angeles. Across her career Liz wrote and/or edited six books (Brumfiel 2005; Brumfiel and Earle 1987; Brumfiel and Feinman 2008; Brumfiel and Fox 1994; Parsons et al. 1982; Robin and Brumfiel 2010) and over 60 scholarly articles published in the United States, England, Mexico, and Spain, many of which have been reprinted. Her books set standards for archaeological research on critical topics including specialization, factionalism, gender, and Aztec society.

As a feminist archaeologist, Liz' research was transformative intellectually, and as a teacher and mentor to her students and colleagues she took an active role in transforming gender dynamics in the field. Through her own example as a professor at the small liberal arts, undergraduate institution of Albion College, where she spent most of her career, she demonstrated to her colleagues and students that it was possible to be a leading intellect without the backing of a major research institution. Her move to Northwestern University made Liz the first female archaeologist working in central Mexico to become a tenured professor at a university in the United States with a doctoral program in anthropology (Figure 2).

At Northwestern, Liz promoted a collaborative research ethic amongst her students and junior colleagues inspired by feminist pedagogy. Her graduate students were her junior colleagues, whom she inspired to conduct their own original research. One result of this approach to teaching and mentoring was the book *Gender, Households, and Society: Unraveling the Threads of the Past and the Present* (2010), that Liz and I co-edited, and which grew out of our graduate seminar on gender and archaeology. We had asked each student in the class, regardless of whether archaeology was their field of specialization or not, to complete original research on gender and archaeology for their final papers. The student papers were of such a high quality that they presented them at the AAA annual meetings as an invited session, by both

the Student Anthropology Division and Feminist Anthropology Division. The session was then selected for publication by the AAA's premier series—*Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association*.

Through personal example and feminist-inspired teaching and mentoring, Liz promoted an inclusive and inspiring research ethic for her students and colleagues. This may be the most transformative aspect of her work in the disciplines of archaeology and anthropology. In 2011 she was awarded the Committee on Gender Equity in Anthropology Award that recognized her significant work in mentoring students and colleagues and promoting the position of women in the field. To honor her memory, the Department of Anthropology at Northwestern established the “Elizabeth Brumfiel Award for Best Senior Thesis in Anthropological Archaeology.”

Liz would introduce herself to students on the first day of our gender class by stating that it is not always the things you most associate with someone as their successes that are the things for which they are the most proud. For Liz it was her activism in the field of anthropology that was something she was most proud of. As the president of the American Anthropological Association (2003–2005), Liz worked tirelessly to promote anthropology as a means to further human rights and social justice. She led an AAA campaign in support of same-sex marriage, stating that:

“[t]he results of more than a century of anthropological research on households, kinship relationships, and families, across cultures and through time, provide no support whatsoever for the view that either civilization or viable social orders depend upon marriage as an exclusively heterosexual institution. Rather, anthropological research supports the conclusion that a vast array of family types, including families built upon same-sex partnerships, can contribute to stable and humane societies.”

She took a controversial stand against holding the 2004 Annual Meeting of the AAA in San Francisco in protest of the lockout of low-wage workers by the San Francisco Hilton and 13 other San Francisco hotels. In 2006, David Horowitz, a leading conservative, listed her as one of the “101 most dangerous professors in America” due to her work on human rights issues and social justice.

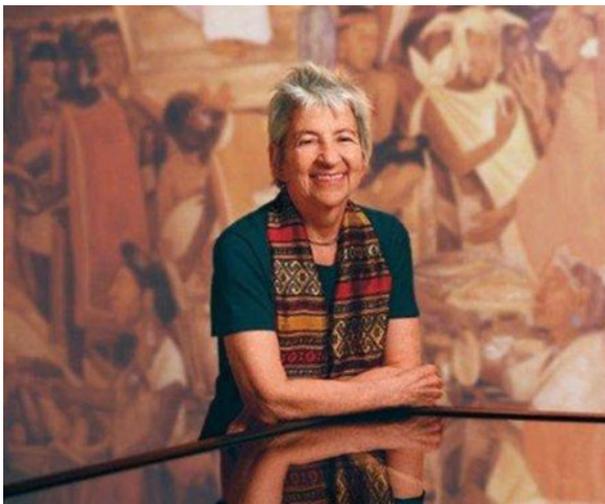


Figure 3. Liz at The Aztec World exhibit at the Field Museum in 2008. Photo courtesy of Andrew Campbell.



Figure 4. Liz with husband Vince and young son Geoff in the early 1980s. Photo courtesy of the Brumfiel family.

Liz was a female project director in a world of archaeological research that is still dominated by male-led archaeological projects. Since 1987, she and her students conducted archaeological research in Xaltocan, Mexico, the capital of an autonomous pre-Columbian kingdom that was conquered first by the Aztecs, and later by the Spanish. Long before archaeology recognized the importance of community involvement, Liz involved the people of Xaltocan in all aspects of her research leading to bestowment of the Eagle Warrior Prize, in 2007, by the town of Xaltocan for her dedication to community issues in archaeology. Eagle Warriors are the highest ranking warriors in Aztec society.

Liz was the lead curator of *The Aztec World Exhibit* at the Field Museum in 2008–2009 (Figure 3). This exhibit brought her message of the importance of understanding the lives of all people in the past to the public. Instead of just exhibiting objects associated with Aztec elites, warriors, and priests, *The Aztec World Exhibit* showed objects of daily life used by women, farmers, and artisans, to put a more comprehensive and vibrant face on life in the Aztec world.

Liz was a loving wife and mother to her husband Vince and son Geoff (Figure 4). She was an avid Scrabble player who would take on any opponent with gusto. It was a certain accomplishment to beat Liz at a game of Scrabble, and one that few achieved. I certainly never did.

In the spring of 2013 I taught the graduate seminar on engendering archaeology that Liz and I developed for the first time on my own. There had always been a synergy in the class that I didn't know if I could recreate on my own: we were bookends on a generation of scholarship that would be carried forward by the students taking the class. Liz had pioneered the feminist movement in archaeology, and I had had the good fortune to benefit from that pioneering. I didn't know what to expect from teaching the class alone, but I truly enjoyed it because I came to realize that through her thoughts and words, just as had been the case before she came into my life, Liz continues to teach the class with me, and inspire new generations as she always did. Thank you, Liz.

REFERENCES

- Brumfiel, Elizabeth M.
 1991 Weaving and Cooking: Women's Production in Aztec Mexico. In *Engendering Archaeology: Women in Prehistory*, edited by Joan M. Gero and Margaret W. Conkey, pp. 224–251. Blackwell, Oxford.
 1992 Distinguished Lecture in Archaeology: Breaking and Entering the

- Ecosystem–Gender, Class, and Faction Steal the Show. *American Anthropologist* 94:551–567.
- 1996a The Quality of Tribute Cloth: The Place of Evidence in Archaeological Argument. *American Antiquity* 61:453–462.
- 1996b Figurines and the Aztec State: Testing the Effectiveness of Ideological Domination. In *Gender in Archaeology: Essays in Research and Practice*, edited by Rita P. Wright, pp. 143–166. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.
- 2001 Aztec Hearts and Minds: Religion and the State in the Aztec Empire. In *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History*, edited by Susan E. Alcock, Terence N. D’Altroy, Kathleen D. Morrison, and Carla M. Sinopoli, pp. 283–310. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- 2005 *Production and Power at Postclassic Xaltocan*. Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City.
- 2006a Methods in Feminist and Gender Archaeology: A Feeling for Difference—and Likeness. In *Handbook of Gender in Archaeology*, edited by Sarah M. Nelson, pp. 31–58. AltaMira Press, Lanham, MD.
- 2006b Cloth, Gender, Continuity, and Change: Fabricating Unity in Anthropology. *American Anthropologist* 108:862–877.
- Brumfiel, Elizabeth M., and Timothy K. Earle
1987 *Specialization, Exchange, and Complex Societies*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Brumfiel, Elizabeth M., and John W. Fox
1994 *Factional Competition and Political Development in the New World*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Brumfiel, Elizabeth M., and Gary Feinman
2008 *The Aztec World*. Abrams, New York.
- Parsons, Jeffrey, Elizabeth M. Brumfiel, Mary Parsons, and David Wilson
1982 *Prehispanic Settlement Patterns in the Southern Valley of Mexico: The Chalco-Xochimilco Region*. Memoirs, No. 14, Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
- Robin, Cynthia and Elizabeth M. Brumfiel
2010 *Gender, Households, and Society: Unraveling the Threads of the Past and the Present*. Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association, No. 18. Wiley, Oxford.