

The Myth of the Gay Caveman

Episode Transcript

Kamila: [00:00:00] There were, if I remember it well, I think six graves. And this one was very special because, the skeleton was, laid as a man but had typical female grave goods. That means the necklace and the egg-shaped vessels. But, it was quite poorer than the other women, other women in, in the grave. I think there were three women and three men actually. So this grave was much poorer than the other two graves and we had two anthropologists there and neither one could say if it, if the skeleton belongs to a man or to a woman according to macro, microscopical signs.

Alison: In 2011, archaeologist Dr. Kamila Vašíňová was undertaking an excavation in Prague when she and her team uncovered several burials

Kamila: [00:01:00] in Czech Republic it is like that when you are a field archeologist, you do excavations wherever construction is held. So you never know what will you find actually.

Kamila: So that was a rescue excavations was in Prague, in the center of Prague, and, was destruction of some old house and building new apartments. And besides from finds from other periods like Bronze Age and Neolithic, there was a small burial ground from the period of the Corded Ware culture.

Alison: [The Corded Ware culture](#) is an archaeological culture based in Central and Eastern Europe from about 3500 to 2200 BCE. This culture has been identified largely based on its pottery, other artifacts , as well as its burial rituals, which were highly gender-specific. Men were typically buried on their right side and women buried on their left side.

Alison: [00:02:00] Both would be accompanied by specific types of grave goods according to their gender.

Kamila: Usually, women have a very specific grave goods, put, in the graves, like, necklaces from small shells and, typical shapes even of vessels. And, men have, uh, hand axes and the round hand axes, they are called bolavá, which no one really knows how this function, but they are quite typical. And, flint stone tools. So usually when you find Corded Ware graves, you know even without an anthropologist if it is a man or a woman. And these rules also, function for small kids even, for small girls and small boys.

Alison: So it was a little bit surprising when Camila and her colleagues found a grave that didn't at first seem to follow this pattern. But what they didn't expect was the media firestorm that [00:03:00] followed

Newscut: archaeologists in the Czech Republic say they have unearthed the remains of what could be the world's oldest known gay caveman. As you might imagine, the report has created quite a stir,

Alison: How did we get from this atypical grave to a gay caveman?

Alison: I'm Alison Carter, associate professor in the anthropology department at the University of Oregon, and on today's This Ancient Life, we'll discuss the life cycle of this archeology media story and why the identification of the sex of a skeleton is not so straightforward.

Alison: Stay tuned.

Alison: So where did the gay [00:04:00] caveman story come from? As Kamila and her colleagues were working on this excavation in Prague, they were asked to do an interview

Kamila: Yeah, well, I quite often do interviews about my work from the field. I don't really know how they found out about some small field excavation rescue excavation in Prague. But suddenly they called and wanted to talk about it. And it doesn't happen very often that, uh, foreign media contact you.

Alison: In chatting with Kamila, she recalled that the initial interview was with the BBC. But from my digital archeology, it seems that the first interview was with Iran's Press TV. The original version of this interview is no longer on Press TV's website, but you can see [a link](#) to an archived version in our show transcript.

Alison: In the interview, she's quoted as saying the following: "We found one very specific grave of a man lying in the position of a woman without gender-specific grave goods, neither jewelry or [00:05:00] weapons. So we think based on data that it could be a member of a so-called third gender, which were people either with different sexual orientation or transsexuals or just people who identified themselves differently from the rest of society."

Alison: There was no mention of a gay caveman in this initial article, but it seems that shortly after this interview, the British newspaper The Telegraph picked up the story with the headline, "The [First homosexual caveman found](#)." And then The Daily Mail posted a story with the headline, "[The oldest gay in the village: 5,000-year-old is 'outed' by the way he was buried](#)," and the story spread from there.

Alison: Almost as quickly, however, was the backlash from archeologists. Several people spoke out about the media characterization of this burial.

Alison: First, the burial was not of a caveman. The Corded Ware culture is [a Neolithic culture](#), meaning that people lived in [00:06:00] villages and practiced farming with domesticated plants and animals.

Alison: Secondly, you can't tell someone's sexuality from their skeleton. As bioarchaeologist Kristina Kilgrove [wrote on her blog](#), "If this burial represents a transgendered individual, as well it could, that doesn't necessarily mean the person had a different sexual orientation, and certainly doesn't mean that he would have considered himself or that his culture would have considered him homosexual."

Alison: Third, it is important to distinguish between sex and gender. Generally, when anthropologists are talking about sex, they're referring to biological and physiological differences between males and females, such as differences in sex chromosomes, hormones, reproductive organs, and genitalia. Gender refers to the social meanings assigned by a culture, often based on those biological differences.

Alison: What does it mean to be a man or male in the Corded Ware culture? This was likely very [00:07:00] different from what we consider to be male or masculine in our culture today. Gender also refers to a person's internal experience of their identity as male, female, both, or neither, as well as the expression of this identity.

Alison: In calling this burial a gay caveman, the press was conflating these nuanced issues of biological sex and gender and then lumping them together with sexual orientation.

Alison: So what did you think when this interview ended up getting picked up and taken so wildly out of context?

Kamila: Well, first I was quite angry actually, and I thought that, uh, I would write to them. But then I told myself that I have too much work to do and, well, I cannot change people's behavior because I didn't tell even, I think, one third of, uh, what was written in the article. [00:08:00] So I concentrated on other work and then used it as an example how media can cover archeology for my students.

Alison: So Kamila and her colleagues continued working. A tooth from this unusual burial that looked male but was buried like a woman with poorer grave goods than others in the cemetery was sent off for analysis at the Criminalistic Institute.

Kamila: So we sent one tooth and the skeleton to the criminalistic institute and they did an analysis for us and finally it w- it took like four month. They found out that it really was a woman but with very muscular, masculine signs on the skeleton.

Alison: Oh, wow. So this whole time it wasn't a male skeleton, it was a female skeleton buried as a female

Kamila: they were female, but, it was quite poor grave. Poor burial because, normally there are like three to six [00:09:00] vessels and necklaces and some, copper, jewelry usual in the female graves. And here it was just like three vessels and one flint stone tool and that was all. No necklace, no typical goods that we find in the Corded Ware culture graves.

Alison: Um, this is amazing actually. Um, I don't think this additional information made it at all into the English language press. Was it covered in the Czech media at all?

Kamila: Well, i-in Czech media we presented it. There were about two or three articles because, we did a presentation, a media presentation of the whole burial ground, which was the six skeletons. And, uh, media took it, like, I don't know, two to three articles were. So it was, like, the results, and also the results from the Criminalistic Institute. [00:10:00] So it was published, and it was interesting,

Kamila: So was it a media sensation?

Kamila: No, it wasn't a sensation, I think, in technically. Uh, I think it was in some, um, in some part where scientific news are in the newspapers or web portals. I, I think some people read it, but, it was not a sensation at all, I think. No one then contacted us after it was published.

Alison: We'll be right back

Sian: I would argue , it's more of than an art than a science. Yeah , and there are all these different things that we have to look at. Like s- for example, we may have an individual who's only represented by, you know, part of a [00:11:00] crania. So, it's really important that we say, you know, this could be possibly a male, but we can't be definitive about that, you know, within the archeologic con- context or even the forensic context.

Alison: This is Sean Halcrow, a bioarchaeologist

Sian: I'm Sian Halcrow, a professor, in bioarchaeology at the University of Durham. And I'm also a professor of anatomy at the University of Otago, but currently I'm at Durham for four years on a global professor British Academy professorship.

Alison: As a bioarchaeologist, Sean studies human skeletons to determine things like age, sex, and even different pathologies that might have been left on the bones

Alison: How do you determine if a skeleton is male or female, and why is it so difficult sometimes?

Sian: Sure. So what we do is we try and look to see if there's [sexual dimorphism](#). So sexual dimorphism is [00:12:00] sex-specific morphological differences, so differences between males and females in terms of size and shape of certain parts of their body and in particular, we're talking specifically in bioarcheology about their skeleton.

Sian: So in general, males are larger than females in terms of size, but obviously there's variation in that 'cause obviously you can have a female that's bigger than a male. So we're, I'm talking here about stereotypical differences, and we have to think about sexual dimorphism as being on a spectrum, okay?

Sian: And that's why we look at a lot of different things on the skeleton, and we give more weight to certain areas of the skeleton that are more ideal for looking at the sexual dimorphism. So we also have to think about the fact that sexual dimorphism is only really, uh, visible in adults morphologically.

Sian: There are methods to assess sex [00:13:00] differences in non-adult skeletons, so infants and children, but they're not necessarily as accurate.

Sian: And we always need to be thinking about variation, and there's variation at different levels. I talked a little bit about inter-individual variation before, so you obviously can have some females that are bigger than, than males.

Sian: But also there's variation in sexual dimorphism between different populations. So for example [I've done a lot of work in Southeast Asia](#). Some of the characteristics there may look quite gracile or less robust than they would for a person of the same sex in another population.

Sian: So we always have to think about variation at those different levels. Another thing that can influence sex estimation is age. So you can have young males that may appear [00:14:00] morphologically, like their size and their shape of their bones, to be quite feminine-like. So they may have more slender, gracile parts of their crania, for example, whereas older adults may appear more masculine.

Sian: So a female may become more masculine over time in terms of her skeletal characteristics. So it's important when we do sex estimation to also do age estimation at the same time to be able to interpret those differences.

Alison: So like what parts of a skeleton do you look at exactly to help determine the sex?

Sian: So we give preference usually to looking at the pelvis, and you could understand that there would be sexual differences between the pelvis of a male and a female, and a lot of that's related to the pelvic inlet and outlet size for giving birth.

Sian: If you're looking at the pelvis and looking kind of through the pelvic cavity, so looking down on it for [00:15:00] males, it's kind of more cone-shaped, so the outlet isn't as big as females. And there's all different parts of the pelvis, including the pubis, which is the interior part that's wider in females, it's more narrower in males, which all contributes to making the pelvic inlet and the outlet bigger for females.

Sian: And that's related to selection for women when they have or if they have children. But this as well can change and [there's been studies](#) that have been done and they were looking at remodeling of the pelvis, the bone, bony pelvis and they found that there were differences over a lifetime of an individual.

Sian: So these, there could be changes to make this outlet and inlet wider slightly during the time of, peak reproductive timing for a female which is really interesting.

Sian: Sometimes, depending on the preservation of [00:16:00] the site, some of the pelvic parts that are really informative of sexual dimorphism may be damaged. For example, the interior or the front part of the pelvis may be crushed with the weight of the burial matrix above.

Alison: So if the pelvis isn't available, what else can you look at?

Sian: We can also look at the cranium and sometimes parts of the cranium are quite well preserved. So there's places that you can look at on, on the skull, and you can probably, if you're listening along to this, you can probably feel these places, so I'll just describe where they are.

Alison: Okay, great

Sian: So above your eye orbit, there's kind of like a crest. This is called a supraorbital ridge. So on men, that's much more prominent, in females it's less prominent. There's also other places and, but you can't look at this on yourself. You can look at this on a skeleton that doesn't have [00:17:00] eyes.

Sian: But you could put your finger in the eye sockets, just on the margin of those, so the sides of them, and they it tends to be more rounded, and that's related to the robusticity of the supraorbital margin on men compared with females. It tends to be more sharp on females.

There's also muscle attachment sites at the back of your skull, right, so right at the back where you've got your neck muscles.

Sian: If you just put your head down, and so you're put it, pulling your chin, into your neck and put it up again and down, you can feel your neck muscles moving.

Alison: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I feel that

Sian: so your neck muscles actually attach there right to the back of your occipital bone, which is the bone at the back of your skull. And males tend to have more pronounced nuchal crest there compared with females.

Sian: There's also part right behind your [00:18:00] ears, kind of behind the bottom of your earlobes, behind your earlobes. Can you feel a kind of projection there? That,

Alison: mm-hmm. Yeah, yeah, I feel that too.

Sian: That's your mastoid process and that's the attachment for your sternocleidomastoid, which helps you like put your head side to side. So it's a muscle attachment site.

Sian: Mine is actually quite big, so I'm a great example of individual variation in terms of sexual dimorphism. It was bigger on average - stereotypically in males compared with females. And there's other parts that you can look at as well, including like the width and the projection of your chin, it tends to be more pronounced, in males and compared with females it's less pronounced and it's smaller.

Sian: There's other things that you can look at as well, like skeletal metrics, so looking at joint size. Joint size is a really good one. And long bone lengths as well, but long bone lengths [00:19:00] might just be related to how tall you are. But we know that on average, obviously, in a population, men are usually, you know, they're taller than women on average. Yeah, so we try and look at as many things as possible.

Sian: And then of course there's other methods that you could use and people have used them. We don't necessarily have to use them in bioarchaeology, but if you've got just a small fragment of bone and that type of thing, people may use [ancient DNA analysis](#) and that type of thing as well.

Sian: And there's new methods looking at [amelogenin-linked amino acids](#) in enamel as well, which is quite a good technique I think because it doesn't necessarily destroy the tooth.

Alison: So when you're trying to determine if a skeleton is male or female, you have to look at several parts of the skeleton, and even then there's a lot of variation, and it's difficult to definitively say if a skeleton is male or female

Sian: Yeah. And, and it, and but this is the thing as well, it's always an estimation. We would never, you know, [00:20:00] some people, you know, when I'm, um, reviewing articles and they say, you know, this individual was determined to be a male, it's like, well, you can't actually do that. Um, so it's really important that we make sure that that's the case.

Sian: And I suppose it depends as well on the preservation as to how many individuals within a population we can't necessarily do sex estimation. And then- confounding the issue is when I'm working in, you know, places like Southeast Asia, where we actually have to modify some of our methods to be able to figure out, you know, if we're dealing with a individual who's represented by a skull, for example, we have to say, well, actually, even though using the standard it says that this might be a female, it could actually be a male because they're generally less robust.

Alison: So determining if a skeleton is male or female is not always [00:21:00] straightforward. The other issue is when you start conflating sexuality with sex

Sian: The press has conflated things like biological sex, with which we're trying to estimate gender and then sexual orientation.

Sian: I think it's a bit hard sometimes when press kind of run away with things, but this is why it's really important to have your results kind of finalized as much as possible and think about those, the implications of communicating, that research.

Alison: Camila also felt the press was eager to assign the atypical burial as homosexual

Kamila: we told to the media that it is an atypical burial, though not that atypical in this period because we have more of them. And they almost immediately. Was he a homosexual? Well, I don't know if it was a he or a she, and I certainly don't know and cannot find out [00:22:00] the sexual orientation from the bones.

Alison: thinking about gender and sexuality in the past is always gonna be multifaceted and requires considering biological sex, grave goods, and other ways that an ancient society might have understood gender roles.

Alison: The skeleton found in Prague in 2011 was neither gay nor a caveman, nor even a man. It appears to have been an adult female buried according to the female burial rites of the Corded Ware culture, but with fewer grave goods than might be expected.

Alison: Skeletally speaking, males and females are not a binary, but exist on a spectrum. Identifying the biological sex of a skeleton can be complicated, and the eagerness of the press to make more of this burial than was really there led to a media circus and the creation of a gay caveman that didn't really exist

Alison: What did you learn from this experience? Do you feel wary of talking to the press now about your [00:23:00] research?

Kamila: Well, it's fun because I use it in my classes as well. I often tell them to watch their mouth. Not to say anything for sure because nothing is for sure, e- except for I have a skeleton here and I have a Neolithic house here that they can say, but to watch their mouth and think before they talk. Because even when I talk to the media, I didn't tell them any sensational things, just that, that there is an atypical burial, which could be a man or a woman. They made this gay caveman from this statement. So I try to teach them how to speak to the media and, what to say, what not to say, and kind of sad actually that you cannot say anything to the media without it being, transformed, but it's probably the reality we live in, so you have to work with [00:24:00] that.

Alison: Is there anything you're working on now that you'd be excited to talk about with the media?

Kamila: We found a great wooden well from the Germanic period, now they are analyzing it, and we did a 3D laser profile. So we are doing a video from it, so it will be scanned in 3D and placed in the museum, the video, and we are looking forward to what wood and what palynological analysis will bring.

Kamila: And that's ... I'm excited about that the most right now, I think. Actually , no one will be interested from the media no one is interested about wells. Everyone wants dead bodies. I think. But for us, it's very interesting.

[00:25:00]

Alison: Thank you for listening to This Ancient Life. This podcast was supported by the [Williams Instructional Grant](#) from the University of Oregon. Check out our website, thisancientlife.com, for episode transcripts, citations, and a teacher's guide with information on where you can learn more about this episode.

Alison: Music in this episode included tracks from Blue Dot Sessions. Our intro music is Bopha Vientiane by Sin Sisamouth.

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