

Ancestral Puebloan pottery-making wasn't 'women's work'

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Dr. John Kantner, a University of North Florida professor specializing in anthropological archaeology. Credit: University of North Florida

New research from Dr. John Kantner, a University of North Florida professor specializing in anthropological archaeology, suggests that pottery making wasn't a primarily female activity in ancient Puebloan society, as had long been assumed based on historical evidence that women produced pottery for each household.

Kanter, also associate vice president of research at UNF, is the principal investigator and lead author of this study, published today in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* of the United States of America, a peer-reviewed multidisciplinary scientific journal and the official journal of the National Academy of Sciences. [View the article.](#)

His research team and co-authors are comprised of Michele Pierson and Shaza Wester, former UNF undergraduates, and David McKinney, formerly a graduate student at Georgia State University.

"An understanding of the division of [labor](#) in different societies, and especially how it evolved in the [human species](#), is fundamental to most analyses of social, political and economic systems," said Kantner, a Southside Jacksonville resident.

The findings, he notes, reconstruct the division of labor between men and women in an ancient society and indicate that labor wasn't strictly divided upon gender lines, despite the conventional wisdom that men and women engaged in separate domestic tasks.

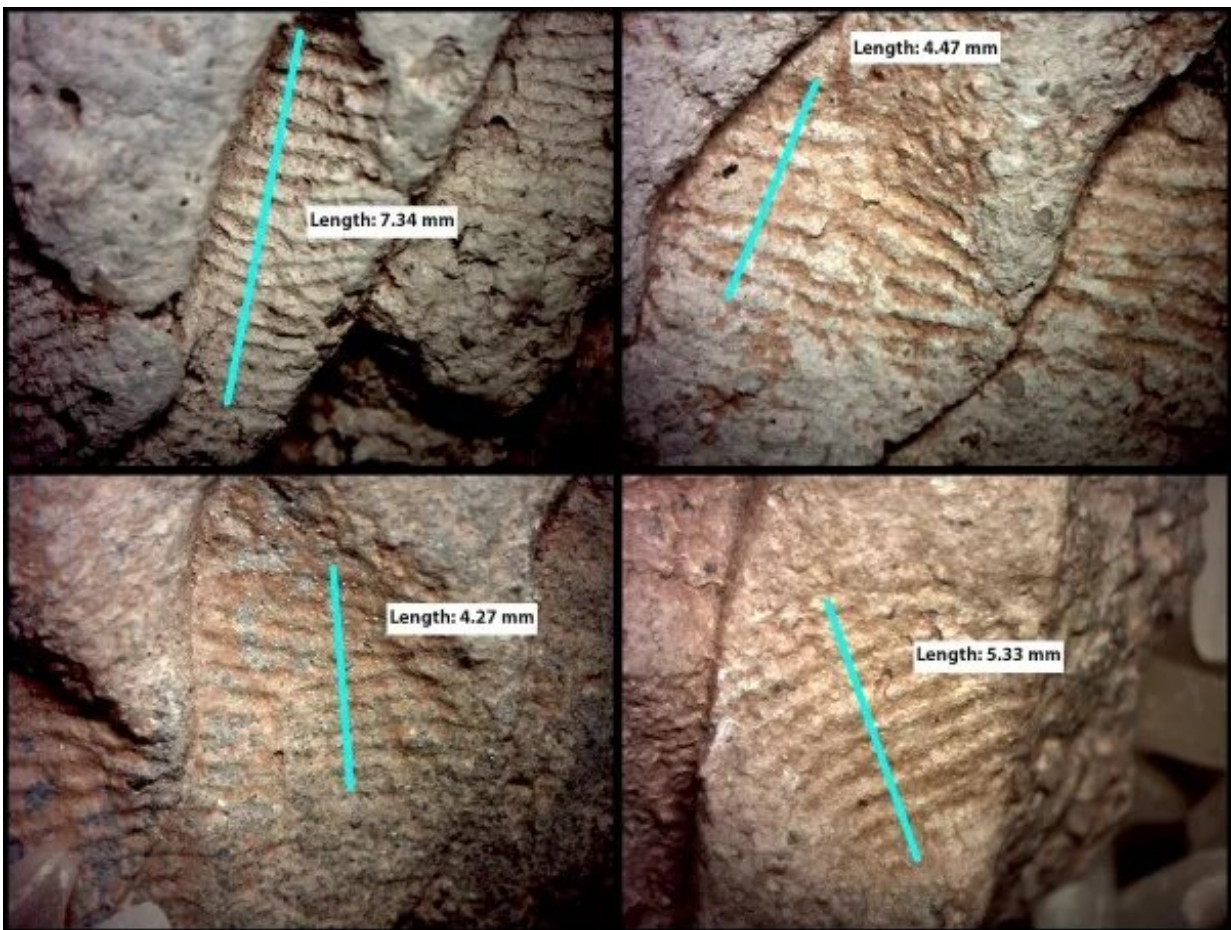


Credit: University of North Florida

Instead, the researchers found that the proportion of males and females involved in [pottery](#)-making was seemingly unconstrained by considerations of gender, with, in some households, more males making pottery while in others, equal numbers of both sexes were involved.

Kantner's team used an innovative method for identifying the sex of potters through the analysis of fingerprint impressions. They recorded fingerprints on pottery from around the 10th to 11th century CE, measuring the width of fingerprint ridges—the patterns on the tip of each finger—to distinguish between male and female prints.

Analysis of over 980 ceramic shards from a 1,000-year-old Ancestral Puebloan community in modern-day New Mexico's Chaco Canyon revealed representation of both male and female prints.



Credit: University of North Florida

The time frame of the pottery production was marked by the development of Chaco Canyon as a highly influential political and religious center. This development coincided with a shift toward [gender equity](#) in pottery-making, the authors write, suggesting that high demand for pottery in Chaco Canyon may have spurred more people of both genders to produce pottery.

"The results challenge previous assumptions about gendered divisions of labor in ancient societies and suggest a complex approach to [gender](#) roles throughout time," noted Kantner.

More information: John Kantner et al. Reconstructing sexual divisions of labor from fingerprints on Ancestral Puebloan pottery, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2019). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1901367116](#)

Provided by University of North Florida

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