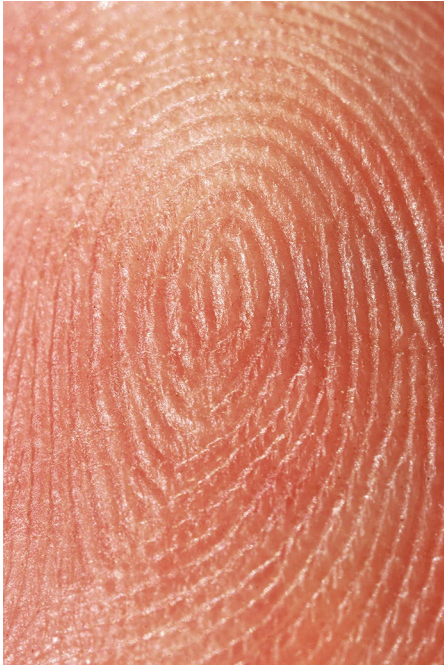


ANTHROPOLOGY

Division of labour

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Credit: Cristian M. Vela / Alamy Stock Photo

Popular beliefs about what division of labour looked like in ancient cultures abound. Scientifically, addressing the question of which tasks were predominantly taken on by women or men respectively is far from trivial. Finding strong evidence in the traces

that previous generations have left behind requires the development of new methods.

A new study by John Kantner and colleagues at the University of North Florida using one such novel methodology yielded results that will perhaps surprise some. The authors build on the recent finding that men and women have slightly different fingerprints, with male fingertips being marked by wider ridges. The authors analysed fingerprints found on ceramic vessels manufactured by Ancient Puebloan people living in the 10th and 11th centuries AD in what is now New Mexico, USA. The authors report that there was no strict division of labour in production of these vessels; in all five analysed households, both men and women contributed to production, sometimes in equal numbers, sometimes with men taking over a slightly larger proportion of the work.

The finding challenges the assumption that it was predominantly women who manufactured domestic goods; it demonstrates the importance of considering scientific evidence, particularly where popular beliefs are used to support arguments on what is argued to be a natural division of labour.

Anne-Marike Schiffer

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