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Archaeology, Sexism, and Scandal: The Long-Suppressed Story of One Woman's Discoveries and the Man Who Stole Credit for Them

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Mary Ross Ellingson was a Hoosier archaeologist who made some important contributions to the field of ancient Greek archaeology. Yet no one has ever heard of her. I rediscovered her in 2003 when I stumbled across a scrapbook she had made. It had been placed on a storage shelf in the Department of Archaeology and Art History at the University of Evansville where I work. What I would like to do this afternoon is tell you about who Mary Ross Ellingson was, what she did, and why you have never heard of her.

Ellingson was a professor at the University of Evansville in the 1960s and '70s. When she passed away in 1993 her daughter donated her mother's scrapbook to the department and all promptly forgot about it. The University of Evansville hired me in 2001 and I stumbled across it two years later while cleaning off the shelf where it had sat for a decade. The scrapbook contained nearly 100 photographs as well as letters, news clippings, and other documents. Ellingson had put it together to document her participation in an excavation at the Greek site of Olynthos in 1931.

¹ *The following is the text of a paper I delivered at the Hoosier Women at Work conference on April 1, 2017. The paper was intended as an introduction to Mary Ross Ellingson and as a summary of research I published in the book *Archaeology, Sexism, and Scandal: One Woman's Discoveries and The Man Who Stole Credit for Them* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2015). Anyone conducting serious, scholarly research on Ellingson, David Robinson, the Olynthos excavations, or women in archaeology, the sciences or academia should consult and cite the book, not this lecture, as the book explains all the issues touched on in the paper in much greater depth and with copious references that the scrupulous researcher is encouraged to also consult.*

Olynthos is a site made famous by an archaeologist at Johns Hopkins University named David Robinson. Prior to his work at the site archaeologists studying the ancient Greeks focused their work on public architecture, like theaters and temples, as these were the most likely locations for finding large marble statuary, a primary area of interest at the time. Robinson excavated a number of houses at Olynthos and convinced his fellow archaeologists that houses could teach us much about the ancient Greeks. It may seem like an obvious concept today, but at the time it was a revolutionary idea.

Olynthos was a spectacular place to study houses. In 348 BCE Philip of Macedon, Alexander the Great's father, laid siege to the city and burned it to the ground. No one returned to rebuild it. Although there was some subsequent disruption, many of the artifacts remained where they fell the day Philip burned the city, making Olynthos a great place to study how different rooms were used within houses as the artifacts still lay where they had been used. The fourteen volumes Robinson published on his excavation have become the cornerstone of ancient Greek domestic studies. As a graduate student I was required to read all 14 volumes of the *Excavations at Olynthus* series, a sign of how seminal his work was.

Robinson met Ellingson in the fall of 1930 and the two struck up what was to be a life-long friendship. She had just arrived at Johns Hopkins University as a graduate student intent on becoming a classical archaeologist. She had completed a degree in classics at the University of Alberta the previous spring. Robinson had already completed one season at Olynthos in 1928 and was planning to return in 1931. He invited Ellingson to join his graduate-student staff at the excavation.

Before I explain what Ellingson's role at the excavation was, I want to share with you an extended quote from a letter that was in the scrapbook dated April 21, 1931. Ellingson sent it to her family from Olynthos. What I like about this letter is that it gives you insight not only into her personality but also into what it was like to work in Greece in the 1930s:

Yours truly rode in a wedding procession...Davey [Robinson] and I walked over to the next village, Hagias Mamas to look at some inscriptions on stone...We were walking along the road, when we heard the tramp of horses' feet and the rhythmic song of the [wedding party] approaching. Turning around, we saw horses, carts, people, banners approaching at a great rate of speed. Much shouting and firing of guns and pistols. The party stopped when they got to us...[they] got out, they passed the cognac around and invited Davey and me to come along which we did... The groom got out...so we rode in his cart, me on the front seat... Now I must explain about these carts, there is a board across the front, to sit on, but no place to put your feet or brace yourself...Well off we went, me feeling very tickled the while ... Bump no. 1.- Mary slips back a little on the seat. Pistol shot no. 1, horses lurch forward, Mary falls back into cart, upon Davey and other members of the bridal party. After resuming

my original place – on we go. Bump no. 2. – Mary slips back a little – Pistol shot no. 2. – horses lurch forward and Mary, by dint of ... a few friendly pushes from the back retains [her] seat. ... Oh I forgot to say that [one of the men riding in the back of the cart] told Dr. Robinson he would like to marry me, and thought I was very beautiful (this being my 3rd proposal during the course of the afternoon). Finally we arrived at Myriophyto, where the whole village...was out to greet us. Much firing of pistols etc...Adoni, the cook, was out to see it too, and when he saw Davey and me sitting up in the front cart... well his eyes just about popped. After recovering his first surprise he made one dive for the house and shrieked at the bunch – M'sieur Robinson – Mam'selle...marriage! They didn't know what it was all about, and wondered if Davey and I were eloping, Mrs. R[obinson] being away in (Thessaloniki) for the week-end."

Ellingson proved to be a talented field archaeologist. At this time women rarely excavated in Greece. During most of the 1928 season Robinson had kept his female graduate students in the dig house cleaning and cataloguing finds. But something about Ellingson made him trust her. By the end of the season she was supervising up to 60 Greek workmen at a time, more than any of the male graduate students were supervising. Robinson had her excavate both among the houses that were to make him so famous and among the graves in the city's cemeteries. In future seasons Robinson would regularly employ women in the field and not confine them to the dig house. The practice slowly spread to other sites in Greece. Ellingson was not the first woman to excavate in Greece, but she helped to open the field to future women.

Johns Hopkins University awarded Ellingson both her master's degree and PhD in classical archaeology. Her thesis and dissertation were about the terracotta figurines from Olynthos, many of which she had helped to excavate. Not only was Ellingson a good field archaeologist but she was also good at cataloguing and analyzing these figurines. At the time the purpose of terracotta figurines was not well understood and was the subject of hot debate. Robinson had published the figurines he had excavated during the 1928 season in *Excavations at Olynthus* volume IV. His work was not well-received as he merely described the figurines without discussing where he found them nor without weighing in on the question of their use. This is what made Ellingson's work so important; not only did she catalogue the figurines and describe the context of their find spots, but she discussed their purpose.

I do not want to go into too much detail, but let me mention just three points she made that caught the attention of other archaeologists. Ellingson found figurines made from the same mold both in homes and graves, which led her to conclude the purpose of a figurine could change over its lifetime. It

might start out as decoration in a house or as a representation of a god or goddess in a household shrine, but when the owner died it could be interred with him or her as a grave offering. A second point she made was about animal figurines. She found them both in homes and graves, but she noticed that they only appeared in the graves of children. This led her to conclude they were toys. At this time Greek archaeology was very focused on men and public life, virtually no one ever mentioned children, which made her interpretation quite novel. Finally, Ellingson used some very simple statistics to support her interpretations. While archaeologists routinely use statistics today, at that time statistical methodology was just entering the field. Ellingson helped promote this new archaeological tool.

A few months after she received her PhD in 1939, Mary Ross, her maiden name, married Rudolph Ellingson. The couple moved to Evansville, where her husband had taken a job. Ellingson did not seek a permanent job, aiding the war relief effort and raising her two daughters kept her busy. Once her daughters left for college in the early 1960s, however, she joined the faculty at the University of Evansville, where she remained until her retirement in 1974. Ironically, she never taught an archaeology course at the university as the Department of Archaeology and Art History had not been formed yet. Instead she taught Latin, Greek, and English courses.

Among the documents with the scrapbook was a copy of Ellingson's master's thesis. As soon as I started to read it, I recognized it. I got a copy of her dissertation from the archives at Johns Hopkins University and recognized the text in that as well. Yet I had never heard of Ellingson before. Aside from the poorly-received volume IV in the *Olynthus* series, Robinson had written about terracotta figurines in just two other volumes, VII and XIV. After checking these out of the library, I laid these documents on my kitchen table and began to read. I read the same words over and over; the texts are identical. Based on sampling various pages and counting the number of words that are the same in each document, I estimate that 95% of the words in *Olynthus* VII and 93% in the first chapter and a half of *Olynthus* XIV repeat what Ellingson wrote exactly and unaltered. What few differences there are represent editorial, not substantive, changes. And yet Robinson lists himself as the sole author of both volumes. He does mention Ellingson in the introduction to each volume along with many other people he was thanking in a general way. One could never guess by reading his acknowledgement of her that Ellingson actually wrote these texts.

Three pieces of evidence allow us to state unequivocally that what Robinson did was plagiarism, even though such a conclusion makes many archaeologists very uncomfortable. First, at that time the practice in archaeology was for senior researchers to help their students publish their work. In this way the students could establish a record of publication that would help them find a position as a university

professor. Robinson was no exception, he regularly helped his students publish. His treatment of Ellingson differed from the normal practice of the day and from his own practice. Second, Johns Hopkins University had a rule at the time awarding the intellectual property in a dissertation to the author, not the advisor or principal investigator. Robinson was aware of this rule. I found a number of references to it in his correspondence among his papers now housed in the archive at the University of Mississippi. Therefore, he knowingly violated a university rule by publishing Ellingson's work without proper acknowledgement. Third, not long after he published Ellingson's dissertation he wrote a definition of the word plagiarism. This definition was in a letter that had nothing to do with Ellingson or Olynthos, nonetheless it provides us with his understanding of the word. He defines it as removing an author's name from a work and substituting one's own, which is exactly what he did. There can be no question that Robinson committed plagiarism.

Why did he did he plagiarize Ellingson's work? We cannot ask him, but I suspect that he recognized her work on the figurines was significantly better than what he had published in *Olynthus* IV. Reviewers certainly thought so. They praised Robinson for his creative ideas such as that figurines had a life-cycle and that children existed in the past. They were also impressed with his use of statistics. Of course the reviewers could not know that they were praising Ellingson's work, not Robinson's.

No evidence survives to inform us of how Ellingson reacted to Robinson's publication of her thesis, but in the archives at the University of Mississippi a letter she wrote to him expressing surprise at seeing her dissertation in print survives. Robinson wrote back stating, ". . . [I] probably should have given you more credit . . ." It was the closest thing she ever received to an apology for his actions.

All of this is only a very brief summary of the story. There is much more to it which I have published as a book, *Archaeology, Sexism and Scandal: One Woman's Discoveries and the Man Who Took Credit for Them*. I encourage you to read the book; it gives much more context to the story by examining the role of women in archaeology, the sciences, and academia on either side of World War II. The book contains more shocks and surprises including the story of how Robinson was fired from Johns Hopkins and how one of the Olynthus graduate students was eventually the victim of murder.

The response to the book has been overwhelming. This is my third book, but it is the only one for which I have received fan mail. The most gratifying are the emails I receive from young women still in high school who are inspired by the book to break the glass ceiling in other parts of archaeology and the sciences, just as Ellingson did in field work. They, however, intend to have their names attached to their work.

The University of Evansville's Department of Archaeology is one of fewer than 20 archaeology departments in the country. We are helping to create the next generation of archaeologists. At the moment about 85% of our students are female. The field of archaeology is still dominated by men, but when this new generation comes of age their sheer numbers will shift that balance. I am looking forward to that day because these women will remake the field in ways I cannot imagine, offering new interpretations the way Ellingson did.