

# SEXUALITY IN HISTORY – Ancient Period

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## OVERVIEW

Two principal features of sexuality during the Ancient Period were, first, the clear articulation, both in sexual standards and in what we know about sexual behavior, of the basic sexual contours of Agricultural Societies, including the double standard in treatment of men and women; and, second, the emergence of some characteristic regional features associated with the development of the main regional classical civilizations.

**The Family.** All the early civilizations placed great emphasis on the importance of female chastity before marriage. All also urged against adultery. Classical Greece rated adultery a worse crime than rape, because it affected the husband as well as the woman herself. Emphasis on the importance of family-based sexuality ran high. The focus on controlling women's sexuality, before and during marriage, had much to do with reassuring men that the heirs of their property were indeed their own progeny. Social shaming was abundantly deployed to maintain propriety.

**Birth control.** At the same time, though this was less widely discussed, the early civilizations also faced challenges in achieving a workable birth rate. Having a number of children was important, as a measure of family success but also a source of labor. But too many could overwhelm available resources, especially for the lower classes. All the early societies experimented with birth control devices or contraceptive herbs, though there were no great breakthroughs. In China and the Mediterranean, infanticide was widespread, affecting up to a quarter of all babies born. But still there could be tension between biological capacity and economic constraints. Many families surely had to resort to periods of abstinence.

**Prostitution.** All the early societies also developed substantial prostitution in the cities, and while most prostitutes were low-status a few gained considerable prestige. All the classical societies created a considerable literature on the pleasures of sex, including advice on how to maximize satisfaction; and while attention went to the male, there were discussions of female pleasure as well.

All the classical societies, finally, tolerated same-sex behaviors, often depicting some in art. Many ruling houses had same-sex as well as heterosexual opportunities.

**China and concubines.** Within these general parameters, each of the classical civilizations developed some distinctive features in their sexual cultures and styles. In early Chinese history, polygyny was widely practiced. Governments sought to regulate this practice, and over time it evolved into a system of concubines for wealthy and well-placed men, beginning with the emperor himself. The main goal of this system was to assure the birth of boys, but it obviously provides a variety of sexual outlets as well. The use of castrated eunuchs accompanied the system, men who could guard the concubines without fear of sexual interference. Some eunuchs gained wider power positions in government as well.

The Chinese system involved a pronounced divide between the sexual contexts of the ruling classes and the mass of ordinary people, for whom concubinage was out of the question.

**Confucian morality.** Chinese sexual culture was also affected by its dominant system of political philosophy, Confucianism. Confucian leaders were not hostile to sex, but they urged moderation and their focus on strong, stable families could modify undue pleasure-seeking. At times in Chinese history Confucian morality seems to have had a restraining force.

**Indian family.** Sexual behaviors among ordinary Indians may have differed little from the patterns in China, with the strong family emphasis and the importance of female chastity. Even more than in China some girls in India were married early, which was one solution to the problem of chastity before marriage.

**Erotic culture.** But Indian public culture was distinctive. Representations of Hindu gods and goddesses frequently emphasized sexual prowess and depicted sexual scenes. India did not develop a sense of separation between sexuality and spirituality, and indeed the two could intertwine; the same linkage would show up in some versions of Buddhism. To be sure, some Hindu mystics renounced the flesh; overall, however, the relationship between religion and sexuality was positive. It is no surprise, in this context, that India generated the most elaborate sex manual of any of the early societies, the Kama Sutra, devoted to advice about pleasure including homoerotic pleasure.

**Mediterranean religion and philosophy.** Greece and Rome, in the Mediterranean, did not replicate India's celebration of sexuality in public art, though many sexual scenes were available in the homes of the wealthy. Roman religion featured twelve vestal virgins, whose chastity was supposed to honor the gods – an interesting variant. And there were philosophical schools, particularly the Stoics, who urged moderation in sexual behavior. Overall, however, Mediterranean culture celebrated sexual pleasure, and its art certainly highlighted the beauty of youthful bodies.

**Homosexuality.** Perhaps the most distinctive sexual pattern in the Mediterranean involved the widespread practice of older upper-class men taking young boys as lovers – often alongside their regular family but frequently commanding greater passion. This practice faded a bit with the Romans but it was still maintained, even by several emperors; and it contrasted vividly with the approach to same-sex relationships that would develop with Christianity.

**Conclusion.** In sexuality, as in other areas, the classical societies featured a number of important similarities and some distinctive signatures. Similarities centered on family-based reproductive sex and efforts to control female sexual behavior, but also the importance of prostitution as an additional outlet. Distinctions showed in different philosophical and artistic approaches and in special options for the wealthy, from concubinage to same-sex relationships.

## HUNTING AND GATHERING SOCIETIES

Hunting and gathering societies – the original framework for humanity – provide something of a baseline for many types of historical analysis, and this is certainly true for sexuality. Though there are undeniable problems of evidence, it is highly probable that sexual behaviors and values in these societies were quite different from what came later. These early societies were small and localized, so it is also likely that there was considerable variation in specifics, but there is wide agreement on some probable general patterns.

**Evidence.** Issues of evidence are obvious: these societies left no written records, and early art and artifacts do not always shed much light on sexuality. It can be inferred, from burial evidence, that child births were usually spaced an average of three and a half years apart, which limited population growth; prolonged lactation was almost certainly the basic control mechanism involved, for it constrains ovulation, which means that the low birth rate was quite compatible with frequent sexual intercourse.

But the direct evidence is anthropological, from a host of careful inquiries into contemporary hunting and gathering societies. And here is where there is some measure of agreement, that then can be extended to the probable patterns of a much earlier time.

**Basic features.** For many people in hunting and gathering societies display what, by later standards, would be regarded as considerable latitude in sexual activities. Children's play, for example, often involves little direct adult supervision (a pattern which many authorities regard as highly desirable from the standpoint of creativity). Sexual touching may sometimes be involved, and while adults express some concern about this they do not usually interfere. In some cases, masturbation is also encouraged. Where temperatures permit, clothing is often rudimentary, which adds to the possibility of physical contact.

**Young adults.** After puberty, sexual encounters are more substantial. In her pioneering 1923 study, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, anthropologist Margaret Mead emphasized the latitude that was permitted for young people of both genders (including explicit interest in female as well as male pleasure). Her findings were later disputed, but further research largely confirmed them, though there is still dispute about the extent of promiscuity involved, as opposed to a more limited opportunity for a few partners. Even after the advent of Christianity, a substantial minority of Samoans continued to engage in premarital sex, beginning as early as age 15, and brag about it privately. Here and in many other cases, no premium was attached to female virginity.

**Role of culture.** This does not mean that all hunting and gathering societies displayed this kind of behavior (climate, again, may play a major role), but it does suggest, first, that at least in a number of cases patterns differed considerably from those that would develop later on and, second, that culture plays a huge role in determining sexual rules – in contrast for example to beliefs that biology dictates some innate constraints, as in the claim of some social biologists that women are “naturally” more sexually conservative than men because of the need to control access to their limited supply of eggs.

**Initiations and training.** Several other cultures provide examples of the interest taken in initiating young people into sexual pleasures. Both among some aboriginal groups in Australia, and among some clusters in Africa, older girls or women actively instruct their younger counterparts; in some cases, this involves direct sexual contacts among the women, even though the older partners often have boyfriends or husbands as well. A number of hunting and gathering societies, such as the !Kung people in the Kalahari desert, encourage younger children to watch sexual acts (both homo- and heterosexual) in order to learn appropriate techniques for providing and obtaining pleasure.

**Adulthood.** In some cases, latitude is extended well into adulthood, even after family formation. In some parts of Papua New Guinea, villages construct special huts for extramarital sexual activity. Here and elsewhere, adults can enjoy at least occasional flings, sometimes conditioned on an expectation that they will offer a brief apology to their normal partners. (Some similar arrangements existed among certain hunting and gathering groups in North America, with separate tents involved.) In some cases also, adults talk rather freely about the sexual attributes and talents of others in their group. (The role of bragging in some of these societies often complicates evaluations of actual behaviors.)

**Complexities.** It is important, again, to emphasize the variety of possibilities in relevant ideas, behaviors and rituals. Several hunting and gathering societies express concern about female sexuality, warning young men of the dangers of excessive involvement. In some cases, male pleasure is emphasized with little concern for female reactions. It may be revealing – anthropology aside – that primitive art far more commonly emphasizes male prowess, particularly through exaggerated phalluses, than female, though there are some sexualized female figures. Menstruation was often disdained, with women supposed to remain isolated during their menstrual periods. Not surprisingly, many early societies also expressed concerns about birth control, in the absence of any reliable artificial devices. Sticks have been found with markings suggesting that some women kept track of their monthly cycles as a means of knowing when indulgence could be practiced without fear of pregnancy.

Several conclusions emerge, along with a host of questions given the limits on the relevant evidence available from the early human past. There is no absolutely standard set of human beliefs about sexuality: for any number of reasons, including climate and available food resources, ideas and expectations vary widely. This said, an interest in pleasure and practices that permit considerable indulgence seem fairly common, absent some of the conditions that would lead to more restrictive attitudes later on, particularly with the advent of agriculture; childhood does not necessarily require a host of sexually-inspired limitations. Gender attitudes vary widely, but there is no inevitable division between

opportunities for women as well as men. While biology certainly plays a role, Margaret Mead's claim that culture – beliefs and values – is a more important factor seems widely justified.

**Sexual orientations.** The latitude of many hunting and gathering societies shows in one other area: the approach to differences in sexual orientations. We have seen that some societies permitted both heterosexual and same-sex activities, sometimes as part of sexual training. To be sure, there is an argument that outright homosexuality may have been rarer in early societies than was true later on – the argument hinges on a claim that in later periods the rise of arranged marriage encouraged procreation and therefore genetic reproduction by people with a relatively low heterosexual drive—in fact direct evidence is absent. What we do know is that strict boundary lines were not inevitable.

In many cases, hunting and gathering cultures explicitly recognized what are sometimes now called “two-spirit” people, who express both male and female attributes – whatever their apparent biology at birth. These people sometimes are given distinctive tasks, in some cases also believed to possess important spiritual or creative qualities. The tradition of acknowledging this kind of sexual differentiation was prominent in a number of native groups on both the American continents, where it was widely misunderstood and attacked by European conquerors later on. But similar attitudes also developed in South Asia and elsewhere, and in several cases traces of this kind of openness persist still today.

**Precedents and disputes.** Clearly, the history of human sexuality builds on a complex and varied set of precedents from early societies, precedents that at least in some cases may seem more constructive than the sexual norms developed later on. At the least, human sexual history does not seem to provide a steady record of progress – however progress might be usefully defined.

But one final complication is vital as well: partly because of limited evidence but partly because the subject involves deep beliefs and passions in any society including our own, specific findings about early human sexuality continue to be vigorously disputed. There is always a risk, particularly given the absence of extensive data, of making early society a convenient foil for modern constraints, without attention to the complexities of human sexuality in any era. Extent of possible promiscuity remains a flashpoint, with some scholars urging that we not exaggerate the differences between earlier behaviors and patterns later on. But the role of what today is called homosexuality or transgender also generates controversy, again reflecting present-day disputes but also the challenge of grappling with societies whose assumptions were so different from prevailing attitudes today. It remains fair to urge that early societies often generated different sexualities from those common subsequently, but precision remains elusive.

*Study questions:*

1. Why do anthropologists have better evidence about sexual ideas and practices in “primitive” societies than historians do?
2. What factors might promote differences in sexual behaviors among different hunting and gathering groups?
3. Why is childhood such an important variable in sorting out the sexual values of any society?
4. Why did many readers, including many scholars, find the claims of anthropologists like Margaret Mead hard to believe?
5. Why were some hunting and gathering societies far more permissive than the more complex societies that developed later on? (Note: this question will be repeated in a slightly different form after chapter 2)

*Further reading:*

*The Trashing of Margaret Mead: anatomy of an anthropological controversy.* By Paul Shankman (University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

*Anxious Pleasures: the sexual lives of an Amazonian people.* By Thomas Gregor (University of Chicago Press, 1983).

*Culture, Biology and Sexuality.* By David Suggs and Andre Miracle (University of Georgia Press, 1999).

*Sex at Dawn: the prehistoric origins of modern sexuality.* By Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jathe (Harper, 2010). But see also the counterargument in Lynn Saxon, *Sex at Dusk: lifting the shining wrapping from Sex at Dawn.* By Lynn Saxon (Createspace, 2012).

*Spaces between Us: queer settler colonialism and indigenous decolonization.* By Scott Morgensen (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

## THE ADVENT OF AGRICULTURE

**Rise of agriculture.** Beginning around the Black Sea about 9000 BCE, the advent of agriculture began to introduce a vast set of changes in human institutions and behaviors, as the patterns of hunters-gatherers began gradually to be replaced. Agriculture spread slowly, because it involved a number of disadvantages along with its striking capacity to generate larger food supplies – but over several millennia it did gain ground. From initial centers, not only in the Middle East but also through separate developments in southern China and central America, agricultural peoples pushed out steadily, taking over additional territories in Asia, Europe, Africa and, though on a more limited basis, the Americas. Unquestionably also, agricultural societies quickly began to contain the largest populations. Birth rates went up rapidly almost immediately, as evident from the changing age structure of Neolithic cemeteries.

While noting the continuing importance of hunting and gathering and also nomadic herding populations, it is fair to say that world history from 5000 BCE until the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE centers on the characteristics of agricultural societies. And while different regions and historical periods during the long Agricultural Age varied and changed considerably – as we will see with regard to sexuality – agricultural conditions did generate certain standard basic patterns. These included some dramatic new approaches to human sexuality. In turn the important variations within the Agricultural Age would develop amid these constraints.

### **Basic Changes:**

**Point 1:** Agricultural societies generated more explicit attention to reproductive sex than had been true previously. For most production activities – not only the predominant farming, but craft manufacturing – took shape within a family economy that depended heavily on the use of child labor. It was vital to have kids if at all possible, and indeed childless couples were often in trouble unless they could gain access to other children by taking in orphans or relatives. Correspondingly, having a number of children was a sign of happiness and success – at least for men, who generated most of the writings in these societies. Agricultural families definitely reduced the length of lactation compared to their hunting and gathering predecessors: a year and a half of breastfeeding was a common norm, in contrast to the three and a half practiced earlier. Here was one way to promote more pregnancies without abandoning all constraint.

Building on this, high birth rates were particularly important in the upper classes, who had more resources and who could use their progeny not only to support the family economy but also to serve in political or religious leadership capacities.

**Reproductive sex.** For several reasons, then, the reproductive role of sexuality received growing attention – which helps explain why, in some agricultural societies, aspects of sexuality not aimed at reproduction were often condemned, at least in principle. This also helps explain why people incapable of reproduction – notably, women after menopause – were usually assumed to be unsuitable for sexual activity.

But the reproductive emphasis had a clear downside: it could be overdone, particularly for the masses of the population whose economic resources were limited. Having more than 6-8 children could be a problem. (Since up to half of all children died young, 6-8 offspring would yield 3-4 adolescents, desirable for family labor and usually manageable with available resources.) Yet if not unchecked an average couple is biologically capable of an average of 14-16 children over a lifetime (this does not include the up to 20% who are biologically infertile.) So along with the emphasis on reproductive sex, agricultural families also needed to seek some limitations.

**Limits of birth control.** Many agricultural societies experimented with various forms of birth control: some abortifacient herbs were discovered early on. Babylonian texts for example mention a number of

abortifacient plants. Early Greeks might place part of a lemon in the vagina in hopes of killing sperm. Some primitive condoms or diaphragms might also be employed: some early Egyptians for example used animal bladders as condoms. Many people also sought recourse to magical practices to prevent or eliminate unwanted pregnancies. And reliance on infanticide was widespread: in ancient China and the Mediterranean, it has been estimated that up to a quarter of all babies born, and particularly females, were put to death (mainly by abandonment in the wild).

These methods, however, were either not very reliable or, in the case of infanticide, were emotionally unpleasant – which means that many couples in agricultural societies had something of a birth control problem which was often addressed by periods of sexual abstinence, particularly when adults reached middle age. It might also be important, partly for birth control purposes, to try to limit the sexual activities of young people before marriage, creating a gap between puberty and acceptable sexual expression.

Agricultural needs and constraints thus added up to a strong emphasis on reproductive sex but also some concern about undue sexual activity particularly for women.

**Point 2:** Agricultural societies developed practices related to private or family property that were much different from the assumptions of hunters-gatherers, and that had huge implications for sexuality and, particularly, women's sexuality.

**Role of property.** Peasant households depended a certain amount of landed property to support the family economy, and property in tools and some kind of shop was also fundamental to urban artisans as well. Marriage was, among other things, a property arrangement designed to make sure that a new couple had enough land or equipment for economic support. Reproductive sex aimed at generating child labor that would utilize the property effectively. By the same token, however, sexual activity outside the family context risked bringing children into the world without an adequate property base, and this could threaten the families involved. Agricultural societies thus sought various arrangements to try to reduce the risk of pregnancy outside of marriage, and this could create serious tensions for young people of both genders in the space between puberty and marriage – tensions that had been less prominent in some hunting and gathering societies.

**Shame and gender.** Tensions were both reflected and expressed in a new emphasis on sexual shame. Nudity, for example, became more shameful than had been the case before – indeed the English word for shame stems from an Anglo-Saxon word for lack of clothing. For the Abrahamic religions, sexual shame was a basic feature of the punishment imposed on humankind as a result of the transgressions in the Garden of Eden. Agricultural communities widely used shame to discipline the behavior of young people but also to regulate activities of other groups – such as widows.

But the implications of the new relationship between sex and property, including the greater use of shame, bore disproportionately on women. Agricultural societies consistently generated a sexual double standard, by which women's sexuality was far more carefully supervised and constrained than that of men. This was most obvious in the upper classes and in the cities, but it applied quite widely. Though specifics varied, respectable women were not supposed to have sex before or outside of marriage; and while this might be urged on men as well, the standards were never as rigorously enforced. Thus Babylonian law stipulated that a man might legitimately take a concubine, particularly if his wife was infertile, but no such latitude was granted to women. Indeed the law insisted on the importance of strict rectitude for women, such that even if a woman was merely accused of infidelity she had to prove her innocence. And while both men and women could be punished by death for adultery, male adultery consisted of sex with another married woman, while female adultery was sex with another man, period. Variants on the double standard occurred in literally all agricultural societies, and leave an important mark even in sexuality today.

**Regulating female behaviors.** Because women are the bearers of children, disproportionate attention to their sexuality was part of the delicate balance between reproduction and control; this was the reason that infanticide most commonly centered on female infants, and also why girls were more scrutinized than boys before marriage. But more was involved. Property holdings, particularly in land, were a vital part of the agricultural economy: otherwise there was inadequate incentive to put in the labor necessary to clear land, dig wells and so on – families needed to own the results of this kind of work, and be able to pass

property on to later generations as well. In a male-dominated society, however, it seemed vital for a husband to be sure that the children his wife bore were his, and not some other man's. Hence another overriding need to place the clearest possible limits on the sexual behaviors of wives.

Property concerns also added to the reasons to pay particular attention to the sexual behavior of girls or young women before marriage. A pregnant girl, after all, would be ushering a child into the world without appropriate property arrangements. Marriage, in contrast (in most agricultural societies) brought a young woman into the orbit of her husband's (or husband's family's) property, which in turn set up a family economy suitable for handling a child. Young men who sowed some wild oats might be reproved, but if they impregnated other girls that was their families' problem in final analysis. To be sure, most agricultural societies tried to make sure that a young man would have to marry a girl he had impregnated, but the controls on young men remained notably looser than in the case of their female counterparts.

**Other features.** While the complicated needs around reproduction and defense of family property introduced the most sweeping innovations into the context for sexual behavior, a few other features of agricultural societies deserve mention.

For most families, housing conditions were limited, and many family members slept in the same room. Children, as a result, could have some awareness of the sexual activities of their parents. For peasants – the vast majority of the population – family members also had direct knowledge of the sexual behaviors of domestic animals. (Some amount of bestiality occurred in some agricultural societies, though it is hard to assess and was widely reproved.) Here were too features of life in the Agricultural Age that need to be factored into any overall analysis. They could provide an earthy awareness of sexuality that strained against some of the conventions seeking to limit sexual expression.

**Prostitution.** But the most obvious sexual innovation of the Agricultural Age, alongside the new approaches to reproduction, post-puberty experience, and gender, was the widespread development of prostitution. It is impossible to know how widespread prostitution was in the countryside, but there is no question that it became a standard feature in urban areas as agricultural economies became more complex. Prostitution is mentioned in the earliest Sumerian lists of professions, in the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE, and it developed in literally every urban setting in every agricultural society. Thus records of prostitution in China go back at least to the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, when brothels were licensed by the state and actually provided some tax revenue.

The practice of prostitution expressed many of the basic features and tensions of the Agricultural Age. It created opportunities for sexual activity – and, possibly, sexual pleasure – outside the family context and the emphasis on reproduction. It could provide men with sexual outlets free from concerns about unwanted pregnancies and with some protection as well from the most obvious sources of shaming. It could particularly help some men bridge the gap between puberty and marriage. Of course it expressed the sexual double standard – while there were some male prostitutes in agricultural cities, respectable women did not have access, and the prostitutes most commonly serviced other men – but it also reflected the fact that men married later than women did (because of the need to establish skills and property adequate to support a family), creating a post-puberty tension that women did not experience to the same degree. (In many agricultural societies the problem of controlling female sex after puberty was often handled by early marriage age, but for economic reasons this was not possible for men to the same degree).

For the women involved, prostitution reflected the difficulty of making a living outside of the family economy by other means, but along with real risks (including disease) it could provide a certain degree of independence. There is no way to measure the frequency of reliance on the services of prostitutes, and in the upper classes other, more expensive arrangements, including concubines and mistresses, provided further opportunities. But the antiquity and ubiquity of the institution, as a creation of the Agricultural Age, are noteworthy.

**Conclusion** Basic features of sexuality in agricultural societies have left an abundance of sources, so the problems of accurate data are far less acute than they are for earlier hunting and gathering groups. And whatever the judgments about earlier conditions, it is clear that the new emphasis on a family economy and property introduced huge changes into sexual values and practices – though the rise of

prostitution reminds us that considerable complexity could still be involved. Within the agricultural context, major regions developed a variety of specific systems of culture and behavior, for though pervasive, the context was rather general, inviting a number of different implementations. No small amount of human history is involved in trying to figure out how particular groups and individuals worked through the constraints and opportunities of the Agricultural Age, in creating an array of further innovations. Finally, the sexuality patterns developed in response to agriculture leave a legacy for societies even today, even as they seek to adjust some of the specifics in response to new needs and opportunities.

Study questions:

1. Did agricultural conditions affect opportunities for sexual pleasure?
2. Why was birth control a complex issue in agricultural societies?
3. How and why did sexuality become more gendered in the agricultural context?
4. Why was prostitution such a standard feature of agricultural cities, regardless of specific laws and cultures?
5. Did the rise of agriculture change human sexuality in fundamental ways, or were the necessary modifications relatively modest?

Further Reading:

*The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Love, Courtship and Sexuality*. James W. Howell and others, eds. (Greenwood, 2008).

*Sexuality in World History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Peter N. Stearns (Routledge, 2017).

*The Creation of Patriarchy*. Gerder Lerner (Oxford University Press, 1986).

*Ever Since Adam and Eve: the evolution of human sexuality*. Malcolm Potts (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

*Encyclopedia of Birth Control*. Vern Bullough, ed., (ABC-Clio, 2001).

*Love for Sale: a world history of prostitution*. Nils Ringdal (Grove/Atlantic, 2007).

## CLASSICAL CHINA

**Classical features.** Though there were some earlier precedents, Chinese civilization began to take shape in the centuries after about 1200 BCE. From that point until the fall of the Han dynasty (220 CE) Chinese society developed a number of distinctive characteristics, many of which would persist into later periods as well. In general terms, these were the centuries in which China developed its strong emphasis on a well-organized central state, under imperial leadership; unified its core territory; and developed signature cultural systems including Daoism and, above all, Confucianism. Under Confucian guidance and its emphasis on hierarchy, a social structure emerged headed by a “scholar-gentry” class at the top, with a large peasantry and, by the standards of the time, substantial cities.

China was, and is, a large and diverse society, so it would be misleading to claim that some single basic approach to sexuality emerged during this formative period. On the whole, however, particularly with the rise of Confucianism, the Chinese approach to sexuality tended to emphasize a certain caution or moderation: strong emphasis on the importance of family and social stability pushed in that direction despite the absence of any sweeping religious sanctions. This tone combined, however, with a vigorous differentiation between the genders, that created far wider range for acceptable male behaviors than that available to respectable women; and the moderate tone was complicated by a number of practices and institutions devoted to sexual pleasure. All of this operated within the general sexual framework of agricultural society.

**Sex manuals.** Materials from the early Zhou dynasty emphasized interest in sexual pleasure. China generated the first known sex manuals, which graphically described relevant body parts and compared orgasm to the bursting of a cloud. Some pornographic works were written as well, both for men and for women. And at some point a custom developed of giving explicit sexual pictures to a couple as a wedding



gift. Much of this applied mainly to the upper class, for among other things literacy was not widespread, but it established interesting precedents.

**Polygyny.** Early on as well, many Chinese families practiced polygyny – a pattern that would persist in some ways into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Multiple wives might be taken to augment the family labor force, or to try to assure the birth of sons, or to help with child care; but clearly sexual pleasure, or at least male sexual pleasure, could be part of the picture as well. At various points the imperial government issued laws trying to regulate the practice, sometimes seeking to protect the position of first wife, but they also frequently regularized supplementary concubines. At the level of the imperial household, hundreds and sometimes thousands of women would be available as concubines, and some emperors developed complex schedules to keep up with the supply. Officials were sometimes employed to keep track of the visits, noting the superior status of women whom the ruler favored most frequently. In the upper classes more generally, wealth could be demonstrated through the number of concubines a man maintained. Brothels were established during the Zhou dynasty, regulated and openly available; and here, some upper-class women participated as well, taking advantage of the services of male prostitutes. Many brothels, often called “houses of singing girls”, featured music, food and other entertainment beyond sexual activity; and occasionally a favored prostitute might rise to the position of concubine.

**Constraints and the double standard.** These various practices were qualified, however, at least in respectable culture, by a number of reservations, aimed particularly at women. Again during the Zhou period the influential *Book of Songs* warned against premarital sex for women, arguing that it would jeopardize the all-important success of the family later on. In subsequent centuries, Confucian emphasis on the orderly family added further elements, including strong warnings against deviant acts such as incest. Confucius was concerned about the disruptive potential of sexuality – particularly, female sexuality – and urged careful regulation. Respectable families worked hard to maintain the virginity of daughters, vital to qualify for marriage; and as was common in many agricultural societies, women often married quite young, to husbands 10- to 15 years their senior, frequently with prior sexual experience of their own. But while disproportionate attention was devoted to women’s constraints, Confucianists and others, including doctors, had warnings for men as well, not so much in terms of fidelity but because of the physical dangers of overindulgence. Undue expenditure of semen was a risk to male vitality and health.

**Arranged marriage.** As in many agricultural societies, marriage arrangements normally had little to do with sexual attraction. Girls, most obviously, were contracted into marriage by their parents; some imperial daughters were even sent to be wives of “barbarian” leaders in central Asia, as conciliatory gifts, often to their loud dismay. But men, also, normally had little choice in a union designed to combine appropriate economic assets for successful family life. These practices help explain why, particularly in the upper classes, other sexual outlets were sought so often.

**Sexual orientations.** Homosexuality was widely if not loudly accepted. Many emperors had male as well as female concubines, and poems were written to the joys of love affairs between men: “sharing the peach” became a symbol for anal sex. Lesbian relationships received less attention, but they occurred fairly openly as well, and were often recorded in erotic art.

**Eunuchs.** Imperial China became one of several societies to create an important group of eunuchs, men who were castrated in order to qualify for certain kinds of public service. Most obviously, eunuchs played a vital role within imperial households, because they could be trusted not to violate royal wives and concubines. Under the Zhou, the practice was probably introduced as a response to acts of treason, since given the emphasis on male prowess the punishment was dire. But with time, the constructive potential of the practice became clear as well: trusted eunuch could achieve great informal power. Under the Han dynasty, the imperial household supported as many as 5,000 eunuchs – recruited from all regions of the empire, sometimes deliberately castrated and sold into service by parents eager to see these boys advance in status.

**Parental strategies.** The complexity of Chinese sexual norms could create dilemmas for some lower-class parents, particularly in the cities. On the one hand, respectability could seem vital for family formation and preservation. On the other hand, economic pressures, amid high birth rates, might prompt some parents to train children, particularly girls, in entertainment skills and other graces, hoping that they might be taken into some wealthier male household.

**Conclusion** Overall, classical China developed a rather complicated balance between regulation and family respectability, on the one hand, and a variety of sexual outlets on the other. Religious considerations introduced few complications: Daoism, China's main contribution to spirituality, accepted sexual activity as a spiritual practice. Daoist texts described a number of sexual acts under the heading of "joining energy" or "joining the essences", appropriate for good health and spiritual advancement. Ultimately (a few centuries after the classical period), Confucian moderates actually sought to dampen Daoist enthusiasm in the interests of public moderation and decorum.

Questions:

1. How did Chinese emphasis on strong distinctions between men and women show up in sexual ideas and practices?
2. What were some characteristic Confucian concerns about sexuality?
3. How did the considerable acceptance of homosexuality fit the larger sexual culture of classical China?
4. Did the development of the eunuch class suggest a belief that abstention from sex was morally preferable?

Further reading:

*Sexuality in China: histories of pain and pleasure.* Ed. By Howard Chang (University of Washington Press, 2018).

*The Culture of Sex in Ancient China.* P.R. Goldin (University of Hawaii Press, 2002).

*Sexual Life in Ancient China: a preliminary survey of Chinese sex and society from c. 1500 B.C. until 1644 A.D.* By R. H. Gulik (Brill, 2003).

## CLASSICAL INDIA

**Basic patterns.** After the decline of an earlier river-valley civilization in present-day Pakistan, classical Indian history took shape gradually with the formation of regional governments but above all through the emergence of Hinduism and Buddhism plus the unfolding of the social caste system. Hinduism was a cluster of beliefs and practices that evolved over time under the guidance of priests or Brahmins and through epic poems, initially written in Sanskrit, which began to emerge by the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE; Buddhism developed as a partial religious alternative by the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The caste system similarly took shape during final millennium BCE, rigorously separating groups by occupation and permissible social contacts (including marriage).

**Artistic culture.** Distinctive features of Indian sexual culture were most clearly linked to the rise of Hinduism and related public art, which at least superficially contrasted rather vividly with the cultural patterns of classical China. As in China, however, some significant sexual patterns developed outside the leading religious and social systems. Simply put, aspects of Indian culture embraced sexuality more openly and enthusiastically than was the case in Confucian China, though actual sexual practices, centered around the family and reproductive life, probably varied considerably less.

Artistic representations were striking. Depictions of Hindu gods and goddesses frequently emphasized sexual attributes, for example in friezes on temple exteriors. Public art also included scenes of copulation, including divine lovers like Krishna and Radha, and murals might contain paintings of nude dancing girls. A 5<sup>th</sup> century (CE) poet described men pining over portraits of their lovers, commenting on the beauty of their bodies. In the Gupta period, sculptors portrayed voluptuous mother-goddesses in pink stone, with almost lifelike fleshy qualities. Other artists in the Gupta empire offered illustrations of sex manuals, with detailed descriptions of anatomy and sexual positions. Clearly, sexual expression and spirituality were not seen in opposition. Women were esteemed for beauty and fertility, not sources of dangerous temptation.

**Religion and literature.** Some ambivalence did exist: holy men might renounce sex as part of their removal from worldliness, and boys might take vows of celibacy during religious training. Sexual abstention was also recommended on some Hindu holy days. On the whole, however, it was the compatibility of sexual pleasure and religious goals that was most striking.

These attitudes readily carried over into literature. Thus in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, a major epic: "In the embrace of his beloved, a man forgets the whole world, everything both within and without" – the same sensation that occurs in the process of spiritual advancement. A variety of writers authored sex manuals, describing positions and techniques designed to offer maximum pleasure – for women as well as men. The *Kama Sutra*, the most important textbook of love ever devised, was written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, but it had many antecedents. The *Kama Sutra* itself, with its varied and detailed suggestions beginning with elaborate foreplay, was republished frequently in India and was also widely translated – even gaining audience in the United States during the 20<sup>th</sup> century when interest in recreational sex began to increase in a very different cultural context.

**Family and marriage.** This distinctive sexual culture, which would deeply shock Western observers when they began to reach India in any numbers during the early modern period, may have had some impact on actual sexual behavior, but some caution is essential – partly, of course, because the evidence is less abundant. Rulers early in the classical period probably took several wives, and some polygamy persisted in other groups; but – more than in China or the Middle East – India on the whole emphasized the importance of monogamy – and this would include assumptions of strict female chastity, with women often marrying quite young. Marriages were carefully arranged by parents – here was a tradition that took deep root – and couples often did not even meet until their wedding. This said, the Indian tradition also stressed the importance of a get-acquainted period of four days at the outset of the marriage, prior to sexual activity – followed by six days of further seclusion designed for enjoyment. And sexual pleasure, along with fertility, was a valid goal as the marriage progressed, with husbands responsible for their wives' satisfaction along with their own. Here, possibly, was a real life link with the assumptions embedded in the public culture.

**Prostitution and adultery.** Considerable prostitution developed, not surprisingly not only because of the public culture but also because men usually had to wait for years after puberty before marrying. Some Indian women, trained as entertainers, were even exchanged with other societies – as far away as Egypt – in what might be seen as an early version of the sex trade. In India itself, brothels but also street prostitutes flourished in the larger cities, loosely supervised by regional governments and, as in China, supplying tax revenues. The autumn Diwali festival might include visits to prostitutes, and accomplished, high-level prostitutes frequently accompanied leaders when they traveled.

On the other hand, adultery was strongly condemned, at least in principle. And prostitutes themselves might be punished if caught with ordinary married men (more harshly than the men themselves). While female beauty was certainly praised, standards emphasized qualities appropriate for childbirth: fertility was a clearer goal than pleasure. Many rituals developed to promote conception, and both pregnant women and new mothers were carefully supported and monitored. Indian culture also tended to disapprove of homosexuality, another sign of the link between sex and reproduction. Male prostitution seems to have been less common than in other classical societies. But there were some artistic depictions of same-sex activity, as well as considerable acceptance of the idea of the "Third Sex"; traditional Hinduism ranged from critical to neutral. Revealingly the *Kama Sutra* dedicated an entire chapter to erotic homosexual behavior. On another front: while eunuchs existed they were far less numerous or important than in China (or, later, the Middle East).

**Sexual jealousy.** One other feature of Indian sexuality, measurable today, might have had roots in the classical period: a slightly higher than average level of male sexual jealousy. Jealousy is a sexually-linked emotion found everywhere to some degree, though more common among men than women, which in itself reflects the gender disparities of the Agricultural Age. The greater intensity of sexuality in Indian culture, combined with larger assumptions of male superiority, might spur a readiness to lash out in cases of real or imagined sexual rivalry. There is no direct behavioral evidence from the classical period, but the theme emerges in several stories within the Hindu epics, sometimes featuring women who deceived their husbands but were ultimately brought to justice. Even wives forced into sex by other men could be roundly condemned (and, at least in literature, sometimes renounced or even put to death by their husbands).

**Conclusion** Overall, it remains highly probable that Indian sexual representations were considerably more distinctive than daily norms and behaviors. As in other classical societies, and despite the esteem

for female pleasure, gender distinctions mattered considerably; and social differentiations, between the mighty and the population as a whole, complicated the picture as well. Within marriage, however, the values of public culture may have had some impact in expectations and practices alike.

Study questions:

1. What were the most important differences in sexual culture between India and China during the classical period?
2. How was sexuality compatible with the strong emphasis on religion in classical India?
3. What might have been distinctive about prostitution in the context of classical India?
4. What were the principal sexual constraints for respectable women, and were they particularly unusual for a predominantly agricultural society?
5. What are the main problems in relating sexual culture to actual sexual behavior in classical India?

Further reading:

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*Sexual Designs in Indian Culture*. By Akhileshwar Jha. (Vikas Publishing House, 1979).

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*Oh Terrifying Mother: sexuality, violence and worship of the Goddess Kali*. By Sara Caldwell (Oxford University Press, 1999).

#### CLASSICAL MEDITERRANEAN: GREECE AND ROME

**Chronology.** Another formative society took shape during the classical period, first in Greece and surrounding territory, then also in Rome and its expansion ultimately around the whole Mediterranean basin. Greek city states developed from about 800 BCE onward, reaching a high point in the 5<sup>th</sup> century; Rome's rise followed a bit later, with the Empire reaching its maximum extent around 180 CE. Greek and Roman approaches to sexuality were not identical, but they generated many similar features, partly because Rome widely shared or imitated Greek values including its religious pantheon.

**Public culture.** Greco-Roman public culture was less openly celebratory of sexuality than was true in India, but particularly in statuary it eagerly represented the beauty of the human body, and particularly the young body, both male and female. Further, stories of the often wanton sexuality and sexual pranks of gods and goddesses played a major role in literature and drama. The goddess Aphrodite – Venus, in Rome – represented sexual pleasure as well as love and beauty, enjoying a host of affairs with gods and humans alike. A summer festival devoted to the goddess featured women imitating the cries of someone mourning a lost lover. Eros (Cupid) even more directly personified sexual desire, symbolizing the sexual attraction of a loving couple but also the potential cruelty of carnal attraction. Here, and also with the wild sexuality of satyrs, Greeks and Romans saw sexuality as a source of excitement and danger alike. Eros (Cupid) for example, far from the cuddly figure of later representations, could be quite frightening, associated with images of disease and even madness. Drama highlighted the risks of sexuality among humans as well, as in the play *Oedipus* where a man is driven mad after unwittingly having sex with his own mother.

Yet drama also highlighted possibilities for pleasure; plays filled with sexual innuendo and often simulated sex acts and nudity, with emphasis on female as well as male sexual desire. In Greece and even more in Rome, urban prosperity brought greater interest in what today would be called pornography, to symbolize and arouse sexual prowess. Nude female statues might stimulate masturbation, and there were also exaggerated portrayals of the phallus, for example in some of the aristocratic villas buried under volcanic ash in Pompey. The Romans even added a god, Priapus, associated with fertility and sexuality, always portrayed with an erect, and usually gigantic, penis. Other painted scenes showed oral and anal sex and

even sex with animals in some of the private homes of the later (and arguably somewhat decadent) Roman Empire. Roman literature also celebrated sex, as in the love poems of Ovid, and the Romans generated a number of sex manuals with advice on how to achieve maximum pleasure – including attention to the importance of female orgasm.

**Spiritual complexity.** Comparisons with Indian classical culture are intriguing. Use of gods and goddesses to illustrate various aspects of sexuality show clear overlap, imported in part from a common fund of divinities in earlier Indo-European culture. But Mediterranean religion, far less spiritual in any event, evinced far less sense of a connection between the sexual experience and a higher religious state. Indeed in Rome, a small group of young women, six at any one time, were selected as priestesses but required to abstain from sex – the famous Vestal Virgins. If faithful to their pledge, they received considerable financial rewards, independent of service to men. A few other sects also associated virginity with spiritual insight.

**Double standard.** Actual sexual behavior, however, was rather different from the artistic representations and from special religious functions as well. The gap was particularly important for women, and indeed Mediterranean sexual values in practice clearly illustrated some of the common features of sexuality in agricultural societies, including the strong drive to focus female sexuality both on control and on reproduction.

**Marriage and adultery.** The Greeks placed great emphasis on female restraint both before and during marriage, all the more because of a (male) fear that left to their own devices women could be dangerously wanton. Virginity was highly prized before marriage, and most girls were married young; further, in the upper classes, wives were largely confined to activities in and around the home. In many rural communities women were expected to remain celibate for certain periods, in order to promote fertility of the crops. In militaristic Sparta, men actually visited their wives only infrequently, mainly for purposes of reproduction. Adultery was strictly punished, with elaborate public shaming for offenses; the women involved were often publicly displayed naked or partially clothed to add to their ignominy. Men could be shamed as well, but the onus was greater for women. Revealingly, Greek law held that adultery was a worse crime than rape, for adultery damaged the offended husband's sexual honor, while rape of a single woman merely affected her.

### **Options;**

**prostitution.** Alternative outlets did develop, in some cases even for women. By the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, dildos were being manufactured, made from wood and padded leather with olive oil used as a lubricant. And a few individual women in the upper class, at least in Rome, defied norms and openly consorted with a variety of lovers – amid public disapproval.

For men, prostitutes might be available, including enslaved women in a society in which slavery was extensive. The philosopher Socrates saw use of prostitutes as an opportunity to “release compulsions of lust” – actually protecting respectable women in the process. Brothels ranged in price, catering to various social classes. A few elite prostitutes were praised for their artistic talent and beauty, and prominent Greek men (including Pericles, the Athenian political leader), openly conducted affairs, their mistresses sometimes wielding considerable power. Roman leaders created similar outlets: the emperor Augustus for example had his wife procure virgins girls for his pleasure. Masturbation, finally, was seen as a normal outlet for men, though officially discouraged for women. Romans, similarly, accepted male masturbation though regarding it as wasteful. Greek philosophers urged the importance of moderation in sex as in other areas, even for men, as a matter of health and moral balance, and as in some other societies there was some worry that male orgasm took a toll on health. But there was no question that many men enjoyed varied sexual outlets and valued their prowess, while there was little explicit concern for the sexual satisfaction of women (though Romans would show slightly more interest than the Greeks did) – a contrast with both China and India in the classical period.

**Bisexual patterns.** Classical Greece generated one other sexual outlet: a widespread and open indulgence in same-sex activities, though primarily in the upper classes and primarily among men. Greek art and literature frequently referenced homosexual desire. Some upper-class men both in Greece and Rome (including Julius Caesar) fairly openly engaged in cross-dressing on occasion. More important was

the custom of apprenticing young men to older partners (who were often also married), with arrangements sometimes furthered by the youths' parents, eager for this kind of advancement for their offspring. Many of the young men would ultimately themselves marry and engage in heterosexual activity. Many prominent older men openly participated in these relationships: the playwright Sophocles for example was widely known for his arrangements, one story featuring an effort to seduce a young wine-seller by kissing him on the lips. In some cases also, men of the same age lived together as if married. Male same-sex arrangements were not only accepted but widely praised (reflecting also the low prestige of women): Plato assumed that serious love was more likely between an older and a younger man than between man and woman. (Later, to be sure, Plato began to condemn any sexual activity not aimed at reproduction; so there was some tension among sexual goals.) Aristotle was somewhat more guarded about homosexuality, but he agreed that an occasional liaison was a good way to assure that women did not gain too much power. Female same-sex arrangements also won some attention, with reference to real or imagined practices on the island of Lesbos. The female poet Sappho (ca. 610-580 BCE) praised the mutual desire of women, and probably had some same-sex relationships herself, although she also married and had at least one child.

Romans maintained the practice of same-sex outlets for upper-class men, though with greater ambivalence. Sex between older and younger men might be regarded as dishonorable adultery. But the emperor Hadrian had a torrid and open affair with a younger man, despite being married, and suffered greatly when the adolescent grew up and turned his attention elsewhere. On the other hand, accusations of homosexuality could be wielded as a weapon against political opponents. And while same-sex love might be praised in literature – Ovid even offered a female example – a standard sex manual in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE condemned same-sex relationships as obscene violations of appropriate gender roles. Roman hesitations were important at the time, and also potentially as a backdrop for the later and fiercer opposition to homosexuality that would develop with Christianity.

**Challenges to reproductive sex.** At a few key points, Greek and Roman history offers one other example of the range of human possibilities where sexuality is concerned: an apparent decline of interest, at least in reproductive sex within the upper classes. The Greek historian Polybius, writing in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE about the Greek (Hellenistic) societies in the eastern Mediterranean, described what he saw as a “decay of population” because too many upper-class men were no longer accepting the responsibility of having children, addicted instead to “show and money and the pleasures of an idle life.” Later the Roman emperor Augustus expressed similar concern about aristocratic behavior, urging more attention to sexual fidelity and the primary duty of reproduction. The possibility of a lifestyle in which reproductive sex was downgraded in favor of other interests (sexual or otherwise) was an interesting phenomenon that might echo in other times and places.

**Conclusion** The principal features of Greek and Roman sexuality obviously invite comparison with developments in China and India during the classical period. Not surprisingly, the comparison yields important similarities, including gender imbalance and (for men, or at least upper class men) the balance between reproductive sex and a wider quest for pleasure. But key differences in sexual behaviors existed as well, as in the Greek same-sex arrangements, and public cultures varied considerably – and some of the differences would persist well beyond the classical period itself.

*Study questions:*

1. Was the gap between public culture and ordinary sexual behavior unusually great in Greece and Rome?
2. Why were the Greeks so concerned about adultery? Why was it seen as a worse offense than rape?
3. Did the Greeks and Romans show more ambivalence about sexuality than was true in Indian or Chinese culture?
4. Why did prostitution play such an important role (at least in the cities) during the classical period?
5. What were the main differences between Mediterranean culture and Indian culture in the relationship between religion and sexuality? Were there any significant similarities?

*Further reading:*

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