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In Bed with the Ancient Greeks:

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Sex & Sexuality in Ancient Greece

Paul Chrystal

Posted on 04 November 2016

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We give below a chapter from Paul Chrystal's

In Bed with the Ancient Greeks *In Bed with the Romans* *Women in Ancient Rome* *Women in*

6 *, which has just been published by Amberley Publishing. Paul is a regular contributor to history magazines, a*
author and broadcaster. His recent books include

, and

; his

Ancient Greece and Rome

is to be published in February 2017.



Caption: (480 BCE, Paestum)

Two affectionate men at a symposium

For one reason or another, to the ancient Greeks bed was an important place to be. For a man, it was where he discharged his important duty as a citizen to maintain his *oikos*, his household and family.

He was to replenish and increase the citizenry of his city state, by having many children, ideally sons, in his *polis*.

It was also where he might commit adultery with impunity when he entertained his female slaves, prostitutes or concubines in pursuit of sexual gratification when his wife was heavily pregnant, had just given birth, or if she was being unadventurous or just not interested. Alternatively, he might take his boy lovers there in his role as a pederast, or he might consort there with an effeminate adult male or two. For a woman, it was where she had sex with her husband in order to produce as many children as possible, again ideally boys, in order to fulfil her responsibilities.

provide citizens to populate the army and the state machinery. Doctors, poets, historians philosophers had all ordained that sex, and therefore bed, was neither a thing nor a place of pleasure for a woman.

Hera

As wife of Zeus, Hera was the queen of heaven; she had a responsibility to protect wives and wifehood. Surprisingly, Hera was not the mother of other gods: Zeus flexed his omnipotence when he circumvented the normal biological process by installing a womb in his penis and gave birth to his progeny that way. By circumventing the normal biological process he also circumvented Hera and her role as wife and mother; this led to centuries in which male dominance in human reproduction was enshrined in the work of such philosophers, scientists and medical scientists as Aristotle and Galen. Usurping Hera had other implications: it was a slight from which she never recovered: she bore an eternal grudge commencing with the asexual birth of disabled Hephaestus. Her reputation as a 'difficult' woman was emphasised further when Homer shows her dressing up glamorously and provocatively to distract Zeus from the all-important man's business that was the Trojan war:

There she perfumed her lovely body, and she combed her hair, and plaited the bright tresses, fair as that flowed down from her immortal head. Then she put on a heavenly robe, which Athena had skilfully made for her covered in embroidery; she pinned it on her breast with golden brooches of gold; her long hair hung in hundred tassels, and in her pierced ears she put ear-rings with three clustering drops which shone,
[Homer 14, 175-85]

Iliad

Woman as a disputatious and duplicitous schemer, deploying sexual power was born.

Pan

Pan, god of the great outdoors, shepherds and sheep, nature, hunting and country music, friend to all the nymphs, is closely associated with sexuality and fertility. He is often depicted sporting an erect phallus. Diogenes the Cynic (412 BCE- 323 BCE) relates a myth in which how to masturbate from his father, Hermes, and then teaches the habit to shepherds. Pan's greatest conquest was that of the moon goddess, Selene, whom he seduced by wrapping a sheepskin to hide his hairy black goat-like appearance, and drew her down from the sky forest. Duris of Samos (c. 350 BC – after 281 BC), a historian, and the Vergilian commentator Servius scandalously report that Penelope slept with all 108 of those shark-like suitors circling around her while Odysseus was carousing around the Mediterranean, and gave birth to 108 children as a result.

Echo was a nymph who was an accomplished singer and dancer; she scorned the love of any man, much to the annoyance of Pan who ordered his people to kill her. Echo was, accordingly, torn to pieces, her body parts spread all over earth. Echo was doomed by Hera to repeat words that had been said by someone else, so she could never speak for herself.

Tiresias

We have Tiresias, the seer, to thank for answering an age-old question which many of us have pondered: is sex better for men or for women? When Tiresias came across a pair of snakes copulating, he killed the female with his staff. An angry Hera turned him into a woman as a result. Obviously 'she', Tiresias, learned a lot of interesting things about women in this time, but when, eight years later, 'she' happened on another pair of mating snakes, 'she' trampled on the male and promptly turned back into a man. A curious Zeus and a 'curioser' Hera asked him which of the two sexes enjoyed sexual intercourse more: the man, as Hera claimed or, as Zeus insisted, the woman? Tiresias, with the unique insight born of having experienced sex from both sides, as it were, divulged that he found sex more enjoyable as a woman: 'Of ten parts a man enjoys one

only'. This was not quite what Hera wanted to hear, so she punished him with blindness as a heretic; Zeus, however, inclined to the opposite and invested in Tiresias the power of prophecy and the gift of longevity.

Priapus

Priapus was a rustic fertility god, who looked after livestock, fruit plants, gardens and -m genitalia. Priapus is easily recognised by his oversized, permanent erection, which gives medical term priapism and is the subject of the obscenely enjoyable collection of verse called *Priapeia*

He was a victim of Hera's who cursed him with impotence, ugliness and a filthy mind even he was still in Aphrodite's womb; this was in revenge for Paris judging Aphrodite more beautiful than Hera. The other gods banished him from Olympus, abandoning him on a hillside to be found by shepherds and raised by them. Body image and self esteem must have been at an all-time low for Priapus.





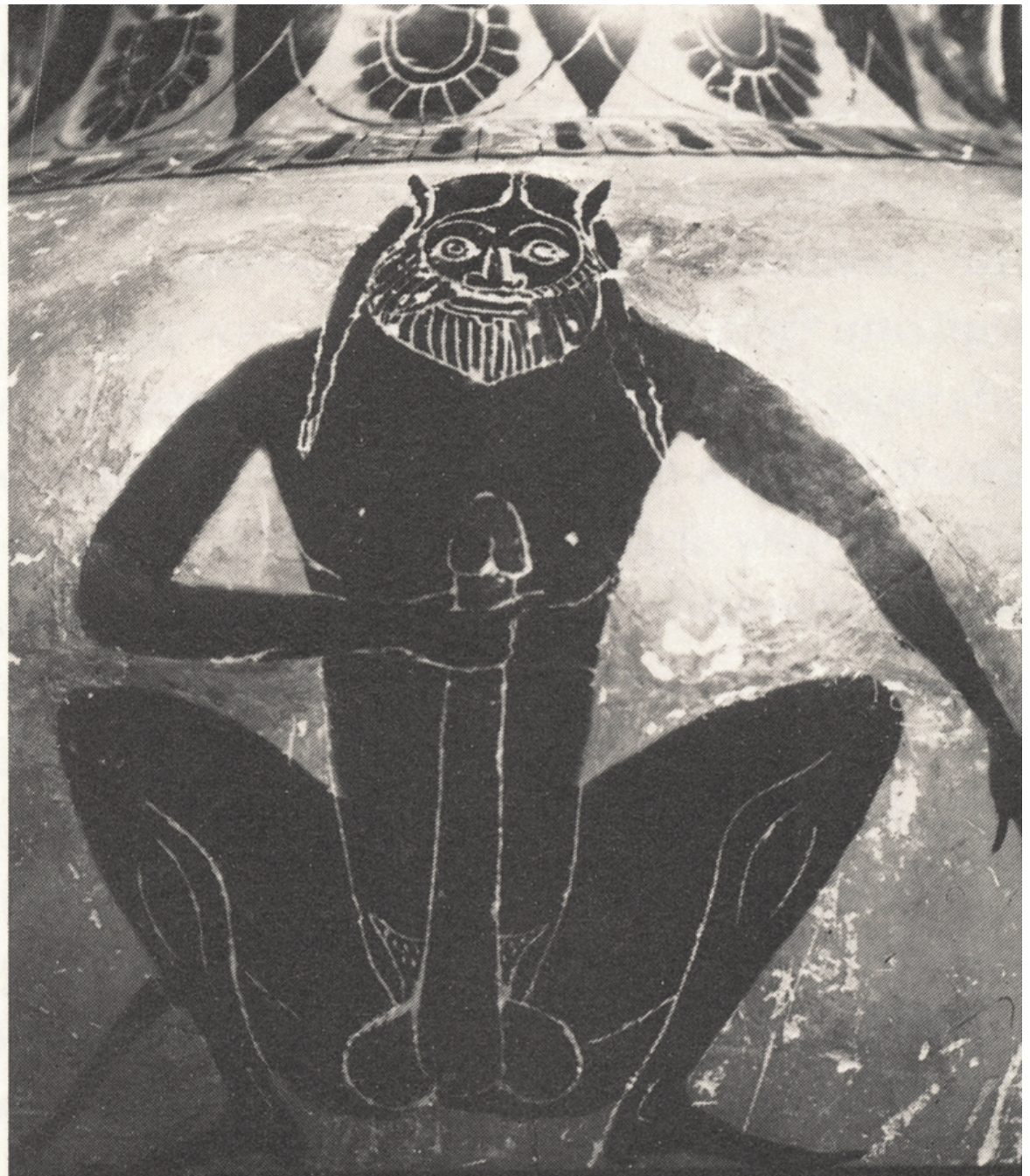
Caption:

Priapus, a wall-painting from a brothel in Pompeii

Nevertheless, statues of Priapus popped up everywhere in ancient Greece, erected in gardens or at doorways and crossroads. To propitiate Priapus, the traveller would stroke the statue's penis as he or she passed. According to Ovid, Priapus tried to rape a sleeping Hestia but was thwarted by a donkey, whose braying caused him to lose his erection at the critical moment and woke the goddess. Naturally, this led to a lifelong Priapic hatred of asses.

Satyr Plays and Mime

Satyr plays were a type of tragicomedy, similar to burlesque and, as the name suggests, starred choruses of satyrs acting out their obscene, sexually charged parts replete with filthy jokes and erect phalluses. The form was developed by Pratinas of Phlius in around 500 BCE to provide some light, intermittent relief from the doom and gloom of the tragedies on the bill.



Caption: (6 century BCE black figure vase, Staatliche Museum Berlin)

A rampant satyr

Sex and male-female relationships have a big part to play too in the scurrilous mimes of I who was active in the 3rd century BCE. Typically, mimes were coarse, vernacular and reple sexual references. In the old nurse, now the local bawd, calls on Metriche, whose husband

Mime

1

in Egypt, and tries to interest her in an eligible young man who has fallen in love with he sight. Metriche declines with dignity, but consoles the old woman with a generous cup o Mrs Sarah Camp in Dickens' springs to mind. In 5 the jealous Bittina quizzes Gastron, in a

The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit

Mime

wonderful turn of phrase

Just tell me, Gastron; have you grown so satiated that you are no longer satisfied to shake your thighs with me but must be having sex with Menon's Amphythæa?

Buttocks partialism

Female buttocks (and indeed male) have always been an erogenous zone and a symbol of fertility and beauty. Statues created as early as 24,000 BCE, such as the Venus or Woman of Willendorf found in Austria, have exhibited exaggerated buttocks, hips, and thighs. Pygophilia is the name for sexual arousal caused by the buttocks.

Athenaeus tells the engaging story of the well-read Mania, mistress of Philip II, quoting S *hetaira*

Mania once was asked, by King Demetrius, for a good look at her fair buttocks; and she, in return, that he should grant her a favour. When he agreed, she turned her back, and said, - "O son of Agam now the Gods grant you to see what you so long have wished for
."

There is more buttock-revealing, or at least a request for it, and an exquisite put-down, with Gnathaena:

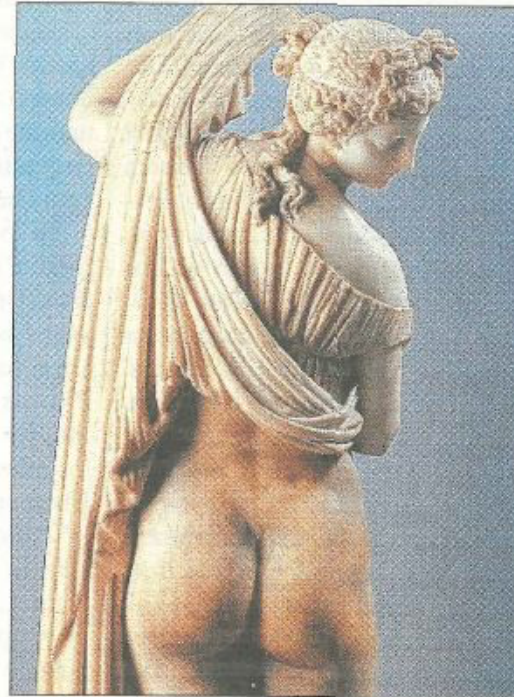
'They say that one fine day a youth from Pontus was sleeping with Gnathaena, and in the morning he asked her to show her buttocks to him. But she replied, "You have no time for that now, it's time for you to feed the pigs".'

Demophoon, a friend of Sophocles', was also partial to his buttocks:
hetaira's

'And it is said this woman had fine buttocks, And when Demophoon tried to hold them, "A pretty thing," said she, "that what you get From me, you may present to Sophocles."'



Kim Kardashian, 2015



Callipygian Venus

Caption:

Kim Kardashian and Callipygian Venus

In the endless pursuit of the acme of physical beauty the buttocks were very important, as they were in social intercourse. The ideal was portrayed on a Greek bronze, now lost, but a 1st century BC Roman copy in marble called the 'Kallipygean Venus' can be seen in the Napoli Archaeological Museum. Athenaeus tells the story of a Syracusan farmer who had two daughters who could not agree on which had the best buttocks so they enlisted the opinion of a young passer-by. He preferred the bum of the older sister and fell in love with her. His inquisitive brother fell likewise for the younger sister; the two married their kallipygian girls who commissioned a temple to the 'Kallipygean Aphrodite and erected a cult statue. The Christian Clement of Alexandria was later to describe the masterpiece as 'shamefully erotic example of pagan religious art'.

Agalmatophilia

Agalmatophilia, from the Greek agalma 'statue', and -philia *φιλία* love, is a paraphilia involving sexual attraction to a statue, doll, or mannequin which may embrace a desire for sexual contact with the object, viewing such sexual encounters, or sexual pleasure from thoughts of being transformed or transforming another into the desired object. Athenaeus describes such an instance, albeit unfulfilling:

Cleisophus of Selymbria... fell in love with a statue of Parian marble then at Samos, and shut himself up in the temple to gratify his affection; but when he found that he could make no impression on the coldness and unyielding nature of the stone, then he lost all desire.

Another man got away lightly, perhaps, for his 'transgression':

At Delphi, in the museum of the pictures, there are two boys wrought in marble; with one of which Delphians say, a visitor fell in love so strongly, that he made love to it, and shut himself up with it, and presented it with a crown; but when he was discovered, the god ordered the Delphians, who consult the oracle about it, to let him off

Agalmatophilia first became a subject of clinical study with the publication of Richard von Krafft-Ebing's in which he recorded the case of a gardener in 1877 falling in love with a statue of a

Psychopathia Sexualis

de Milo and being discovered attempting to have sex with it.

Necrophilia

Hittite law from the 16th century BC to the 13th century BC explicitly permitted sexual relations with the dead. According to Herodotus, necrophilia was a bit of a problem in Egypt:

'The wives of [Egyptian] top brass, when they die, are not handed over immediately to be embalmed, nor are such women who are very beautiful or sexier than others; it is only on the third or fourth day after their death (and not before) that they are delivered to the embalmers. They do this in order that the embalmers may not abuse the women, for they say that one of them was caught doing so to the corpse of a woman lately dead, and his colleagues blew the whistle on him.'

Herodotus alludes to Periander 'baking his bread' in Melissa's 'cold oven' in that superb euphemism. The Babylonian Talmud relates that King Herod of Judea (73 BCE – 4 BCE) was besotted by a virgin girl who killed herself to avoid marrying him; he preserved her body for seven years in order, some say, to have regular sex with her corpse. Xenophon of Ephesus with the odd and unedifying story of the poor Spartan Aigialeus and his common-law Thelxinoe who died; Aigialeus kept her body at home embalmed Egyptian-style. he says,

*'I speak to her as though she is still alive,'
I lie down next to her and have my meals with her'*

Diodorus Siculus reminds us that poorer Egyptians would keep mummies at home rather than placing them in tombs because they believed that the dead could enjoy 'earthly pleasures of food and drink. Aigialeus says of Thelxinoe's corpse, , with the strong suggestion of necrophilia

'I'm forever kissing her and passing the time with her'

Roman times Nero, of course, is reputed to have been romantically connected with his de-

Dildos

Miletus was dildo-city; the manufacturing and exporting centre of the *olisbos* and known

ὀλισθεῖν (*olistheîn*, to slip, glide)

the dildo. The world's oldest known dildo is a twenty centimeter phallus from the Upper Palaeolithic period some 30,000 years ago found in Hohle Fels Cave near Ulm in Germany. They can only be described as dildo-like breadsticks, known as (singular *olisbokollikos*), were known in ancient

olisbokollix

before the 5th century BCE. More often, dildos were made either of wood or pressed leather. They were, mercifully, liberally smeared with olive oil before use.



Caption: (red figure vase from 430 BCE, British Museum)

A woman watering some phalloi

Erotic magic

The pursuit of love often led to recourse to the dark arts. The popularity and ubiquity of the evil and sinister form of ancient hate mail is illustrated by the fact that 1,600 or so curse tablets alone – or – curse tablets or binding spells – have been found. reach back as far as the 5th century BCE.

katadesies

Katadesies

5th century BCE in Greece. Around one quarter of the tablets show erotic magic, deployed to bring bitter revenge on duplicitous lovers, bind an object of desire to love and sex with the dedicatee for the rest of his or her days. Typical is the one which rains down every kind of disaster on the recipient.

made all the more exotic with the addition of the usual inexplicable mumbo jumbo:

*May burning fever seize all her limbs, kill her soul and her heart; O gods of the underworld, break her bones, choke her,
arourarelyothphrix, phrox
, let her body be twisted and shattered,
.*

There are, though, examples of love – binding spells – where a lover will invoke underworld deities

in a heartfelt bid to win the love of his life. A man called Successus dedicates his wife in a binding spell for his love for her requested:

May Successa burn, let her feel herself aflame with love or desire for Successus

.

Let us hope that Successus was successful in winning Successa over. Plenty of fire here but the brimstone we often meet in these spells.

Extracted from by Paul Chrystal (Amberley 2016). © Paul Chrystal

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Sex & Sexuality in Ancient Greece

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