

The Trouble With Sex

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Introduction:

I teach classes about the history of sexuality in the time period of the SCA's focus; from the end of the Roman Empire until the 16th century. While I've been studying and teaching these classes for years I have written down comparatively little. It's tempting, when you start a website in order to share your work, to simply slap up a tape of the best version of the class and add the bibliography. After all why would I want to go back and cover things that are already out there when I could be learning new things, taking notes, and teaching something else? The answer is that I want to get it all out there before that happens so it can be useful to someone else. After all, teaching, even at Pennsic, I'm really only reaching 60 or so people at a time. Invariably someone asks for the web site for further documentation or to share their new found knowledge with friends. Until now I didn't have that. Another reason is if I want to be taken seriously, and I want my area of interest to also be taken seriously, then I need to get it all out there so others can access it on their own time, and not just when I feel like driving out somewhere to teach.

And, really, with a topic this vast, I only share about 10 percent of my studies at any given class. We could easily have semester's worth of topics before I ran out of things to talk about. So for the foreseeable future I will split this site into random areas of interest. I will talk about subjects I cover in my classes, and hopefully expand on that knowledge as well. In the mean time please pardon the haphazard nature of the information. Better writers than I have managed to cover these topics. I promise to always include my sources. They are never boring. People should get their own copies and check it all out for themselves.

The History of Sex

>Insert Roman Ménage e Trois mural<

The history of sex in Western Culture is complicated, both in itself and in how we preserve and disseminate information about it. We all bring our personal baggage to any subject. We look at all history through the lens of our own experiences, personal culture, prejudices and religious beliefs. The history of sexuality might be our most fraught area of study, besides religion. The change over the last 2000 years is dramatic, a violent shift from a celebration of sex as a public sport, to an act that is utterly private, even occasionally a condemnation of the very idea of sex. The history of sex in western Civilization is the history of the development of shame.

That sounds terribly depressing, but like sexuality itself, you can oppress it, but the yearning for it, will leak back out in surprising and even fun ways. I try to make my classes as much about the ways sexuality escaped suppression as the ways it was suppressed.

Looking back on the ways academia has tried to hide the past is actually kind of entertaining. It's a great example of how some things can scare you so badly you hurt yourself.

In the 16th and 17th c. the western world saw the rise of Antiquarians, people who collected artifacts from the past. It required no formal study. You went to an ancient site and dug like crazy until you found something. Today's archeologists cringe at the behavior of these men, who in many ways were little more than grave robbers. But their personal collections expanded into national museums and much of what we have from the ancient world, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome were first in their collections.

In terms of sex these cultures were nothing like our modern experience. It's taken us some time to begin to understand their values. Our own values fill our view screen so completely we are blind to all other possibilities. I like to use the discovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum as an example of this persistent blindness. I begin with a story.

Once upon a time, in 1709, in Italy, near the Gulf of Naples, a man walked up a beautiful lush hillside in search of a place to dig a well. He fell in a hole. When he managed to collect himself he realized that next to him in the dark was not in fact dirt but a wall. The discovery of this wall would eventually lead to the excavation of Herculaneum, an ancient Roman city that last saw the light of day Aug 24, 79 when Mt Vesuvius covered the city in ash, killing 1500 people and preserving the city in dark for the next 1600 years.

Herculaneum was special. By the 17th c. the western world had come to think of themselves as the inheritors of all that was good and noble about the Roman Empire. Indeed, Rome's heyday was considered a golden age, one many scholars hoped current society would learn from and emulate. But Rome itself hadn't remained the same. Some of its monuments had been preserved of course, but continual living on the sites of this former civilization had erased many aspects of daily life. Current Italians made assumptions based on ancient writings and ignored anything that didn't fit with the idealized picture they had drawn for themselves. Herculaneum was going to change that.

Herculaneum was frozen in time. Everything was exactly as it was the morning that all those souls died. What they ate, what they wore, their furniture, their homes. It was all exactly as they had left it. No chance was given to remove anything the modern world might find distasteful. The men charged with digging up and cataloging their finds had some terrible surprises in store.

1st of all Herculaneum was FULL of penises. Representations of them were everywhere from jewelry to household items, paintings and statues. Also in evidence were depictions of sex acts. Now to give some perspective on this, even today there are two things that make any public display illegal for minors, exposed genitalia, and any depiction of actual penetration. Herculaneum had penis necklaces specifically made for children. The sex acts weren't all the standard tab A fits slot B kinds of acts either. There were pictures of group sex, a child slave performing cunnilingus on his mistress. There was a finely crafted garden statue of the god Pan having intercourse with a goat. The goat looked really happy about it.

At first every time a larger object was found the excavators assumed it was a in a brothel, until the number of brothels went well past the needs of any mid-size Roman city. They simply couldn't wrap their heads around the idea that displays of sex were a natural part of public life. Romans viewed sex like they did any other sport, fun to do and fun to watch. They simply did not possess a sense of privacy when it came to sex. The Antiquarians, and the government of Naples for that matter, were completely stumped. What were they going to do with all these priceless artifacts of history that told a depraved story about the culture they so admired? Some objects were defaced. Penises were broken off and thrown in drawers. Naughty bits in frescoes were scratched out. What they deemed too precious to destroy the hid from any of the public deemed too fragile to handle their corrupting influence.

And so was developed a series of what were called "Secret Museums". Eventually every capital city in Europe had some form of them. If you were of the right station in civilized society, if you were male, and white, and an adult, you could pay a certain sum of money to view these objects. Everyone else, women, children, immigrants, were prohibited. To some extent the practice continues, though the reasons have changed somewhat. I will cover that topic more in other essays, but for now let's use this story as an illustration of what we are up against when we try to explore the history of sexuality.

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