

International Journal of Human Sciences Research

HISTORY OF SEXUALITY IN CLASSICAL CIVILIZATIONS: AN ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PETER STEARNS

Marina Hilst

Universidade Estadual Paulista
(UNESP/FCLAr). Master's student
in Sex Education. Ibitinga-SP
<http://lattes.cnpq.br/5975172450745449>

Paulo Rennes Marçal Ribeiro

Universidade Estadual Paulista (UNESP/
FCLAr). PhD in Mental Health and Associate
Professor in Sexology and Sexual Education.
Associate Professor. Postgraduate Programs
in Sexual Education and School Education.
Araraquara - SP
<http://lattes.cnpq.br/7163791603588084>

All content in this magazine is
licensed under a Creative Com-
mons Attribution License. Attri-
bution-Non-Commercial-Non-
Derivatives 4.0 International (CC
BY-NC-ND 4.0).



Abstract: Sexuality is a human dimension whose study makes it possible to understand the civilizing process and the direction of social conduct. The historical bias of sexuality brings multiple possibilities, in this work we prioritized a bibliographical research of an exploratory nature to detect patterns of sexuality in classical civilizations: China, Greece, Rome, Persia and India, in the book *History of Sexuality* by Peter Stearns. The analysis aimed to focus on specific aspects of sexuality such as interest in sexual pleasure, division by gender, the role and participation of women, homoerotic relationships, prostitution, culture and art. Sex for procreative purposes was a constant in all the civilizations analyzed. Interest in sexual pleasure varied according to cultural conditions. Interest in female pleasure showed greater and lesser emphasis in India and Greece respectively. Sex outside of marriage was frowned upon when practiced by women. Female prostitution socially accepts the distinction between respectable and non-respectable women. Homoerotic sexuality was more freely practiced in Greece than in other places and at the same time it was the place that most devalued female sexuality. Among the Greeks, passivity was frowned upon, but sex between men was a matter of parity. In terms of sex and art, China produced little in this regard, whereas the Greeks explicitly produced sex as an artistic expression. The sexual artistic themes of the Romans were influenced by Greeks but were less obscene and more apotropaic. In India, erotic art presented itself as a form of intersection between sexuality and religiosity, showing a mixture of sex, deities, anatomical details and sexual positions. The societies analyzed were more open to fantasies and wanton sexual conduct in art and culture than in everyday life.

Keywords: History; Sexuality, Antiquity;

INTRODUCTION

Sexuality is a human dimension, therefore an aspect that can be studied and analyzed, as it is and since then, in the same ways and with the same intentions applicable to the study of human beings. At the risk of truism, but rather obvious than negligent, it is time to say that the historical study of sexuality is not just the same as studying how different human groups had sex throughout the history of humanity, but far beyond that, the study of sexuality brings within it, many possibilities of understanding civilizing social development, or the human being's own relationship with oneself, that is, thinking that the concrete practices of everyday life influence the construction of the subject sexuality constitutes the scenario to describe how subjects construct their identity and direct their conduct, Foucault (2014).

It is important to make it clear that using historical factors to understand sexuality gives us a multiplicity of possibilities in covering a range of social phenomena, regarding cultural, economic and political aspects, just mentioning a few, to which, for this work, we will allocate a cut-off, in order to narrow our path and define our objectives.

MAIN GOAL

This work's main objective is to explain relevant information and knowledge resulting from a bibliographical research of an exploratory nature, about sexuality in classical civilizations, in the book *History of Sexuality* by Peter Stearns, in order to provide greater familiarity with the topic, improve ideas through the description of the characteristics of sexuality in the aforementioned civilizations of the classical period, namely: China, Greece, Rome, Persia and India.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

Analyze specific aspects of sexuality in the aforementioned civilizations, namely:

- 1.a. The interest in sexual pleasure, its division by gender, and, consequently, the role of women in society and sexuality;
- 1.b. Masturbation, homosexual relations and male castration;
- 1.c. Prostitution;
- 1.d. Sex, culture and art.

JUSTIFICATION

The idea of this work was a theoretical exploration of sexuality in classical ancient civilizations in order to seek relevant information about sexuality patterns as a fundamental aspect of human behavior. This in itself constitutes an important justification for carrying out this work, however we can also add that we believe that the information compiled here is a valuable source for more specific studies that we intend to carry out in the near future.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Peter Stearns in his book "History of Sexuality" (2019) states that patterns of sexuality constitute fundamental aspects of human behavior and studying such patterns allows us to understand not only facets of human behavior, but also everyday life itself and even patterns historical. Understanding how things were in the past is a way of understanding what happens today, even if we consider as a premise that sexual cultures sometimes present discontinuities, particularities, exceptions, however, a survey, a critical reading of patterns and possible comparisons can reveal rich information about the functioning of different societies through the erotic content they produce.

An important aspect of sexuality is the interest focused on sexual pleasure and how different societies of the same period distinguished, or not, sexual pleasure between genders. Taking this aspect into account, China, during the Zhou dynasty, in the Classic period, transitioned from an overt sexuality to a marked regulation. Texts and materials from the period demonstrate a strong appreciation of sexual pleasure, with sex being practiced beyond procreation. It is clear, however, that female desire was taken into consideration, but treated differently from male sexual interest. A specific text from the 12th century BC refers to the male orgasm as fire while the female climax as water. With regard to women, their main objective was aimed at preserving the family, therefore, sex before marriage was condemned for them. Even though a gradual regulation of sexual practice was noted, with the advance of Confucianism in classical China, the interest in sexual pleasure was public and notorious, for both genders, maintaining due proportions, since sexuality was a very important subject. publicly debated.

The same pattern was not observed in Greek civilization in the classical period. The pattern observed for Mediterranean civilization is one of profound regulation of female sexuality. Women led a reclusive life, with a high concern for preserving their virginity, and it was even common for women to participate in religious activities to reinforce the guarantee of sexual abstinence. Greek girls married very early, in marriages arranged and supervised by their parents, until then they lived in almost total confinement. Classical Greece was an elitist patriarchal society that limited women, marked by the separation between the feminine world (home) and the masculine world (life in society). Sparta was a Greek city in which women may have had a little more freedom, however, we have

to put this interpretation into perspective since we know that women were considered to be at the service of the State as producers of warriors, with this supposed freedom being conditional on a sexuality focused on reproduction. It is important to note that this standard was imposed by the vision of men, with women not being satisfied with their conditions, which is evidenced by the existence of a dildo manufacturing industry in the region of Miletus, around 500 BC.

Roman civilization was formed in continuity with most Greek values, however, it is possible to notice some changes, albeit discreet, with regard to the interest in female sexual pleasure, practically non-existent in its predecessor Greece. An analysis of Roman literature of the period allows us to notice considerable attention to sexuality. Sex manuals containing teachings on how to obtain maximum pleasure were common, taking into consideration, not only women's desires, but also encouraging men to make an effort for women to have orgasms. In this aspect, we see a slight modification in the patriarchy model, since there is a perceived interest in female sexual satisfaction. However, nothing changes when it comes to marriages, fidelity and motherhood, with women being responsible for having a respectable life at the service of the patriarchy.

Some Greek sources allow us to infer about the role of women in Persian society, where the emperor was often cited as being surrounded by many women. They were concubines, but some were just dancers or artists. If from the point of view of Persian women this could be understood as a prominent position, due to their proximity to the emperor, to Greek observers, who saw the female figure as a point of inferiority, the Persian emperor was also seen as decadent, for placing himself surrounded by women, immersed in sexual intrigue and exposed to female influence.

Other than that, what we know is that the Persians emphasized sex for procreation.

India, in turn, the last great exponent of classical civilization, was the one that most valued sexual pleasure, considering it the best of all earthly pleasures. We see here a peculiar case of intertwining between religiosity and sexuality. In a similar way to what happened in Greece, gods and goddesses were presented in stories with sexual themes, or in sexual relationships, however in the Indian case the sexual themes are much more explicit and detailed. Here too, a countless number of sex manuals addressed positions and practices to increase sexual pleasure for both men and women, with a diversity of rituals and a lot of emphasis on foreplay. Standards such as female virginity, arranged marriages, regulation of female behavior are included in Eastern civilization, a difference, perhaps important to highlight, is the almost divinization of sexual pleasure and the clear interest in female sexual satisfaction, within marital sex.

Another way to interpret the way classical civilizations dealt with their sexuality is to try to scan the information on how they positioned themselves on issues relating to masturbation and homoerotic sex.

In China, sexuality gained the contours of basic philosophical principles, therefore, straight sex guaranteed the balance between yin-yang for men. On the same philosophical basis, masturbation was criticized and, in some periods, even prohibited for men, while it was tolerated for women as long as they did not use objects. Outside of the philosophical view, homosexuality was not a major problem, with there even being instances of love affairs in poetic and romantic literature. In Greece, we have a polarization of aspects due to the distinction and hierarchy of genders. The almost non-existent interest in female sexual pleasure did not produce many

possibilities for women to enjoy pleasure in sexual relations of a straight nature, since sex had a merely reproductive character, within marriages where sex was erratic, furtive, and infrequent., it is known that some women developed self-sufficient alternatives to satisfy themselves, such as the use of artificial penises made of wood covered in leather and used with olive oil for lubrication. Obviously, such a practice was not socially approved. For men, masturbation was seen as an escape valve, however, pederasty was a valve used with more emphasis and freedom by most Greek men in the classical period. Homosexuality is a peculiar feature of classical Greek sexuality. It was socially accepted, and even understood as part of the process of good male education. It could be part of a private learning system between an older man (tutor) and a young apprentice. This practice required parental approval and presupposed that there would be learning and sex eventually as an escape valve, with the tutor being active and the learner passive. The character of this homosexuality must not be understood as sexual orientation or desire as we understand it today, given that such guardians were generally men married to women, and who used this practice simply to satisfy their sexual needs that were not addressed in their relationships with their wives. Likewise, apprentices in the future would marry and have heterosexual relationships. However, we cannot ignore that there was, to a large extent, relative tolerance towards male homosexuality in addition to pederasty, sometimes reported in the literature. Zeus himself was described in some tales as showing sexual interest in beautiful epebes. Plato even theorized that true love would only be possible between two men, as it would result from sexual and intellectual exchanges, which could only occur in male parity. Aristotle, in turn, saw occasional male homosexuality as a way of keeping women

away from power, demonstrating concern only with the passive position.

In Rome, male masturbation was seen as wasteful but acceptable. Homoerotic sexual relations presupposed a relationship of domination between master and slave, not following the same age pattern as in Greece, much less the same social connotation. On the contrary, using sex with boys could be used as a political weapon to demoralize enemies and political competitors, as happened between Cicero and Marco Antônio. There was space for homoerotic literature copied from the Greeks, however it did not find the same prestige and acceptance in Roman society as it had in Greek society, on the contrary passive homosexuality was seen here as obscene.

In India, homosexuality was a much less prominent issue, as far as we know non-vaginal sex was prohibited, there was state patrolling and punishments involved very heavy fines for men. In general, homosexuality in classical Indian civilization was a practice that was despised and did not produce greater content.

We can then address an issue arising from sexuality: male castration. Several societies used the services of castrated men, known as eunuchs. Interestingly, men in this condition are deprived of their sexuality, and within societies whose patriarchal models, for which sexuality is almost synonymous with power, Even so, there was space for these social types to be highlighted to a greater or lesser extent, as we will point out below.

China appears to have been the civilization where this group enjoyed the greatest importance. Initially, castration was considered degrading, precisely because it deprived men of their sexual potency, it was applicable to those convicted of treason. Gradually they were considered suitable for carrying out some specific activities, and by the Han dynasty there had been more than

five thousand eunuchs in the court, enjoying positions of prestige and power. Among the occupations, the most obvious was guarding the imperial harem, but they also spread as advisors and confidants of the emperor. In Persia it was not very different. A court model very similar to the Chinese style became part of the imperial bureaucracy, placing the court extremely dependent on its services and laying the foundations of a tradition that would be widely used in imperial regimes in the Middle East. Finally, eunuchs were also present in Indian society, but their existence was linked to a much lesser importance than in China and the Mediterranean.

The penultimate aspect we want to analyze, referring to the sexuality of classical civilizations, is prostitution. In a comprehensive way, female prostitution existed in all societies, but with varied perspectives and analyzing this aspect allows us to make several inferences about sexual and social conduct in these societies. First we can address the question of purpose. In general, prostitution was a socially accepted practice, in parallel with a respectable social life, prostitution was a non-respectable practice for prostitutes, however resorting to the services of a prostitute could be interpreted in the most respectful ways, none of which were dishonorable to the client. Entertainment, recreational sex, outlet of sexual drives, gaining pre-marital experience, even regulating violent instincts that could cause rape or deflowering of respectable women. In China, there was easy and shameless access to brothels for all social classes, just taking care that there was no excess. And as the regulation of female sexuality grew in Chinese society, the same was not observed with prostitutes. In Greece we notice a classist connotation in relation to this aspect. Prostitutes were generally slaves, and for men, having the financial means to access prostitution was a

reason for recognition. Likewise, the virtue of moderation was expected. Notorious names in Greek society, such as Socrates, defended the use of prostitution and Pericles had a long-lasting relationship with a courtesan, even having a child with her. In Rome, prostitution covered several economic levels and was controlled by the government, which registered prostitutes in order to collect taxes. Furthermore, among the main positive aspects that made prostitution a socially accepted practice was that it regulated unmet sexual needs in marriages and supposedly avoided relationships with married women, acting as a prevention of adultery. Regarding this, it is worth adding that in classical Roman society, the definition of adultery applied only to women, that is, sexual intercourse with a married woman, excluding the man's marital status (PUCCINI-DELBEY, 2010).

In India, female prostitution was a way for men to obtain sexual pleasure. Women were also sold as artists, dancers, concubines, and in large cities there were brothels, street prostitutes and those who also served at home. This practice was almost always supervised by the government that collected taxes. Luxury prostitutes were educated women who enjoyed freedom, had a salary, and acted as escorts on trips, obviously for men who could afford such luxury. It is interesting to note that in this context prostitutes, despite being seen as non-respectable women, or women unfit for marriage, were still considered powerful women, almost divine due to their sexual potency. Only in the case of a prostitute being caught with a married man was the punishment more severe than that of the man.

Last but not least, the relationship between sex, culture and art concludes our analysis of sexuality in classical civilizations. In this aspect there was great variation in the pattern. While China practically did not produce minimally elaborate sexual art, Greek culture did,

revealing at various times a view of disrespect towards women, often portrayed as libertine and immoral, in need of external control. A notable point is that in the expression of Greek art, sex was something public and authorized, in many moments presenting an open, practically wanton sexuality, which contrasted sharply with the way they dealt with it in real life, that is, Greek sexual art was much more vigorous and spicier than the reality they experienced. Roman erotic culture follows the reflections of Greek art, using a set of gods and anthropozoomorphic creatures in relationships with humans as a deliberate expression of sexuality, to which the Romans also add the god Priapus, always portrayed with an erect penis symbolizing vigor and fertility. Priapus' expressions had a largely apotropaic character and were very common in the simplest homes. He also appeared in poems with obscene themes, linked to female lust. In elite homes, representations were more restrained, but still present, and in the lower social stratum there were mentions of oral, anal and animal sex. As the prosperity of the Roman Empire was consolidated, an explicitly sexual art also grew substantially.

Indian sexual art, especially in the Gupta period, was very vigorous and detailed, both with regard to anatomy and positions. Sculptors represented goddesses in an extremely sensual way and sexual scenes from the Kama Sutra were very popular in paintings.

METHOD

The method chosen for this work was monographic, as characterized by Gonçalves (2005) as being an exhaustive study on a given topic, here in question sexuality in classical ancient civilizations. Undoubtedly a work of a historical nature, we carried out an exploratory reading, that is, a bibliographical research in the book History of Sexuality by

Peter Stearns, using as a focus the section dedicated to the approach to sexuality before the modern era, specifically the classical period. Consequently, the procedures were the reading, interpretation and detailed description of the information found in the established section.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

After carrying out our intention, we obtained the following considerations. It was possible to clearly see that in ancient societies, sexuality was an ever-present factor, being practiced within certain standards.

Sex for procreative purposes was the most visible of these. In all the civilizations analyzed in this work, sex to produce children was a constant, however, interest in sexual pleasure varied according to some particular cultural variables. The appreciation of female pleasure was perceived with greater emphasis in India and with less emphasis in Greece. In both cases, female sexuality was kept confined within marital relations, with sex outside of marriage for women being very frowned upon, another striking pattern.

However, female prostitution was widely and socially accepted, but a distinction was made between so-called respectable women and so-called non-respectable prostitutes. However, in India we find the occurrence of prostitutes considered luxury, who enjoyed certain freedoms and admiration. For their sexual potency, a condition not enjoyed by respectable Indian women.

Male homoerotic sexuality found a more fertile environment to be practiced in Greece, precisely where a greater devaluation and contempt for female sexuality was also observed, thus we understand that somehow because they understand women as being inferior to men, men themselves do not see it as taboo to have sex between men, even though they did not view passive

homosexuality favorably, and considered themselves heterosexual. It is also worth noting that in the other societies analyzed here, male homosexuality also occurred, although it did not have the same focus, and was even neglected in most contexts.

In terms of sex and art, with the exception of China, which produced little or almost nothing of erotic art, the Greeks produced it openly, explicitly, and were even seen by other civilizations as an obscene and depraved art. Roman society, in turn, maintained a pattern of sexual art inherited from the Greeks, but less obscene and more apotropaic in character, that is, linking sexuality, especially in the figure of Priapus, the god always portrayed with a huge erect penis, to fertility. From what can be seen from the literature and walls of Pompeii, Roman erotic art was found in houses and public baths accessible to men and women. In India it was where

art was most intensely an instrument of intersection between sexuality and religiosity. Indian art propagated the sexuality associated with deities with a high level of detail and descriptions of anatomy and sexual positions.

Ultimately, it is convenient to recognize that this study did not exhaust all the potential for analyzing sexuality in the societies that we set out to analyze within the scope of this work. There would also be several other bottlenecks around aspects of sexuality such as birth control, abortion, infanticide, differentiation of standards by social class, rape and adultery. And we are left with a disturbing question, posed by the author of the book we analyzed, which could be a starting point for a future work: Why did some societies develop open, even wanton sexual fantasies and behaviors in art and culture that did not correspond to your everyday sex life? This certainly requires a new study to be answered.

REFERENCES

CECCARELLI, Paulo Roberto e Andrade, Eduardo Lucas. O sexual, a sexualidade e suas apresentações na atualidade. *Revista Latinoamericana de Psicopatologia Fundamental* [online]. 2018, v. 21, n. 2 [Acessado 21 Setembro 2023], pp. 229-250. Disponível em: <<https://doi.org/10.1590/1415-4714.2018v21n2p229.2>>. ISSN 1984-0381. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1415-4714.2018v21n2p229.2>.

FOUCAULT, Michel. **História da Sexualidade 1: A vontade de saber**. Tradução: Maria Thereza da Costa Albuquerque e J. A. Guilhon Albuquerque. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2014.

GONÇALVES, Hortência de Abreu. **Manual de metodologia de pesquisa científica**. São Paulo: Avercamp, 2005.

HISTÓRIA DA SEXUALIDADE HUMANA. In: WIKIPÉDIA, a enciclopédia livre. Flórida: Wikimedia Foundation, 2022. Disponível em: <https://pt.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Hist%C3%93ria_da_sexualidade_humana&oldid=64351519>. Acesso em: 6 set. 2022.

LOURES, José Maurício Teixeira e Fuks, Betty Bernardo. A sexualidade humana: maldição ou mal-entendido?. *Psicologia: Teoria e Pesquisa* [online]. 2022, v. 38 [Acessado 21 Setembro 2023], e38418. Disponível em: <<https://doi.org/10.1590/0102.3772e38418.pt>>. Epub 03 Out 2022. ISSN 1806-3446. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0102.3772e38418.pt>.

NEVES, Dulce Morgado. Sexualidade: Saber e Individualidade. *Revista Estudos Feministas* [online]. 2019, v. 27, n. 2 [Acessado 21 Setembro 2023], e54146. Disponível em: <<https://doi.org/10.1590/1806-9584-2019v27n254146>>. Epub 27 Jun 2019. ISSN 1806-9584. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1806-9584-2019v27n254146>.

PUCCINI-DELBAY, Geraldine. **A vida sexual na Roma Antiga**. Lisboa: Edições Texto & Grafia, 2010.

SANFELICE, Pérola de Paula. Sexualidade, amor e erotismo na Roma Antiga: as representações de Vênus nas paredes de Pompéia. *Opsis*, Catalão, v.10, n.2, p. 167-190, jul. 2010.

STEARNS, Nathaniel Peter. **História da Sexualidade**. Tradução: Renato Marques. São Paulo: Contexto, 2019.