ForeWord Reviews

Sexual Culture in Ancient Greece

Daniel H. Garrison
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"The erotic contains the least that repels the mind, and the most that inevitably attracts." So states the Indian sage Abhinavagupta in the headnote of the opening chapter of Garrison's book on the erotic as a force in the art, literature, and life of ancient Greece. It's a safe bet to state that after reading this rigorously argued book few readers will disagree with the sage-or with the life-loving tolerance of the ancient Greeks.

Garrison, professor of classics at Northwestern University, demonstrates that most ancient civilizations saw sexual energy and expression as a pervasive natural force, not as a socially narrow mechanism for the necessary propagation of the race. Sex was openly represented in the lives of the goddesses and gods in the late Neolithic civilizations of the Fertile Crescent and ancient Anatolia. By contrast, in ancient Israel, sexual knowledge (sexual knowing) propelled humankind to a place far below its divine creator. Subsequently, Christianity energetically promoted the notion that sex, sexual knowledge, and the representation of sex in art and literature were to be strictly regulated.

The author's treatment of his theme is refreshingly multidisciplinary and two elements in particular significantly help the nonspecialist reader. The first is the provision of numerous illustrations of sculpture from the Neolithic period through Augustan Rome (including a powerful array of Cycladic images), in which the lineaments of desire and sexuality and sexual behaviors are powerfully and economically expressed. Later work, including vase decoration incorporating subtle symbols and elegant draperies, clearly draws readers to carefree abandon. Garrison's second great strength is his extensive range of quotation from exuberant classical Greek authors to censorious Church Fathers. Almost no psychological or emotional beat is absent.

Any reader regretting not having lived in a privately imagined golden age of irresponsible eroticism will learn that such golden ages never quite were. This is not to deny that a freer and more open sexual culture existed in the past rather than today. Garrison, however, makes it quite clear that at all times in the classical Greek period numerous forces-political, moral, economic and social-governed the mechanisms of sexual access and exchange. Sex then, like sex now, was intimately bound up with power because an important end product of sexual

activity is knowledge.

No brief general review can do justice to this scholarly book, which is the twenty-fourth volume in the Oklahoma Series in Classic Culture. It will delight all readers willing to analyze the inescapable force that drives, satisfies, and torments their lives.

Peter Skinner