

## **Shelf 2: Sex and Sexuality**

Gods were male and female, with separate areas of authority but often of unequal power. The more tribal and less urbanized a society was, the stronger the patriarchy, but even in the later Greco-Roman world, women rarely held any status outside the family. Both Pericles and Paul thought women's silence in public appropriate and honorable. Egyptian tradition was different. Noble women, at least, seem to have had greater authority, perhaps mirroring that of their goddesses. Nevertheless the symbol of royalty remained male, and thus the Bronze Age female pharaoh Hatshepsut is shown wearing the kingly headcloth and kilt and the Hellenistic version of the goddess Hathor has a beard.

Fertility was a major concern for these early societies, both for their crops and herds and for their families. Thus ancient populations supplicated the Semite Astarte, the Greek Aphrodite, and the Roman Venus for sexual attraction and fecundity. The modern world derives from these goddesses the terms aphrodisiac and venereal disease. In those days long before Viagra, men sought sexual endurance in certain foods like oysters and in prayers to Hermes or Priapus. The Hebrews maintained a strict moral code that was continued by Christians, but the Greeks were quite open about their sexuality and about the varieties of relationships acceptable in their society. The Romans, however, like the Victorians, often lived with public modesty and private prurience. In Pompeii, excavated walls of some private homes were found to have orgy-like scenes, while some street-side walls had painted advertisements for brothels as well as graffiti of obscene insults. Crafted with a humorous intent, figurines from the Roman Empire depicted sexually stimulated older men, satyrs, and dwarves, but pornographic representations of copulating couples may have served as marital aids, similar to the Kama Sutra of India.