

Sex and Revolution in the Ancient World

This panel explores sex as it relates to revolutionary thought and action in the ancient world. Scholarship on sex, gender, and sexuality over the past forty years has greatly advanced our understanding of human complexity and helped move the academic community beyond outdated frameworks. Recent collections have especially situated gender and sexuality within the broader discipline of classical studies (James and Dillon 2012; Skinner 2014; Hubbard 2014; Masterson, Rabinowitz, and Robson 2015; Campanile, Carlà-Uhink, and Facella 2017). It has been particularly important to center marginalized voices and experiences in the ancient world and consider the many ways a more inclusive account of the past benefits scholarship and contemporary society.

Building on this work, the papers on the panel represent a broad chronological and geographical span: archaic and classical Greece, republican and imperial Rome, and the Sinai Peninsula in late antiquity. The first paper examines the historical context and reliability of the literary traditions concerning the poet Sappho. The paper questions whether Sappho was ever exiled because of political revolution in archaic Mytilene. The paper also addresses the reception of her poetry in Rome, speaking to the enduring legacy and literary power of Sappho's work. In fact, an analysis of the poetry of Propertius in the first century BCE may help clarify a disputed line in the poetry of Sappho. The second paper demonstrates how gender and sexuality figured prominently in the liberation of Thebes in the fourth century BCE. Theban men disguised themselves as women to gain entry into a banquet to assassinate pro-Spartan officials ruling the city as tyrants. The successful plot ultimately turned on men cross-dressing and playing on the unbridled depravity of tyrannical leaders. The liberation of Thebes is also compared to other political revolutions in which gender and sexuality played significant roles. The third paper

considers the possible homoerotic relationship between Marcus Aurelius and the imperial tutor Fronto in the second century CE. The letters of Fronto generally have been overlooked by modern scholarship, but they may have revolutionary implications for our understanding of Marcus Aurelius and imperial power in general. The paper not only seeks to answer questions about the intended audience of the letters and their homoerotic elements, but also their potential to undermine the masculinity and political legitimacy of an emperor-in-waiting. The fourth paper focuses on Christian demonization of Saracens in the Sinai Peninsula in late antiquity. Beginning in the fourth century CE, Christian monks started to settle in the Sinai Peninsula inhabited by an indigenous population of non-Christians called Saracens. Christian sources assert that the Saracens engaged in sexually charged human sacrifice and tempted Christian monks with pederastic sex. The demonization of the Saracens was part of the overall thrust of hagiographic literature, which created a clear dichotomy between Christians and non-Christians and gave a later writer, John of Damascus, negative tropes to reuse in describing the revolutionary movement of Muhammad.

Sex and Revolution in the Ancient World ultimately investigates the reliability and subtlety of ancient textual evidence and looks to shed new light on the diverse ways that sex, gender, and sexuality were potentially and actually destabilizing and revolutionary. Normative ideas and customs were developed in ancient societies to circumscribe gender and sexuality in part to limit revolution in thought and action. But the papers on the panel demonstrate that the multivalent concept of sex was revolutionary by its very nature and was used in a variety of ways to reinforce or subvert traditional understandings of political, social, and cultural power.

Bibliography

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