

Ancient Pagan Greek Attitudes To Nudity

In their book, “Sin, Sickness and Sanity”, the historians Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough wrote: “Put simply, the Jewish tradition has been strongly opposed to nudity, while the **Greek tradition, with certain limitations, has looked upon it favorably**. Superficially at least, it would seem that the Jewish tradition has been dominant because it was adopted by the Early Christians and has been transmitted through the Scriptures, **but the Greek influence remained in sculpture and painting** and, in spite of some hostility, has continued to exert great influence upon Western art.”¹

Thucydides and Plato on the Greeks and nudity

The Greeks are one of the earliest groups in history to have an indecent immodest attitude to public nudity.

Thucydides (471-399 B.C.) was a Greek historian from Athens. He wrote of how public nudity was not originally a Greek custom, but became one: “It was the Spartans who first began to dress simply and in accordance with our modern taste, which the rich leading a life that was as much as possible like the life of the ordinary people. **They, too, were the first to play games naked, to take off their clothes openly, and to rub themselves down with olive oil after their exercise. In ancient times even at the Olympic Games the athletes used to wear coverings for their loins, and indeed this practice was still in existence not very many years ago. Even today many foreigners, especially in Asia, wear these loincloths for boxing matches and wrestling bouts. Indeed, one could point to a number of other instances where the manners of the ancient Hellenic world are very similar to the manners of foreigners today.**”²

In his writing “Laws”, the Greek philosopher Plato wrote that in the 400’s B.C. at what was called the “Naked Games” in ancient Greece, men went naked while competing: “**Moreover in our games we have severe tests of endurance, when men unclad do battle with the violence of the heat, - and there are other instances so numerous that the recital of them would be well-nigh endless.**”³

Herodotus on nudity

In his “The Histories”, the ancient Greek historian Herodotus (approx. 490-420 B.C.) records how Candaules, the King of Sardis showed his wife’s nakedness to another man and how she was so shamed and offended by this, she took revenge on her husband.⁴ Commenting on what happened, Herodotus wrote: “For with the Lydians, as with most barbarian races, it is thought highly indecent even for a man to be seen naked.”⁵

¹ Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, “Sin, Sickness and Sanity”, A Meridian Book, New York, 1977, page 177.

² Thucydides, “History of the Peloponnesian War”, Book 1, Introduction, 6.

³ Plato, “Laws”, Book 1, 633 C.

⁴ Herodotus, “The Histories”, Book One, 7-11.

⁵ Ibid, 10.

Plutarch on Sparta

The Greek historian Plutarch (48-122 A.D.) records that in the 700's B.C., the Greek Spartan boys who were younger than 12 years old used to play naked wherever they were. Plutarch said the Spartan boys: "*were accustomed to going bare-foot, and to playing **for the most part without clothes**. When they were twelve years old, they no longer had tunics to wear, received one cloak a year...*"⁶

Athenaeus on Thessaly, Macedonia and Sparta

Athenaeus, the Greek writer (approx late 100's to early 200's A.D.) stated that in his "Convivial Notes", the ancient writer named Persaeus of Citium – a pupil of Zeno⁷, the founder of Stoicism (approx. 335-262 B.C.) recorded the fact that in ancient times dancing girls from Thessaly in central Greece appeared naked in public except for a small loin cloth around their genitals before Antigonos, a political delegation from Arcadia in Greece and other men: "*But when the drinking was going on apace and there entered, among other entertaining shows, those Thessalonian dancing-girls who danced, as their custom is, in loin-cloths without other covering, the men could no longer restrain themselves, but started up from the couches and should aloud at the wonderful sight they were seeing.*"⁸

Athenaeus also stated that in Macedonia, at the marriage of a man named Caranus, there were some at least topless or fully "**naked female jugglers**" who entertained the crowd.⁹

Athenaeus also recorded: "*The Spartan custom, also, of stripping young girls before strangers is highly praised. And on the island of Chios it is very pleasant just to walk to the gymnasia and running-tracks and watch the young men wrestling with the girls.*"¹⁰

Here Athenaeus reveals:

1. The Spartans stripped their young girls before strangers.
2. On the Greek island of Chios, girls wrestled with young men at the gymnasium. In Greek, the word "gymnasium" is "gumnasia" in Athenaeus' comments above. "Gumnasia" comes from the Greek word "gumnos" which means "naked". These girls were wrestling naked with boys.

Socrates' recommendations about Greek women

In his "Republic", the ancient Greek writer Plato records a conversation between the Greek philosopher Socrates and Glaucion in which Socrates recommends that Greek women should sometimes go naked in public or at gymnasiums in front of men: "*Then the women guardians **must strip** since they'll clothe themselves in virtue instead of robes and they must take common part in war and these rest of the city's guarding, and must not do other things. But lighter parts of these*

⁶ Plutarch, "Lives", Lycurgus, 14, 6.

⁷ Athenaeus, "Deipnosophistae", Volume 6, Loeb, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1980, page 273, footnote a and Diogenes Laertes VII, I, 8.

⁸ Athenaeus, "Deipnosophistae", Book 13, 607c-d.

⁹ Ibid, Book 4, 129d.

¹⁰ Ibid, Book 13, 566e.

tasks must be given to the women than the men because of the weakness of the class. And the man who laughs at **naked women practicing gymnastic** for the sake of the best 'plucks from his wisdom an unripe fruit for ridicule' and doesn't know – as it seems – at what he laughs or what he does."¹¹

Herodotus on nudity at Corinth

The tolerance of Greek rulers of the occasional public exposure of the naked bodies of women is typified in what the Greek historian Herodotus records below in relation to what Periander, the ruler of Greek city of Corinth did: "Once, on a single day, he stripped every woman in the town naked, on account of his wife Melissa... Periander...issued a proclamation to the effect that every woman in Corinth should come to the temple of Hera. The women obeyed, crowding to the temple in their best clothes as if to a festival, and Periander – who had hidden some of his guards for the purpose, **had them all stripped** – every one of them, freeborn women and servants alike – and their clothes collected into a pit and burnt, while he prayed to the spirit of his wife Melissa."¹²

Evidence in ancient Greek pottery

In her writing "Women in Ancient Greece", Sue Blundell records that on one pot from the late 500's B.C. there is "a scene in which young women are bathing naked in the open air, apparently in a creek. Some are swimming, some diving, some anointing themselves with oil, some combing their hair, and two stand under makeshift showers...there is nothing in the representation to indicate that they are either Amazons, nymphs or prostitutes, as some have suggested."¹³

Sue Blundell also records that fragments of pottery from the sanctuary of the female Greek goddess Artemis at Brauron shows Greek girls running nude in races.¹⁴

Aristophanes on nudity at an Athenian State religious festival

In his play "Lysistrata", the ancient Greek dramatist Aristophanes (445-384 B.C.) wrote of girls in ancient Athens stripping nude in public as a part of a state religious festival: "**Strip**, my sisters, **strip** for action, **on the ground your garments throw**. Right it is that I my slender tribute to the state should render..."¹⁵

The Greek naked boy dance

Athenaeus also wrote that the Greeks had a dance in which boys danced naked. He called it the "naked-boy dance"¹⁶ He states: "**The naked-boy-dance** is like what is called the *anapale* among the ancients. For all the boys who dance it **are naked**, performing certain rhythmical movements and describing certain positions with the arms gently, so as to represent certain scenes in the wrestling-

¹¹ Plato, "Republic", Book 5, 457 a-b.

¹² Herodotus, "The Histories", Book 5, 92.

¹³ Sue Blundell, "Women in Ancient Greece", British Museum Press, 1995, page 133.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Aristophanes, "The Lysistrata", 638-639.

¹⁶ Athenaeus, "Deipnosophistae", Book 14, 630 d-e

school during a wrestling-and-boxing match, but moving the feet in time to the music. Variations of it are the Oschophoric and the Bacchic, so that this dance also is traceable to the worship of Dionysus. Aristoxenus says that the ancients, practicing first the naked-boy-dance, proceeded into the pyrriche before entering the theatre.”¹⁷

Strabo on nudity at a Greek festival

The ancient Greek writer Strabo (63 B.C. – 20 A.D.) recorded the following example of public nudity at Acharaca in Greece: “A festival is celebrated every year at Acharaca; and at that time in particular those who celebrate the festival can see and hear concerning all these things; and at the festival, too, about noon, the boys and young men of the gymnasium, **nude** and anointed with oil...”¹⁸

Athenaeus gave other Greek examples

Athenaeus records another example of ancient Greeks having a wicked attitude to nakedness. He stated that in a war against Asiatics, the Greek leader “gave orders that those who were captured should be taken to the auctioneer **stripped of their clothes...**”¹⁹

Athenaeus also wrote of the below activities of Dionysius the Younger, the tyrant of Sicily: “In the same strain Clearchus, in the fourth book of his Lives, writes as follows: “Dionysius, the son of Dionysius, proved to be the evil genius of all Sicily; once he went over to the city of the Locrians, which was the town of his own origin (for Doris, his mother, was a Locrian by birth), and strewing the largest hall in the city with tufted thyme and roses, he summoned one after the other the young girls of the Locrians; then **naked among the naked girls he omitted no indecency** as he rolled with them upon the pavement. Not long afterward, therefore, the outraged fathers got his wife and children into their own power, and standing them up in the street they indulged their lust upon them with brutal violence.”²⁰

Athenaeus also wrote of Anaxarchus who had a wicked attitude to having young girls expose their nakedness: “Concerning Anaxarchus, Clearchus of Soli, in the fifth book of his Lives, writes as follows: ‘After great wealth had fallen to the lot of Anaxarchus (who was called the philosopher of eudaemonism) through the folly of those who rendered him benefits, his wine was poured out for him by a **naked young girl** who had been selected because she surpassed in beauty all others, although, to tell the truth, she laid bare not so much her own nakedness as the lustfulness of those who treated her in this way.’”²¹

Eudaemonism is the system of ethics and morals based on the idea that something is right if it produces **happiness** and wrong if it fails to produce happiness. Anaxarchus’ happiness was based on lusting with his eyes on a naked girl who was not his wife.

Athenaeus records the people of Tarentum – the largest Greek colony in southern Italy – did as follows to the Iapygians in Calabria: “But later, blindly led by luxury into outrage, they uprooted Carbina, a city of the Iapygians, made the boys, girls and women in their prime gather in the temples of Carbina, and there got up a **spectacle exposing their bodies naked for all to gaze at** by day;

¹⁷ Ibid, Book 14, 631 b-c.

¹⁸ Strabo, “Geography”, 14:1, 44.

¹⁹ Athenaeus, “Deipnosophistae”, Book 12, 550 e.

²⁰ Ibid, 541c-d.

²¹ Ibid, 548 b-c.

and anyone who wished, leaping like wolves upon a herd into this wretched group, could feast his lust on the beauty of the victims there gathered.”²²

Ferrand on Zeuxis, a Greek painter

In his chapter “Prevention of Love” in his book ‘A Treatise on Lovesickness’, Dr Jacques Ferrand wrote about Zeuxis, a Greek painter from Heraclea in southern Italy in the late fifth century B.C. Zeuxis was asked by the city of Croton to paint a picture of Helen for the temple of the pagan goddess Hera which was on the Lacinian promontory of Magna Graecia, which was the Greek colonies in southern Italy.²³ Ferrand records: “*The painter Zeuxis was cognizant of this difficulty, for when he was asked by the city of Croton to create a representation of the beauty of Helen, he made as his prerequisite an examination in the nude of the most beautiful girls of the region so that he could take from each of them the traits he judged the most beautiful.*”²⁴

Many Greeks worshipped statues of male penises

It is little wonder the ancient Greeks developed such perverted attitudes to the public exposure of human nakedness. This is because the Greeks imitated the Egyptian worship of the pagan god Dionysus. Dionysus’ worship included venerating male genitals and phalluses – statues of male penises. The Greek historian Herodotus stated: “*In other ways the Egyptian method of celebrating the festival of Dionysus is much the same as the Greek, except that the Egyptians have no choric dance. Instead of the phallus they have puppets, about eighteen inches high : the genitals of these figures are made almost as big as the rest of their bodies, and they are pulled up and down by strings as the women carry them round the villages. Flutes lead the procession, and the women as they follow sing a hymn to Dionysus. There is a religious legend to account for the size of the genitals and the fact that they are the only part of the puppet’s body which is made to move.*

Now I have an idea that Melampus the son of Amythaon knew all about this ceremony; for it was he who introduced the name of Dionysus into Greece, together with the sacrifice in his honour and the phallic procession. He did not, however, fully comprehend the doctrine, or communicate it in its entirety; its more perfect development was the work of later teachers. Nevertheless it was Melampus who introduced the phallic procession, and from Melampus the Greeks learned the rites which they now perform. Melampus, in my view, was an able man who acquired the art of divination and brought into Greece, with little change, a number of things which he had learned in Egypt, and amongst them the worship of Dionysus.”²⁵

Final Point

It is tragic but too many Christians in the 1700’s and 1900’s had and at present have a fully or partly pagan Greek attitude to them observing the nudity of sexually mature members of the opposite sex to whom they are not married. The Biblical teachings on modesty and nudity oppose the pagan Greek teachings.

²² Ibid, 522 d-e.

²³ Jacques Ferrand, “A Treatise on Lovesickness”, Syracuse University Press, New York, 1990, page 530, footnote 15.

²⁴ Ibid, page 315.

²⁵ Herodotus, “The Histories”, Book 2, 48-49.