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Sex and Gender in Greece and Rome

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An As For Some Ass?

Brothels existed in ancient Rome, allowing men to buy sexual favors legally. Prostitutes were believed to cost between two and ten asses, making the average brothel fairly inexpensive and able to cater to a wide range of social classes of men. Sex was bought and sold in these brothels as a product, but it is unknown exactly how the monetary interactions took place. Most likely, pimps and brothel-owners would have wanted to avoid money passing through the hands of the prostitutes. One possibility to avoid this was the use of brothel tokens, or *spintriae*. These tokens would have been purchased from the brothel-owner or pimp and then given to a prostitute to redeem for the sexual act. One side of the token depicted an erotic scene, and the other featured a numeral. Geoffrey Fishburn acknowledges that many scholars believe *spintriae* to have been used for the purchase of sexual favors because the numerals on the reverse align with the average prices of a prostitute.¹ As brothel tokens with the numerals on the reverse directly correlating to the cost of the sexual favor depicted on the obverse, *spintriae* are capable of being studied to determine which sexual deeds Roman society placed a greater monetary value. I believe in ancient Rome, the cost of a sexual favor directly related to its social acceptability, with sexually deviant acts being more expensive. Roman society classified sexual acts that disrupted

¹ Geoffrey Fishburn, "Is that a *Spintria* in your Pocket, or Are You Just Pleased to See Me?," *Regarding the Past: Proceedings of the 20th Conference of the History of Economic Thought Society of Australia* (July 2007): 226.

the power structure of masculinity or conflicted with Roman views of cleanliness as sexually deviant.

Prostitution and brothels were legal in ancient Rome.² Prostitution was viewed as a legitimate business enterprise; however, Roman society distinguished between the person and the action. Ulpian writes, “she does behave disgracefully, since she is a prostitute, while she does not accept money disgracefully, being a prostitute.”³ Prostitution as a career was a legal business option with the investors often belonging to the wealthy upper class⁴. However, those who worked as prostitutes or pimps were relegated to the lower classes. Roman law placed restrictions on those who worked in the sex industry, excluding them from public office and limiting their rights as full Roman citizens.⁵ These limitations affecting politics, social life, marriage, and taxation were used to keep prostitutes and pimps out of the elite class and to ensure the upper classes did not lower themselves to objectionable standards.⁶ While those who sold sex as a commodity were looked down on in Roman society, patrons who visited brothels were not.

Brothels were visited by all ranks of society. An average prostitute cost between two and ten asses.⁷ Since the typical pay of the average worker was twelve to sixteen asses, and a soldier

² Romans distinguished between locations solely used for sex and brothels, which often included other attractions, such as food, alcohol, or lodging.

Thomas A. J. McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World: A Study of Social History and the Brothel* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2004), 16.

³ Ulpian. *Ad Edictum*. D.12.5.4.3 (Thomas A.J. McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 324.).

⁴ While the elite often invested in or owned the properties used for brothels, they would often rent to a middle man so as to distance themselves from interactions with the lower class members of society who acted as pimps.

McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution*, 30-4.

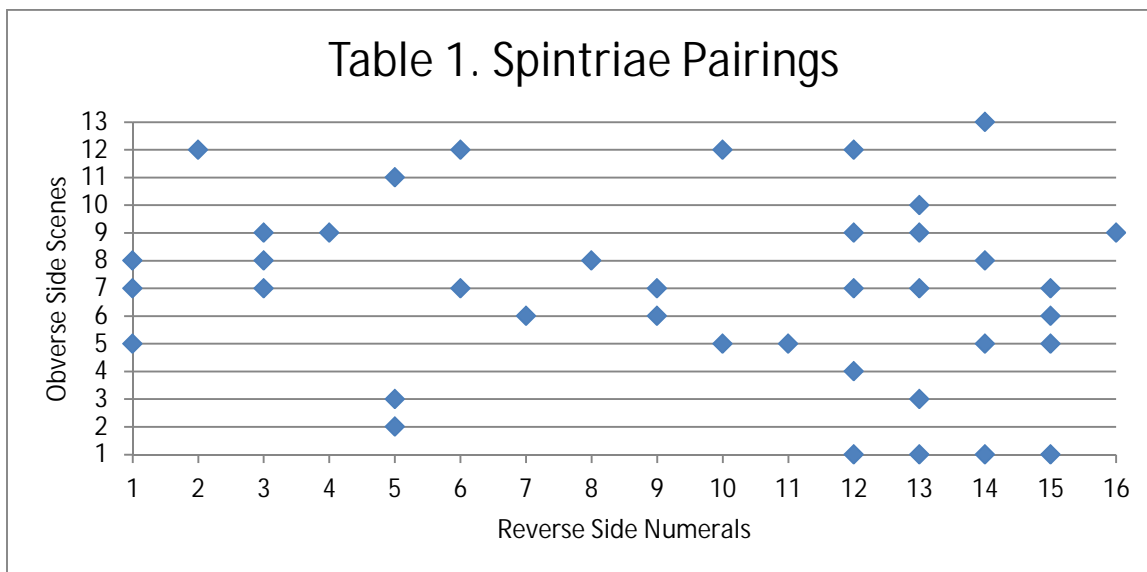
⁵ McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law*, 21, 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷ McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution*, 42.

earned sixteen asses a day, prostitutes would have been easily affordable and capable of catering to a wide range of men.⁸ Of course there would have been significantly more expensive prostitutes; however, while these women might have been managed by pimps, they would not have worked in a brothel location, since their purpose was to appear elite and above the system of prostitution. The *spintriae* would not have been used by these prostitutes, since their rates were most likely negotiated. The typical prostitute who worked in a brothel, cost between two and ten asses, and was viewed as lower class is the type who would have utilized *spintriae*.

Spintriae were circular bronze or brass tokens. One side of the token depicted an erotic scene of a couple engaging in a sexual act of copulation or fellatio. The reverse featured a roman numeral between I and XVI. Currently, there are thirteen recorded sexual scenes on the obverse sides. Partnered with a variety of numerals on the reverse, there exists a total of thirty-nine pairings, which are illustrated in Table 1.⁹ There is no hard evidence identifying the purpose of these tokens; however, many scholars have speculated on their use in Roman society.



⁸ Fishburn, “*Spintria* in your Pocket,” 226.

⁹ T.V. Buttrey, “Roman *Spintriae* as a Historical Source,” *Numismatic Chronicle* 13 (1973): 52.

There are many varied theories on the function of *spintriae*. One possible option is that they were used as tokens in games.¹⁰ If the tokens were used for this purpose, the numerals might have been a factor in positions, movements, or scores. The obverse scene, while erotic, would have been for amusement not arousal. Another theory is that the *spintriae* were admission tokens to the theater. This argument is based on the idea that the numerals might have represented seating arrangements. The scenes would have been solely for decoration, with only the numeral being of importance. However, there is no evidence that seating was numerically arranged.¹¹ A theory that connects *spintriae* to brothels, but is still reluctant to acknowledge them as payment tokens, is the possibility that they were used for advertising. Since *spintriae* were only manufactured for a short period of time, they may have been a brief attempt at increasing sales.¹² The erotic scenes would have captured customers' attention, enticing them to engage a prostitute. The issue with this approach, however, is that the artwork on the *spintriae* is too simple. No where do they include names to indicate a location, specific prostitute, pimp, or brothel. While they could have promoted the sex industry overall, they would not have benefitted any particular establishment. Lastly, *spintriae* are believed to be brothel tokens. A customer would have approached the pimp or owner of the brothel to arrange a transaction. He would then pay for a specific sexual act and receive in return a *spintriae* depicting this. The customer could then give the *spintriae* to the prostitute of his choice to redeem for the sexual act. It is believed there was a direct correlation between the numeral on the reverse and the cost of the sexual act on the obverse. The use of *spintriae* as brothel tokens is the most plausible theory for their purpose.

¹⁰ Fishburn, "*Spintria* in your Pocket," 232.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 232-3.

¹² Fishburn, "*Spintria* in your Pocket," 235.

The most likely function of *spintriae* was for use as brothel coins to restrict prostitutes from embezzling. Brothel-owners and pimps strictly controlled both their free and slave prostitutes, who were often forced to live and eat at the brothel and were very rarely allowed to leave.¹³ Prostitutes were heavily watched not only because they acted as the main source of income, but also because there was immense profitability in selling sex.¹⁴ Since a lot of money was exchanging hands, it would have been easy for prostitutes to keep small amounts for themselves unbeknownst to the brothel-owner. Prostitutes could have done this by reporting to the brothel-owner inaccurate amounts charged to the customers and by boosting prices. *Spintriae* therefore, allowed brothel-owners to prevent real currency from passing into the hands of prostitutes. The set numeral on the tokens indicating price would have meant there were pre-determined rates, which would have allowed brothel-owners to track pricing and expected revenue. Severely limiting a prostitute's access to money would have heavily benefitted brothel-owners and pimps, by greatly cutting down on, if not eliminating all together, the potential for embezzlement.

Without *spintriae*, the options brothels could utilize for preventing theft by its workers were marginal. For the money to go straight to the pimp without a prostitute as a middleman handling the coins, the only foreseeable choice would be to have the prostitute close at hand during the purchase. She would then most likely leave immediately with the customer to one of the chambers to provide the sexual favors recently purchased. These restrictions would have placed high demands on brothel-owners' time by forcing them to be at every sale as it took place.

¹³ McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution*, 37.

¹⁴ In 40 AD, Emperor Caligula imposed a series of taxes intended to increase state revenue. The tax on prostitution implies there was a significantly large amount of money in the sex. McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law*, 19.

In circumstances in which a brothel-owner operated multiple locations, this possibility for preventing embezzlement would also have forced them to travel, taking up even more time.

Spintriae allowed for freedom of use and created a less restricted brothel in which men could feel more at ease and relaxed and less like they were participating in a structured business transaction. Instead, the coins meant the customers could take their time picking out an ideal prostitute while having some food or drink. *Spintriae* would have freed up brothel-owners time by making the interactions quick and simple with little discussion, allowing more time for pimps to focus on schmoozing potential new customers. *Spintriae* were a simple, effective, and time-saving way for brothels to reduce the chance of embezzlement and increase profits. Increasing earning potential would have been important to brothel-owners since a lot of money could be made in the sex industry if the business was run effectively.

Other arguments are also made for the use of *spintriae* as brothel coins. Some scholars believe *spintriae* were created as a result of a law passed under Emperor Tiberius stating, "...[no one] to carry into latrines of brothels a coin with the head [of the Emperor] stamped on it or cut in the stone of a ring...".¹⁵ It is plausible that this law was enforced, especially in the end of Tiberius's reign when political tensions were running high and scandals were circulating about the Emperor's sexual deviance. There are also a few scattered cases of men being convicted for violating this law. In 217 AD, a citizen of equestrian rank was sentenced to death for bringing a coin bearing the Emperor Caracalla's image into a brothel.¹⁶ However, this law was most likely

¹⁵ Suet. *Tib.* 58

One of only two primary sources mentions *spintriae*. It is important to keep in mind that this passage discussing a law relating to *spintriae* is not referenced in any existing legal documents, but, rather, is found in Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars, Tiberius*.

¹⁶ McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution*, 86.

not strictly enforced, since it would have severely decreased the profits of the sex industry, which is believed to have been a vital part of the Roman economy.

While overall brothels would have continued to accept Roman coins and customers would have felt comfortable breaking the law against bringing these coins into brothels, it seems plausible that there were Roman citizens who felt an extreme loyalty to the emperor and took the ruling seriously. *Spintriae* might have been utilized in those cases to appeal to customers who wanted to abide by this law. The brothel tokens would have enabled these men to pay for a sexual act in an alternate location and then take the *spintriae* to the brothel to redeem for a sexual favor, never themselves bringing Roman coins with the emperor's image into a brothel and, therefore, still respecting the law. The Roman edict against bringing coins stamped with the Emperor's head into brothels would not have forced a complete transition over to *spintriae*, but would have encouraged the use of *spintriae* to appeal to a select market of Roman citizens.

There are some scholars who argue against the use of *spintriae* as brothel tokens. One of the most common arguments in opposition to *spintriae* being used as a form of representative payment, with the reverse numeral denoting the cost in asses of the sexual scene on the obverse, is that the images are not delegated to only one numeral.¹⁷ While five of the sex scenes are paired exclusively with one Roman numeral, there are thirty-nine known combinations in total, with some scenes having upwards of five numeric denotations.¹⁸ The pairings of sex scenes with multiple numerals could indicate a range in prices. Instances where the numerals are all close together, such as scene 1 from Table 1, may have resulted from various brothels competing for business by offering a better price. The variations may also have been due to the reputation of

¹⁷ Fishburn, "*Spintria* in your Pocket," 226.

¹⁸ Buttrey, "*The Spintriae* as a Historical Source," 60.

the brothel, or prostitute, with those higher in demand, or known for offering better services, being able to charge more than another location. Another case that can be made against *spintriae* being used as brothel coins is that negotiating prices seemed to be a fairly usual practice in Roman prostitution.¹⁹ Fixed rate coins, such as *spintriae*, would severely limit, if not remove all together, the ability for customers to haggle over prices. However, this would have greatly benefitted brothel-owners and pimps because they could establish a desired price, which patrons would not be able to alter. Fixed rate coins allowed brothels to effectively increase their revenue, making brothel-owners in favor of *spintriae*.

A final argument in favor of *spintriae* is that there are many examples from other time periods and places of tokens being used as brothel coins.²⁰ While this is not direct evidence relating to the Roman *spintriae*, the existence and use of brothel coins throughout history proves that the concept is not a unique one. It is entirely plausible that some Roman brothels experimented with the *spintriae* system of payment. It is also possible, that rather than an experiment, *spintriae* were used on an as needed basis, only being distributed periodically.²¹ One possible instance when they might have been needed is during times when the ban issued by Emperor Tiberius was enforced.

Even though the *spintriae* were short-lived, the correlation between price and sexual act on the *spintriae* can still be examined to evaluate Roman concepts of sexual deviancy. Sexual acts that were viewed as socially unacceptable to Roman society were more expensive for customers to purchase from brothels. The rates increased as the sexual favors became more

¹⁹ McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution*, 41.

²⁰ Bartholomew Lee, "'Brass Checks' Return: An Excursus in Erotic Numismatics, or The Spintriae Roll Again," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 17, no. 2 (Fall 1983): 142-5.

²¹ B. Simonetta and R. Riva, *Le Tessere Erotiche Romane (spintriae)*. *Quando ed a che scopo sono state coniate* (Lugano: Gaggini-Bizzozero Sa., 1981), 35 (trans. Fishburn "Spintria in your Pocket," 234).

deviant. Five specific *spintriae* can be studied to observe this trend. Two brothel tokens depict different scenes of homosexual intercourse costing five and six asses. These coins were chosen to go into detail on because they demonstrate that Roman society did not place homosexuality high on the list of deviant acts. Next, a *spintriae* portraying male-to-male oral sex worth seven asses will be examined to discuss Roman society's view on the uncleanness of genitalia. After that, a brothel token valued at three asses showing male-to-female anal sex will be studied to show an example of non-deviant sexual acts that heavily supported the male power structure.²² Lastly, a *spintriae* illustrating one of the most socially unacceptable sexual acts to Roman society, male-female intercourse with the prostitute on top. This final coin is therefore the most expensive of the five, costing thirteen asses. These five *spintriae* successfully represent the sexual values of Roman society.

There are two *spintriae* which could be purchased for homosexual intercourse with a male prostitute. The first, valued at five asses, depicts two males engaged in missionary anal sex (Figure 1). Both appear physically fit with typical male body types. The second coin, priced at six asses, shows a male couple having anal intercourse with the receiving partner crouched on all fours and the dominant partner entering from behind (Figure 2). The receiving partner appears very young and effeminate with no visible genitalia; he could easily be mistaken for a woman due to the large hips and, what resemble, small breasts included by the artist. The face and hair are largely the only indication that he is a male.

²² While, it is more difficult with this coin to be certain the couple is engaging in anal sex, as compared to the two homoerotic coins depicting intercourse, an enlargement of the image of the coin shows the position of the phallus to strongly support the argument for anal sex.



Figure 1



Figure 2

These two homosexual acts fall in the middle of the rates for prostitution. Homoerotic relationships, as well as intercourse, were not predominantly seen as socially unacceptable in Roman society. However, homosexuality did fall outside of the perceived norm because one of the partners assumed a passive role, lessening his power, which was directly connected to masculinity in Roman society. Due to this, engaging in homosexual acts with a male prostitute

would have been more expensive than anal intercourse with a female, which cost only three asses. The second homosexual *spintriae*, in which the passive partner is exceptionally effeminate, costs more than the first *spintriae*, in which the two lovers appear almost as equals, because the power structure is more heavily disrupted in the second scene. The fact that the passive partner embraces his lack of masculinity makes the homosexual act more deviant than the homosexual intercourse occurring in the first *spintriae*, causing the price to rise. While, homosexuality could be viewed as deviant in certain cases, such as the depiction in the second *spintriae*, social acceptability was based on the level of passivity of each male in the relationship.

The *spintriae* of male-to-male oral sex, worth seven asses, portrays two nude males on a couch (Figure 3). The male prostitute is in the process of performing fellatio on the enlarged genitalia, a symbol of male dominance, of his customer. Similar to the first homosexual *spintriae*, both males in the scene look physically fit. The cost to receive oral sex was higher than many other sexual favors brothels offered because it was seen as unclean. Oral sex was considered disgusting because Roman society believed genitalia to be unclean. When a person performed fellatio, his mouth was corrupted and made unsanitary.²³ The view of genitalia as unclean most likely arises from a fear of the genitalia itself. Roman society was very sexually repressed, unhealthily directing their focus on power. Michel Foucault argues that the focus on the importance of power is what caused Romans to seek sexual repression, in order to protect their reputation and therefore, their political office.²⁴ Rather than seeing sex for its physical or emotional aspects, Roman society concentrated on the power dynamics. Oral sex was seen as deviant because Roman society feared genitalia and therefore classified it as unclean.

²³ Marilyn B. Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 18.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Care of the Self* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 81-95.



Figure 3

The brothel token used for male-to-female anal sex depicts a nude couple reclining on a couch (Figure 4). The male figure crouches over the female, who has turned her upper torso to face him, while the rest of her body lays flat. According to the *spintriae*, brothels charged three asses for anal sex. Anal sex was inexpensive because it did not fall into the category of deviant acts. When the power dynamics were unequal, the sexual acts would cost more, but only when the inequality did not favor the customer. It supported the male dominance based power structure of Roman society even more than vaginal sex did. Vaginal sex reinforced basic power structures of males being the dominant beings and females being passive. Anal sex took this even further, by pushing the female into a much more passive position than vaginal sex did. A male's power rose as the female sunk further into passivity. In Roman society, power directly related to masculinity. Anal sex would have been glorified because the male partner not only reaffirms, but strengthens his masculinity by dominating the passive female. Anal sex, therefore, cost very little at brothels because it was socially acceptable.



Figure 4

The last *spintriae* that should be studied in order to gain a better assessment of Roman society's values on sex is the coin depicting a couple engaged in sexual intercourse with the female on top (Figure 5). Like the other *spintriae*, the nude couple appears in a bedchamber in mid-coitus. The male customer, appearing to be of average build, lies on the bed. The prostitute, who is portrayed as being slightly heavier set, sits astride him. To buy this specific sexual role, in which the female was the dominant partner, from a prostitute cost thirteen asses. Sex with the woman on top was considered to be exceedingly sexual deviant because it disrupted the male dominance based power structure of Roman society. This position allowed the receptive partner, the female, to act as the superior by controlling the intercourse.



Figure 5

Roman society had three major issues with this position. First, the male willingly accepted the role of the passive participant, surrendering his masculinity by giving up his power. Next, the female who is intended to have little to no power, especially in regards to sexual acts, becomes the dominant partner. Roman society would have viewed the concept of a powerful, and, therefore, masculine female as highly inappropriate and would have scorned her for acting in such a way. Lastly, Roman society would have taken issue with how difficult it was to truly define the roles of power in that position. While the woman is on top in the traditionally dominant position, she is still the receptive partner, the traditionally passive position. Roman society reacted harshly to the sex position where the woman was on top, ensuring that it was labeled clearly as socially unacceptable and that those who engaged in it were considered sexual deviants.

Roman society felt threatened by sexual acts which questioned the male dominance based power system used not only for sexual relationships, but also used to guide the Roman social hierarchy. As a result, Roman society reacted harshly to these sexual acts by labeling them as socially unacceptable, in order to protect its system of social classes. While homosexuality was something that was tolerated, unless the males were inclined to effeminacy, it was not something that was promoted and therefore walked a fine line between being socially acceptable and being deviant behavior. Oral sex was seen as deviant behavior because it was too sexually free for the repressed Romans who saw genitalia as unclean. Romans did not see anal sex as deviant because it reinforced societal ideals of masculinity being connected to power. Sexual positions with the woman on top undermined the power structure used by Roman society. Consequently, these sexual positions were then branded as deviant. Roman society was run by males who intended to continue to run Roman society. They used the ability to classify people as deviants, and, therefore, social outcasts, as a way to hold onto their own power.

Roman *spintriae* were brothel tokens created to lessen the possibility of embezzlement by prostitutes. However, in today's world they allow historians to study the relationship between sexual acts and their monetary value in ancient Rome. Through this, it is known that sexually deviant practices were more expensive in brothels because Roman society wanted to decrease participation in actions that undermined the male dominated social structure of Rome, in which men accumulated masculinity by establishing their power. Brothels took advantage of the shame society would place on citizens who engaged in sexually deviant acts, by boosting prices in relation to the level of social unacceptability, since they knew customers would keep paying rather than complain.

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