

Chapter 2: Mesopotamia: 2-2g Women's Rights, Sex, and Marriage
Book Title: World Civilizations
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2-2g Women's Rights, Sex, and Marriage

Historians generally agree on some categorical statements about the women of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. In the earliest stage of civilization, women shared more or less equally with men in social prestige and power. This egalitarianism was undermined and overturned by the coming of militarized society (armies), the heavy plow in agriculture, and the establishment of large-scale trade over long distances. The trend toward [patriarchy](#) ((PAY-tree-ahr-kee) A society in which males have social and political dominance.) (PAY-tree-ahr-kee)—a society in which males have social and political dominance—proceeded at varying speeds in different societies but was impossible to reverse once it started.

Because children and the continuity of the family were the real reasons for marriage, the marital bed was an honorable and even sacred place, and what took place there was in no way shameful. But males and females had desires that went beyond the creation of children, and these were also nothing to be ashamed of, for they were implanted in humans by the all-wise gods. Everywhere in the Near East—apparently starting with the Sumerians and continuing long after—the rites of the Sacred Marriage between a god and his high priestess, celebrating the fertility of the earth and of all creatures on it, were central to religious practice. The result was a fundamentally different attitude toward sex than we commonly find in civilized society today. Whether sexual pleasure outside marriage was permissible, however, depended on the status of the individuals concerned.

Adultery was always considered the worst of all possible offenses between a husband and wife because it cast doubt on their children's parentage and thus undermined the family's continuity. Punishment for wifely adultery could be death, not only for her but also for her lover if he was caught. Note that in Hammurabi's law code, adultery as a legal concept was limited to the wife's acts. A husband's sexual activity with slave girls or freeborn concubines, as he saw fit, was taken for granted.

Marriage was always arranged by the two families; something so important could never be left to chance attraction. A great many of the clay tablets dug up in Mesopotamian ruins deal with marriage contracts. Some of them were made when the bride and groom were still babies. Such early arrangements were especially common for girls, who normally were considerably younger at marriage than their husbands.

Marriage usually involved the exchange of bride money and a dowry. Bride money was a payment by the groom's family to the bride's family as specified in the marriage contract. The dowry was also specified in the contract and was paid by the bride's family to the groom when the couple began to live together. The dowry remained in the husband's control as long as the marriage lasted. When the wife died, the dowry was distributed among her children, if she had any.

Most ancient cultures insisted that brides should be virgins. This was one of the reasons for early marriages of women. Although many literary works and folktales describe the social condemnation that awaited a woman who lost her virginity before marriage, it is still quite clear that lovemaking between young unmarried persons was by no means unheard of and did not always result in shame. Loss of virginity was regarded as damage to the family's property rather than a moral offense. As such, it could be made good by the payment of a fine. Punishment for seducing a virgin was less severe than for adultery or rape. Some authorities believe that civilizations in all areas were, in their early stages, more tolerant of marriage of women who were not virgins than were later ones. If premarital relations were followed by marriage, little fuss was made.

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