

BEFORE THE BINARY: SEX, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY IN PREHISTORY

GNDR_ST 321



This course takes a queer and feminist approach to the study of identity and bodies in the ancient past. Together, we will investigate the ways in which issues of sex, gender, and sexuality are represented by academic research and for popular audiences. Queer and feminist activism since the latter half of the 20th century has shown how rigid binary identity systems (male/female; man/woman; straight/gay; cis/trans) constrain and erase variability in the ways people live their lives and relate to themselves/others as gendered and sexed beings. In this course, we will explore what genders, sexes, and sexualities were made possible before this binary system, and consider the specific cultural and historical contexts in which they developed. Some of the questions we will ask include: How did sex and gender categories define the specific roles of groups in prehistoric cultures? Were these categories determined by biology or culture? Are there cases where people crossed or defied these roles? What did sex and sexuality mean to people in the ancient past? To what extent did issues of sex, gender, and sexuality shape the ways in which these people understood themselves and others? To answer these questions, we will look at case studies from all over the globe, during some of the earliest moments in human history, across multiple different ancient civilizations, and through the colonial period. We will bring the course to a close by turning to recent debates about issues of identity and the past (e.g. the development of Goddess Feminism; queer appropriations of Two Spirit and third/fourth gender identities). In so doing, we will question and engage with the possibilities and problems that arise when identity categories defined by specific cultural and temporal contexts are utilized or appropriated to interpret bodies and identities that are shaped by another.

Zachary Nissen

Fisk Hall 114
TTh 3:30-4:50pm