

## Flawed conceptions

Yvonne Marshall

**The Prehistory of Sex: Four Million Years of Human Sexual Culture.** By Timothy Taylor. *Bantam/Fourth Estate: 1996.* Pp. 353. \$23.95, £18.99.

IN this wide-ranging survey of sexual behaviour in human history, Timothy Taylor argues, in opposition to sociobiologists, that human sexuality must be understood as primarily cultural rather than biological. To him, the diversity of sexual practices in prehistory indicates that human sexuality is as much a social activity as a reproductive necessity. Combine this with an attempt to account for the origins of patriarchy, and one might reasonably expect a good read. But all is disappointment.

Just because a book is written for a general audience does not mean it is excused from meeting the requirements of good scholarship. As the successes of Stephen Jay Gould's many books demonstrate, good scholarship sells widely. Although we cannot all aspire to such pinnacles of achievement, adequate referencing of source material, especially when it is contentious or poorly known, and the development of a coherent, theoretically informed argument, constitute a good start. But Taylor neglects these basic requirements, offering instead a series of anecdotal comments that lack authority and fail to develop ideas in any meaningful way.

This is evident from page four where, sandwiched between titillating speculations about whether Ötzi, the Iceman, still has semen preserved in his body and, if so, whether it resides in his scrotum or rectum, we are informed that early hominid females had large clitorises while males "had vanishingly small penises". Thankfully this alarming situation was sorted out in the course of human evolution and the "clitoris reduced in size, while the penis grew dramatically larger". Such a riveting, if dubious, assertion promises a rollicking good story. But, typically, Taylor has little more to tell us and his tossed salad of anecdotes eventually becomes boring.

In pursuit of his objective "to challenge the sociobiologists", Taylor provides summaries of theories he intends to take issue with and quotes extensively from authors he wishes to criticize. But, ironically, without a well developed argument of his own, this has the effect of promoting sociobiological ideas to the reader: his thumbnail sketches of other people's theories seem comparatively convincing placed alongside his own.

Similarly, his attempts to promote feminist perspectives have the opposite effect

because he clearly does not understand the literature on sex, gender and sexuality and cannot even use these concepts consistently, never mind make an original contribution. What's more, relevant work by feminists is ignored or commented on only briefly. One example is the work of Adrienne Zihlman and Nancy Tanner, who suggested in 1976 that the first artefact was probably a bag invented by women for carrying plants and babies. Yet Taylor seems to claim this idea for himself: "I believe that the invention of the baby-sling was the single most crucial step in the evolutionary development toward larger brains." Just one more immaculate conception. In the same way, Marie Louise Sörenson, an archaeologist well known for her work on prehistoric clothing, is never mentioned despite Taylor's frequent use of the idea that clothing transformed sexual relations. Such omissions are numerous.

Epitomizing Taylor's failings is the bizarre interpretation he offers for the image portrayed on a silver-gilt horse harness and reproduced as the cover illustration. In this image, a seated man is shown copulating with a woman astride his lap. Another woman holds in one hand a vessel and in the other a plant that hovers over or between the couple's heads. This scene is usually described as a sacred marriage, and I agree with Taylor that this interpretation takes a fair degree of licence. But his own assertion that "it seems clear that the man is being seduced, even raped", made on the basis that the man must be drugged and



### Sacred marriage or strange seduction?

the plant obscures his view of the woman, is simply ridiculous.

The challenge to sociobiology presented by the archaeological evidence of past human sexuality informed by feminist theory is not only real, but also has the potential to transform our understanding of what sex, gender and sexuality mean in human terms. To find it reduced to a series of facile, unfounded assertions is enraging. One can only hope that a more intelligent treatment will appear quickly. □

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## Unravelling biological complexity

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**Human Molecular Genetics.** By Tom Strachan and Andrew P. Read. *BIOS/Wiley: 1996.* Pp. 597. £29.95, \$44.95 (pbk).

SPRINGING from classical genetics, human genetics and molecular biology, the nascent field of human molecular genetics was born out of a series of powerful innovations referred to as the recombinant DNA technology. Ever since, the field has been to a large extent driven by new and ever more powerful technological innovations, such as the polymerase chain reaction and the newly developing areas of whole-genome cloning and sequencing, with their dependence on robotics and informatics.

As a field that is both advancing and evolving rapidly, human molecular genetics does not have many, if indeed any, definitive textbooks. This deficiency arises not only from the rate of technological change but also from the sheer volume of new information in this field, which underlines the biological complexity comprehended with the new tools. Textbook authors have

chosen their audiences carefully, and taken their chances by writing about particular aspects.

The theme of this textbook is the structure and function of the human genome, and the authors use the technological developments of the past 15 years as the basis for discussion of this theme. Particularly well done is the interplay between the formal genetic analysis of human disease and the use of modern mapping methodologies, both genetic and physical, to attack what were once considered unsurpassable obstacles. The handling of mechanisms and consequences of mutations, of the organization of sequences of the human genome, and of the evolutionary processes that have shaped it, are unique aspects of the authors' approach, setting the textbook apart from others in the area. The emphasis is more on the genome itself than on medical conditions arising from its disturbance.

A technological approach such as this has its dangers. When the complete sequence of the human genome has been