

Today's fear and loathing of fat bodies rooted in ancient Western civilization

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Our modern love-hate relationship with fat dates to antiquity, says a University of Kansas researcher who writes about the cultural history of fat in Western civilization.

Christopher E. Forth, the Howard Chair of [Humanities](#) and [Western Civilization](#) and history professor at KU, traces some current perceptions of [fat](#) to those of ancient [Greeks](#), Romans and Hebrews, among others, and explores how these have evolved.

“That’s not to say ancient cultures were anywhere near as obsessed with fatness as we are today,” Forth says, who is writing a new book to be titled “Flab: A Cultural History of Fat.”

“We actually love fat. We love the taste of it in our mouths and prefer some degree of fat on the body,” Forth says. Yet at the same time Western societies sometimes fear and loathe body fat to the point of stereotyping and discriminating against fat people. The stereotype includes viewing fat men and women as soft, lacking self-control, lazy, often sweaty, smelly or dirty.

“It’s a common misperception that, if we fear fat today, there must have been a time when fatness was accepted and even celebrated without qualification. Some claim this time was before the 1920s, others point to the 19th century, and still others go back to the Middle Ages,” Forth says.

“The fact is there never really was a time when Western societies viewed fat is entirely good or entirely bad. It has always been viewed with ambivalence.”

“As a substance fat is itself ambiguous: it melts into oil, penetrates the body and makes us overindulge, but it also performs all manner of useful functions that we cannot live without,” he says. “What has changed over time is the intensity with which different societies have viewed fat inside the body.”

Forth adds: “Our obsession with very thin bodies may be relatively recent, but our misgivings about fat as a substance are not.”

Combing through ancient Greek, Hebrew and Roman texts, Forth points to references that both celebrate fat as signs of richness, fertility and increase and also warn that too much fat can lead to rot and ruin.

Ancient Hebrew words for a quality of fat – greasiness -- described fertile qualities of soil and warned that overly rich or fat soils would be infertile. Some scholars suggest that the phrase “land flowing with milk and honey” more accurately translates as “land flowing with fat and honey.”

St. Augustine counseled chubby patrons worried about their heavenly appearance that their bodily fat would be redistributed once in heaven – giving them a perfectly proportioned body suitable for eternity. An idea that makes today’s fat grafting God’s work, Forth says, referring to the surgical transfer of fat from buttocks to breasts or lips.

The most likely candidates among ancient peoples for today’s fat transfer would have been found in the elite. Most ordinary citizens were physically active and had neither an abundance of idle time nor food supplies. Socrates, for example, was fat. Aesop was fat but a slave.

The Greeks and Romans viewed fat as the lot of slaves or foreigners - providing an early link between fatness and racism that lingers in Western societies today, Forth says.

In Africa and India, for example, fatness could be admired. Many Africans viewed stored fat as a sign of fertility, and Indians considered it a sign of prosperity. Yet Greeks and [Romans](#) often found fat adults grotesque, especially if they linked fatness to lack of self-control, Forth says. Beauty was all about self-control and morality, qualities that foreigners lacked. By the early modern era, European colonists took the concepts of beauty and elite a step further. To be properly elite, to be apart from those considered foreign, was to be lean and muscular and white.

Through the ages, fats derived from plant and animal sources have been used for variety of artistic, culinary and ritual purposes, including illuminants (lamp oil and candle tallow), sealants, lubricants, polishes, binders and varnishes as bases for perfumes, medicinal and cosmetic ointments.

Forth notes that as recently as the 18th century, Europeans were using human fat from cadavers for medicinal and other purposes. The practice led some to fear being murdered for their fat or being attacked by witches or werewolves -- creatures believed to steal human fat to absorb its vitality.

“Fat is far too rich a substance to be fully savored in the space of an article,” Forth notes in a soon-to-be published paper: “The Qualities of Fat: Bodies, History and Materiality.”

Forth researches not only the origins and responses motivated by visual qualities of fat but also responses to the material properties of fat. He is also working on a future collaborative book project exploring fat

materiality from olive oil to pork fat with anthropologists, cultural historians and scholars of fat studies.

Forth's previous books include "Zarathustra in Paris: The Nietzsche Vogue in France, 1891-1918" (2001), "The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood" (2004) and "Masculinity in the Modern West" (2008). He has also co-edited five books, including "Cultures of the Abdomen: Diet, Digestion and Fat in the Modern World" (2005), "French Masculinities" (2007), and "Confronting Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle France" (2010).

Provided by University of Kansas

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