

Head Coverings in Antiquity

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People in the Mediterranean world covered their heads for various reasons, especially for shame and mourning. Romans covered their heads for worship, and Greeks uncovered them. None of these customs, however, differentiated coverers and non-coverers by gender, as is the case in 1Co 11:2 – 16.

A practice of head covering associated specifically with women is well attested, however, both in ancient art and in written sources. The farther east one traveled, the more of the head that was normally covered; in Mesopotamia, e.g., women often covered their faces, a practice attested also even among conservative households in Tarsus and Judea. Elsewhere, however, those who covered their heads were especially concerned to shroud their hair from public view.

The reason normally given for the practice was modesty. The custom thus applied especially to married women, not virgins (except in very scrupulous environments). One Spartan gave the reason: virgins must find husbands, whereas wives must keep their husbands. Women's hair was considered a primary visual temptation for young men. In some places, including Judea, a wife who went in public without her hair covered would thus be deemed immodest, dishonoring herself in the eyes of others. Those prone to gossip might consider her promiscuous. Some husbands even considered this an appropriate reason to divorce their wives on grounds of infidelity.

Among earlier Greeks, especially in classical Athens, respectable urban women were at least ideally restricted especially to the home; Corinth in this period had more Roman influence, in which aristocratic women often even banqueted alongside their husbands. Many scholars argue that upper-class women, who had expensive and fashionable hairstyles, were less inclined to cover their hair in public than were other women. That wealthier women were matrons of the sorts of homes in which churches often met may have also made more ambiguous the question of whether they were in "public."

The matter of head coverings, then, could have provoked some tension between church members of different social status. For many, however, probably including most of the congregations' Jewish members, the lack of a head covering would signify the lack of sexual modesty.

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