Tales of Times Forgotten

Retelling Obscure Stories from the Distant Past

Just How Gay Were the Ancient Greeks Really?

The ancient Greeks have a longstanding reputation in modern culture for their alleged tolerance of homosexuality—a reputation that has been so thoroughly

ingrained that a common euphemism for the word *homosexuality* itself is "Greek love." Additionally, the modern English word *lesbian*, referring to a female homosexual, comes directly from the name of a Greek island (i.e. Lesbos) and the word *sapphic* with the same meaning comes from the name of an ancient Greek poetess (i.e. Sappho).

While the ancient Greeks' modern reputation does have some basis in truth, the modern popular stereotype of the "boy-loving Greeks" is far from a complete and accurate portrait of ancient Greek sexuality. In reality, the subject of sexuality in the ancient Greek world is a deeply complicated—sometimes downright convoluted—matter. Homosexual activities were considered acceptable in some ancient Greek cultures under some specific circumstances, but, under other circumstances, the same activities were not tolerated at all.

No concept of "homosexuality"

The first thing I need to make clear is that the ancient Greeks had no analogous concepts to what we today call "homosexual," "heterosexual," or "bisexual." The concepts of people being "gay," "straight," or "bisexual" are all entirely modern ones that only first began to emerge in the late nineteenth century. Even then, these concepts did not fully develop into the concepts we know today until the last few decades of the twentieth century.

Modern scholars therefore widely agree that it is anachronistic to refer to people who lived in ancient Greece using the terms "gay," "straight," "bisexual," or any other exclusively modern labels. In other words, Alexander the Great was not "gay," "straight," or "bisexual" because those concepts simply did not exist during his lifetime; he may very well have had sex with both men and women, but he could not have called himself "bisexual" or used any other word with the same meaning.

The ancient Greeks certainly recognized the difference between homosexual and heterosexual *acts*, but they had no concept of what we call "sexual identity." To the ancient Greeks, the kind of person that someone was sexually attracted to was not a defining, unchanging characteristic of a specific person, but rather a characteristic of a particular period of every person's life. Homosexual acts were only regarded as acceptable under certain very specific circumstances.

ABOVE: Photograph of a rainbow flag, which is a modern symbol for people who identify as LGBTQ+. The ancient Greeks and other ancient peoples, however, had no concept of sexual identity as we would recognize it.

Ancient Greek ideas about gender

In order to understand those circumstances, however, we first need to understand how the ancient Greeks thought about gender. Today, in the twenty-first century United States, we usually think of "male" and "female" as being two different, but fundamentally equal things. For the ancient Greeks, however—and for many other peoples in the ancient world—"male" and "female" were not two equal things of separate kinds, but rather two different *degrees* of the same kind.

The ancient Greeks, like most other peoples in the ancient world, saw adult masculinity as the supreme pinnacle of humanity. Boys, women, and girls were seen as inherently inferior to adult men. They were regarded as essentially *incomplete* men. (For more information on what the ancient Greeks thought about women, I suggest reading this article I published near the beginning of this month, but brace yourself for a lot of quotes touting blatant misogyny.)

Ancient Greek views on male homosexual activity

When the Greeks thought about the roles assumed by two partners during sex, they did not think of it as a male partner and a female partner, but rather as an active, or *penetrating*, partner and a passive, or *receiving*, partner. The active role, they believed, was naturally the role of an adult male, but the passive role could be assumed by anyone who was not properly an adult male. This, of course, included women, but also male adolescents, who were likewise seen as deficient in masculinity. It was believed that, by receiving the active partner, the passive partner—whether it was a woman or a boy—would become more masculine and thereby progress towards the ultimate goal of manhood.

In line with this thinking, it was utterly taboo in any era of Greek history for an adult male to be on the receiving end of any kind of sexual activity. Men were supposed to be penetrators, not receivers, so, for an adult man to be penetrated by *anyone* was regarded as the utmost shame, a disgrace against his manhood.

ABOVE: Ancient Greek fresco from the Tomb of the Diver in Paestum, Italy depicting pederastic couples reclining together on couches at a symposion, or drinking party

It was not only accepted as natural, but even to some degree *expected* that a young man in his twenties should seek out an adolescent boy in his mid-to-late teenaged years to be his lover. The man was supposed to court the boy, just as he would court a woman. The man in his twenties doing the courting was known as an *erastes* (ἐραστής; *erastē´s*), meaning "lover," and the boy in his teens who was

being courted was known as an *eromenos* (ἐρώμενος; *erō´menos*), meaning "beloved."

Adolescent boys were expected to choose a lover, but they were also conditioned to put up as much resistance as possible. It was regarded as shameful if a boy accepted one of his suitors without the *erastes* having to put up a huge effort. Often multiple *erastai* would compete for the affections of the same *eromenos*, bringing him expensive gifts and even sometimes sleeping outside his window, doing anything they possibly could to win his favor.

ABOVE: Tondo from an Attic red-figure kylix dating to c. 480 – c. 470 BC, painted by the Brygos Painter, currently on display in the Ashmolean Museum, depicting an older, bearded erastes fondling a beardless adolescent eromenos at the palaistra

I know what you are all thinking: "Hold on a minute! That's *really* creepy. So the Greeks were all pedophiles?" Technically no. The *eromenos* was usually in his mid-to-late teens, usually roughly between the ages of roughly fourteen and eighteen or thereabouts. The word "pedophile" properly only refers to an adult

who seeks sexual relations with a *child*. For the ancient Greeks, it was rightly seen as absolutely taboo for an adult to seek sexual relations with a preadolescent.

The Greek pederasty system, then, did not involve *pedo*philia, but rather *ephebo*philia, which is when an adult seeks sexual relations with an adolescent in their mid-to-late teenaged years (generally ages 14-18). Obviously, by our modern standards, this whole relationship is still really, *really* messed up; saying that something is *technically* not pedophilia does not by any means imply that it is wholesome or even remotely morally acceptable. Nonetheless, we have remember that the ancient Greeks lived in a very different culture from the one we live in today and their societal norms were very different.

The relationship between an *erastes* and an *eromenos* was, in a very real sense, seen as something sacred. In his philosophical dialogue, *The Symposion*, the Athenian philosopher Platon (lived c. 427 – c. 347 BC) praises the love between an *erastes* and an *eromenos* as the highest, most sacred form of love. Zeus himself, the king of all the gods, was said to have abducted the beautiful adolescent Trojan prince Ganymede in the form of an eagle, granted him eternal youth, and made him his *eromenos* and his personal cupbearer.

ABOVE: Depiction of Ganymede, the eromenos of Zeus, playing with a hoop and a cockerel naked from an Attic red-figure krater painted by the Berlin Painter, dating to c. 500 – c. 490 BC

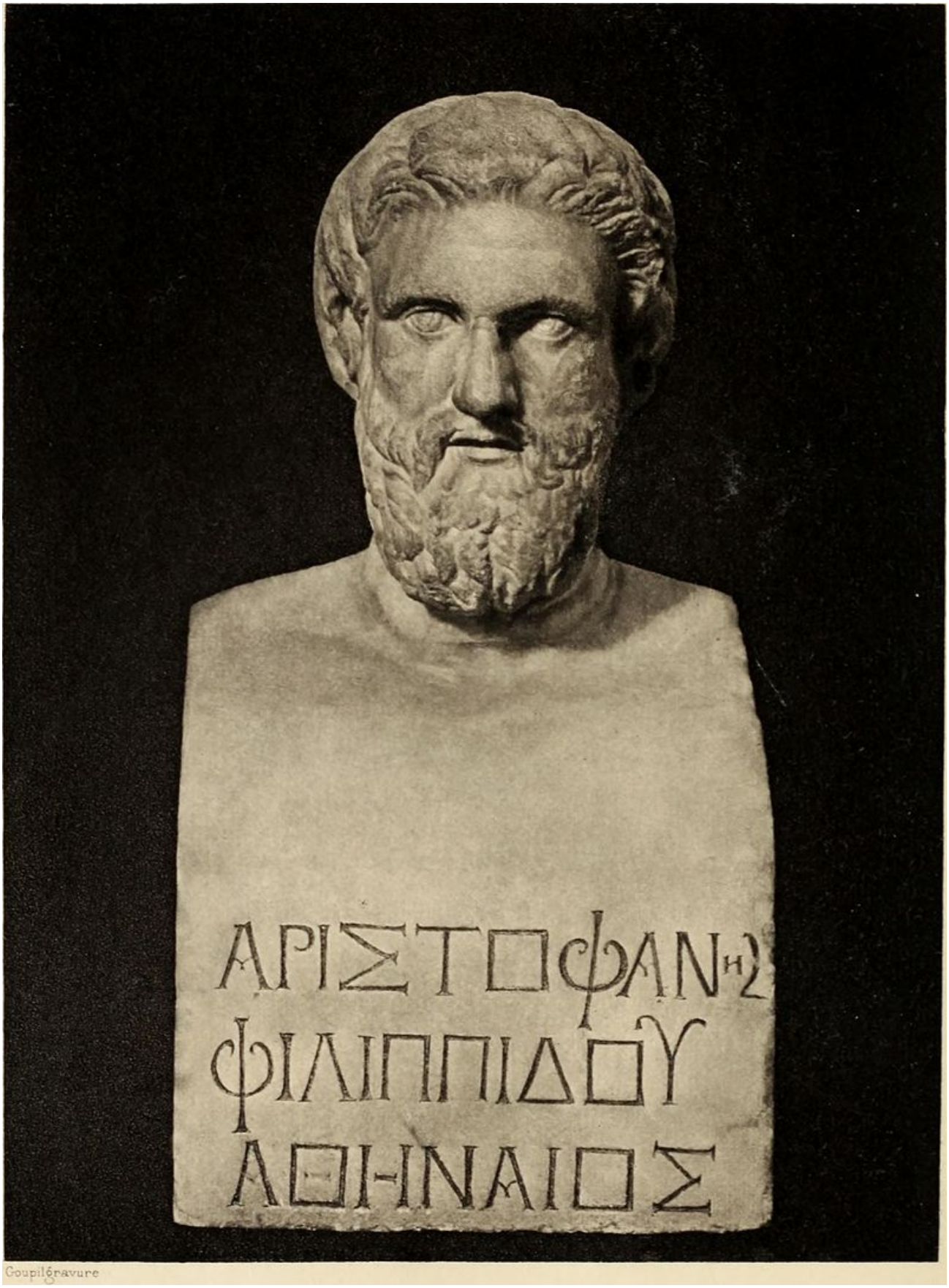
After an *erastes* reached his late twenties, he was expected to move on, stop being interested in boys, marry a woman, and start a family. In ancient Greece and in most other ancient cultures, a man was usually expected to marry when he was in his late twenties or early thirties. His wife was expected to be (and usually was) a girl roughly between the ages of around fourteen and eighteen—almost exactly the same age as an *eromenos*—and a virgin.

The process of courting a woman was almost exactly the same as the process of courting an *eromenos*; all women were expected to marry, but they were expected to put up a show of modesty to avoid looking too eager for marriage, which could reflect poorly on their upbringing. Marriages were arranged between the groom and the bride's parents. The parents determined whether the groom would be a worthy match for their daughter, mainly on the basis of the groom's wealth and reputation. Ultimately, the bride herself had little to no say over who she married. This was, however, how marriages were arranged in virtually all ancient societies all over the world, so we should not blame the Greeks in particular for this fact.

Shame and ridicule for men who maintained homosexual proclivities into mature adulthood

A man who did not move on and find a wife, who continued courting boys or—even worse—started having relationships with other adult men, would have been looked upon as shameful and "effeminate." Aristophanes relentlessly mocks men of this variety in his comedies. The "effeminate" informer Kleisthenes, the "effeminate" tragic playwright Agathon, and the "effeminate" coward Kleonymos, all of whom seem to have been well-known for their homosexual proclivities, are all the butt of numerous jokes and ridicule.

Agathon and Kleisthenes both appear in the play *Women at the Thesmophoria Festival.* The Thesmophoria was reserved exclusively for women only and men were absolutely forbidden to attend; the play revolves around Euripides's nephew trying to sneak in to hear what the women are saying about his uncle. Agathon appears at the beginning of the play, dressed as a woman, and he gives Euripides's nephew a dress to wear as a disguise. Kleisthenes appears later on at the festival itself, which he is allowed to go to because he is basically a woman anyways.



ABOVE: Photograph of a marble bust intended to represent the ancient Athenian comic playwright Aristophanes, who ruthlessly mocks men such as Kleisthenes, Agathon, and Kleonymos for their alleged "effeminacy" in his surviving comedies. Such so-called "effeminates" seem to have been objects of considerable mockery in ancient Greece.

Ancient Greek views on female homosexual activity

Up until this point, I have been focusing on what we know about ancient Greek views on male homosexual activity because our sources discuss this matter at great length and we have a great wealth of information available to us on the subject. Our sources for how women in ancient Greece lived in general, by contrast, are extremely limited. In fact, female homosexuality is virtually absent from nearly all our surviving ancient sources.

This is at least partially due to the fact that ancient Greek women were ideally expected to live their wholes lives in seclusion from men and we have almost no surviving sources from ancient Greece that were actually written by women. Everything we know about women in ancient Greece comes from what tidbits of information we can glean from our extant sources and from archaeology.

The most notable female author from ancient Greece for whom some writings have survived is the poetess Sappho of Lesbos (lived c. 630 – c. 570 BC), but, even with her, only one of her poems, the "Ode to Aphrodite," has survived to the present day complete; all of her other poems have either been lost or have survived to the present day only in a fragmentary form.

Most of our sources for life in ancient Greece come from the city-state of Athens, but, ironically, when it comes to female homosexuality in ancient Greece, most of our sources on the subject come from *outside* of Athens. Sappho is, of course, an important source and her surviving poetry famously abounds with homoerotic imagery. Here, for instance, is a translation of Sappho 31 by Jim Powell:

> *In my eyes he matches the gods, that man who*
> *sits there facing you—any man whatever—*
> *listening from close by to the sweetness of your voice as you talk, the*
>
> *sweetness of your laughter: yes, that—I swear it—*
> *sets the heart to shaking inside my breast, since*
> *once I look at you for a moment, I can't speak any longer,*
>
> *but my tongue breaks down, and then all at once a*
> *subtle fire races inside my skin, my*

> *eyes can't see a thing and a whirring whistle thrums at my hearing,*
>
> *cold sweat covers me and a trembling takes*
> *ahold of me all over: I'm greener than the*
> *grass is and appear to myself to be little short of dying.*
>
> *But all must be endured, since even a poor…*

Another one of Sappho's poems, Sappho 94, also known as "Sappho's Confession," is even more explicit. Here is a translation of it by Thomas McEvilley:

> *Really, I want to die; weeping she left me.*
>
> *She said many things, and this:*
> *"Alas, what terrible things we have gone through;*
> *Sappho, truly I leave you against my will."*
>
> *And I made her these replies;*
> *"Farewell; go, and remember me,*
> *for you know how we cared for you.*
>
> *But if you do not, I wish to*
> *remind you…*
> *what tender and beautiful things we went through.*
>
> *For many wreaths of violets*
> *and of woven roses too,*
> *you put around yourself at my side,*
>
> *and many woven necklaces*
> *made of flowers*
> *cast about your soft neck,*
>
> *and with much rich and royal*
> *perfume elegantly you*
> *anointed…*

> *and upon a soft bed...*
> *you satisfied desire*
> *of tender young girls,*
>
> *and there was no sacred hill,*
> *nor temple, nor stream of water*
> *whence we were absent,*
>
> *no grove...the rattle (of castanets)...”*

The question of what we ought to make of all this, however, is a difficult one. Sappho may have written these poems and others expressing similarly homoerotic sentiments, but we cannot be sure that she is even speaking in her own voice in her poems at all. She calls herself “Sappho,” but the “Sappho” character in Sappho’s poems may be very different from the actual Sappho. Furthermore, setting that issue aside, it is difficult to assess what Sappho’s poems actually tell us about ancient Greek perceptions of female homosexuality.

One thing that is peculiar about Sappho is that, although she is remembered today as “the lesbian poet,” in antiquity, people who had direct access to a lot more of Sappho’s poetry than we do today seem to have often imagined her as an icon, not female homosexuality, but of heterosexual promiscuity. This “excessively” heterosexual vision of Sappho is probably by-and-large the result of the ancient Greek male imagination, but it is hard to say how much basis it might have had in the now-lost works of Sappho.

ABOVE: Depiction of Sappho playing her lyre from an Attic red-figure kalathos from Akragas, dating to c. 470 BC or thereabouts

Another important early source is the *Louvre Partheneion*, a melic poem composed by the seventh-century BC Spartan poet Alkman to be performed publicly by a chorus of young women. The song contains heavy implications of female homoeroticism, with the women in the chorus praising each other's appearances and using sexual wordplay. Again, though, it is difficult what to make of this poem in context.

In *The Symposion*, a philosophical dialogue on the nature of love written by the Athenian philosopher Platon (lived c. 428 – c. 348 BC), the comic playwright Aristophanes, a speaker in the dialogue, mentions the existence of "woman do not care for men, but have female attachments" as part of a humorous fable on the origins of sexual attraction.

In the dialogue, Aristophanes says that, in the beginning, human beings originally had two heads, four arms, four legs, and two sets of genitals. Some people had two penises, some had one penis and one vagina, and, finally, others

had two vaginas. Eventually, though, these primeval humans grew proud and haughty and they tried to storm Mount Olympos and overthrew the gods.

Zeus ended their uprising and, to punish them for their act of hubris, he split them in half so that each person only had one head, two arms, two legs, and one set of genitals. Nonetheless, despite being separated, the people still longed for their other half and this longing for completion became what we now call "love." According to Aristophanes, the people who had originally had two penises became male homosexuals, the people who had originally had one penis and one vagina became male and female heterosexuals, and the people who had originally had two vaginas became female homosexuals.

ABOVE: Depiction of the "primeval man" according to Aristophanes in Platon's Symposion

Our most explicit sources on ancient Greek female homosexuality are, ironically, to a large extent, sources written by non-Greek, straight, male authors in late antiquity. There is a brief reference to female homosexuality in the Epistle to the Romans 1:26–27, written in Koine Greek by the Jewish Christian apostle Paul of Tarsos, in which Paul describes the God of Judaism and Christianity punishing human beings by giving them over to "degrading passions." Here is the passage as translated in the NRSV:

> *"For this reason God gave them [i.e. humanity] up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error."*

Another source is the *Epigrams* of the Roman poet Martial (born between c. 38 and c. 41 AD; died between c. 102 and c. 104 AD). In his *Epigrams*, Martial ruthlessly mocks a certain Greek woman named Philainis (who is probably fictional) for being a "tribade." He characterizes her as an extremely masculine woman who "sodomizes boys" and has sex with girls. Here is Martial's epigram 7.67.1, translated by Harriette Andreadis:

> *"That tribade Philainis sodomizes boys,*
> *and with more rage than a husband in his stiffened lust,*
> *she works eleven girls roughly every day."*

Another epigram (epigram 7.70) is even more explicit:

> *"You, Philainis, tribade to tribades,*
> *rightly call friend her whom you fuck."*

I apologize for the coarse language here; Martial is a notoriously crude author.

Another source is the *Erotes*, a dialogue written in Attic Greek and attributed (possibly spuriously) to the Syrian satirist Loukianos of Samosata (lived c. 125 – after c. 180 AD). It is primarily a discussion between two men over whether the love of boys or the love of girls is better. The speaker arguing in favor of male heterosexuality objects that, if men are permitted to have sex with boys, this will only open the door for the utmost absurdity: women having sex with women! He says, as translated by Andrew Kallimachos:

> *"That is why, if a woman can satisfy the lover of boys, let him abstain from the latter, or else, if males can conjoin with males, then in the future allow women to love each other. Come, men of the new age, you legislators of strange thrills; after having blazed unfamiliar trails for*

> *men's pleasures, grant women the same licence: let them comingle as do the males; let a woman, girded with those obscene implements, monstrous toys of sterility, lie with another woman, just as a man with another man. Let those filthy lesbians – a word that only rarely reaches our ears since modesty forbids it – triumph freely. Let our schools for girls be nothing but the domain of Philainis, dishonored by androgynous loves. And yet would it not be better to see a woman play the man than to see men take on the role of women?"*

There are a few other ancient sources on this subject that I have not mentioned here, but I think, by this point, everyone has realized that our very few surviving ancient sources on this subject paint a complex and somewhat contradictory picture. Greek women in general lived very secluded lives and their social influence was severely restricted, yet the speaker in Sappho's poems and the chorus of girls in Alkman's *Louvre Partheneion* are still able to openly express desires for other women.

As I have mentioned over and over again, while references to male homosexuality are virtually ubiquitous throughout ancient Greek literature, most of our ancient sources are completely silent on the issue of female homosexuality. Platon at least seems to acknowledge the existence of female homosexuality in his *Symposion*, although he devotes little attention to it. Meanwhile, our sources from late antiquity portray a world in which "tribadism" is only mentioned to be mocked, deplored, and portrayed as an absurd depravity.

ABOVE: Sappho and Erinna, *painted in 1864 by the English Pre-Raphaelite painter Simeon Solomon*

Conclusion

Contrary to the stereotype of the ancient Greeks as uniformly permissive of homosexuality, an analysis of the primary sources reveals a much more complex and difficult image of what the ancient Greeks thought of homosexual activity. The picture we come out with from this analysis is, unfortunately, a rather confusing and contradictory one.

Male pederasty was a deeply-rooted ancient Greek social institution. Nonetheless, in spite of this, adult men who acted as the passive partner in homosexual relations, who maintained exclusively homosexual proclivities into mature adulthood, or who were simply perceived as "effeminate" were routinely mocked and viewed as unmanly.

We know very little about what the ancient Greeks thought of female homosexual activity. Nonetheless, the sources we do have seem to suggest that some degree of female homoeroticism was considered permissible at least during Archaic times. At least during late antiquity, however, women who had sex with other women were often viewed as laughingstocks for forsaking their "natural roles" as passive, receiving partners for men.

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Hello! I am Spencer Alexander McDaniel. I am currently a student at Indiana University Bloomington pursuing a double major in classical studies and history. I am obsessed with the ancient world and I write about it constantly. My main area of study is ancient Greece, but I also write about other areas of history as well.

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7 thoughts on "Just How Gay Were the Ancient Greeks Really?"

Panchajanya Bollam

June 25, 2019 at 7:41 am

Hey Spencer.Great article. Could you suggest blogs that focus on medieval history?
thanks!!

Spencer Alexander McDaniel

January 29, 2020 at 2:55 pm

Well, first I should probably note that I have written quite a few articles about medieval history on *this* blog. For instance, I wrote this article about the Byzantines just a few days ago. Obviously, I'm not a specialist in medieval history, since I usually write mostly about the ancient Greeks, but I do write about the Middle Ages occasionally. In addition, I know that Medievalists.net has a some great articles about the Middle Ages as well.

If you are interested in ancient history or history in general as well, I have a list of great blogs that cover those subjects here. I know that Tim O'Neill has written some great posts on his blog "History for Atheists" about the Middle Ages. Tim can be unnecessarily belligerent at times, but he is highly knowledgeable and I've found that, in general, he's nearly always right.

George

June 25, 2019 at 10:12 am

Hi There Spencer,
Thank you for that interesting article.
To what extent would you say that the conduct of the adult males in Ancient Greece, which you describe was the behaviour of a relatively narrow stratum of society, such as for example the 'well-born', the warriors, etc. ?
In other words, could that have been the conduct also of say a shepard, a carpenter, sailor or any other 'commoner' in Ancient Greece, assuming that the means and the opportunity presented themselves?

Spencer Alexander McDaniel

June 29, 2019 at 10:06 am

It is difficult to say, but, as best as we can tell, the custom of pederasty seems to have existed in all strata of Greek society. It is worth noting, however, that, during the Classical Period (c. 510 – c. 323 BC), there was no strict "warrior class" in Athens, which is the city where most of our surviving sources about ancient Greece come from, since all able-bodied Athenian citizens were required by law to serve in the military in some capacity during times of war, regardless of their rank or occupation. Members of the lower class, the *thetes*

usually served as rowers of triremes in the Athenian navy because they could not afford weapons and armor, but they were still required to serve. Members of the middle class, the *zeugitai* usually served as hoplites because they could afford weapons and armor, but not horses. Members of the upper class, the *hippeis*, served as cavalry because they could afford armor, weapons, and horses.

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sebastien

May 27, 2020 at 5:53 am

Dear Spencer,
I am just now discovering your beautiful website, and it resonates so much with what I am doing these days, with a friend, reading the Greeks from the start. (yes, really reading, comparing translations, in French and in English, with attention and open-mindedness, and looking at comments and analyses only afterwards…). After Homer, Hesiod, the three Tragedians, Aristophanes, Thucydides, we are now immersed in Xenophon. It feels so beautiful and healthy to read the original texts, rather than rely on commentaries, on Victorian or Freudian analyses, or on wikipedia articles.
Anyway, about homosexuality, something in Xenophon's Symposium strikes me and I'd like to get your opinon about it. This banquet feels like David Geffen inviting Elton John and Gore Vidal, and some of their friends (including heterosexuals) to a party in New York. What I mean is that the atmosphere of that evening is very "gay". What I think is that maybe, through Plato and Xenophon, we have a picture of an elite society, intellectual and elegant, where it happens that homosexuals were more visible and maybe even more present. And this could explain part of the "bias" we see. A selected slice of the society who wrote about itself. This, reinforced by the later hellenistic or roman writers who delighted in sexual gossips. On the other hand, Aristophanes shows a more "heterosexual" society, with lots of mockeries around passive homosexuals, and heroes who are average males, not intellectuals or even "sportsmen", such as the Knights – who did not write and whose values we cannot know nowadays. What do you think? This does not contradict your analysis of the sexuality the Greeks entertained, which was very different from our christian one, particularly their focus on the "boys in their full bloom".

Sharles Abad Passos

June 12, 2020 at 8:43 pm

Great article. Thanks you!

Sebas

July 7, 2020 at 5:03 am

The foucauldian idea that ancients or generally pre-moderns didn't conceive exclusive homosexual attraction has been jeopardised by recent literature. See, for example Davidson's 'The Greeks and Greek Love'.