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Manifestations of Male Homosexuality in Ancient Rome

The Roman Empire once ruled over the entire Mediterranean region. The Romans controlled lands as far north as England, as far south as Africa and eastwards into Western Asia. The story of Roman expansion is a gruesome one. As the budding Republic grew out of the Italian peninsula, they waged bloody battles against nearby ethnic groups, as well as entire empires, to eventually absorb surrounding regions under Roman rule. Perhaps the most influential civilization to the foundation of the Romans, the Greeks were defeated by their Western neighbors in 146 BC after a series of attacks. While Rome was just starting its journey toward global supremacy, the Greeks already had an established society with distinct political, social and artistic customs. With the Greeks under Roman rule, the Romans realized they had much to learn. In the world of art, the Romans adopted and adapted Greek styles in sculpture, architecture and painting to serve as the inspiration for the future empire's artistic endeavors. With art influenced by the Greeks, the Romans also became aware of Greek social customs – especially towards religion and sexuality. As the Romans began following the entire Greek pantheon, Romanizing it with Latin names, they behaved similarly towards homosexual relations. The Romans saw how homosexuality functioned in Greek society, and while the practice was accepted in the Roman world, new societal norms were created and adhered. Roman male homosexuality can be understood by analyzing Roman views on masculinity, societal

taboos such as stuprum, the absorption of the Greek pantheon, and the lifestyles of its emperors.



Figure 1¹

While most of what is known about male homosexuality in the Roman world started with the creation of the Republic in 509 BC, homosexuality on the Italian peninsula existed among earlier inhabitants. The frescos depicted in Etruscan burial sites such as the Tomb of the Bulls show how male homosexuality made its way into artistic depictions. As said by Fred S. Kleiner in *A History of Roman Art*, “Some think they have an *apotropaic* function (warding off evil spirits). Others postulate that they refer to reproduction and regeneration and to the deceased’s expected afterlife in the Underworld.”² Produced around the middle of the 6th c. BC, this erotic fresco clearly depicts a scene of homosexual intercourse. A longhaired man with darker skin

¹ *Erotic Scene*, Tomb of the Bulls

² Kleiner, 2010: 32

penetrates a man with fairer skin as a bull charges toward them. Etruscan art often depicted men with darker skin than women, but here we see the same treatment extended into the homosexual sphere — where the fairer individual takes on a receptive role, possibly suggesting their effeminacy. It is important to note the bull's features, with a stylized head of a man and an outlined phallus – the male genitalia is clearly the core symbol of this scene. Greek influences are evident as well, with the myth of Achilles on another wall of the tomb. With the inclusion of Greek mythology, cultural exchange was established between the Grecian and Italian peninsulas before the formation of Rome.

In the centuries to come, the Roman Republic absorbed the last of the Etruscans and conquered the Greeks. During this time Rome began to form its own identity. The Roman senate grew in power and cities grew prosperous. Rome, in essence, grew in power through its militaristic endeavors. Emperors such as Augustus and Trajan would often highlight their militaristic achievements through monuments like triumphal arches, sculptures and columns. With a society keen on expansion and power, the quality of masculinity or *virtus* was instilled in Roman males. As explained in Robert Aldrich's *Gay Life and Culture*, "*Virtus* represented the qualities that made one a real man...In heart and soul, the Roman was a usurper, aggressor and conqueror. A Roman ought to dominate and rule all spheres of life, whether with his weapons, his words, his knowledge or his phallus."³ The emphasis on masculinity in Roman society can be seen in popular icons such as the god Priapus, "Priapus is the most salient Roman icon: the mature male, amply capable of asserting his masculinity by penetrating others with his impressive member." Images of Priapus were aspirational, he was seen as the embodiment of masculinity – an untouchable powerhouse who had the ability to protect what was his.

³ Aldrich, 2006: 49



Figure 2⁴

This remarkably preserved fresco comes from the House of Vettii in Pompeii from the 1st c. CE. It depicts the god Priapus standing next to a bowl of fruits. The god towers over the viewer, standing in a calm position with his arm reclining on a stoop that he shifts his body weight onto. Priapus is categorized by his abnormally large phallus which stretches far past the rest of his body. Although having exaggerated features, Priapus is depicted rather naturalistically, with light highlighting the contours of his skin and his clothing draped in all sorts of directions. One should not be fooled by Priapus' relaxed demeanor as his face tells another story. His lips are pursed, his eyes fixated and his cheekbones tense. While the god's body is loose, his face is stern.

The contrasting expressions show that while he is secure in his body and proudly displays his genitalia, he is also commanding respect and obedience. This idea of power is likely why the fresco was placed close to the entrance of the villa. The god protects the home while also serving as a reminder of how men should present their masculinity in society.

⁴ Pompeii: Casa dei Vettii; mural showing the god Priapus

Virtus and dominance being the prized morals among men in Roman society translated into how they were expected to behave sexually. Similar to the Greeks, the Romans had no word or concept for homosexuality. It was acceptable for male citizens to fornicate with men or women, “what was important to a Roman man’s sense of self was maintaining the semblance of an active masculinity which, in essence, meant that it was preferable to always be the ‘inserter’ rather than the receiver.”⁵ However, it was not socially acceptable to just be the aggressor in the sexual relationship, as strict social rules of conduct formed under a unified Rome. The Romans saw how the Greeks had an established system of pederasty – where prepubescent male citizens would be trained to become men of society by older, respectable male mentors through formal education and grooming involving sexual activity. While the Romans may have borrowed much from the Greeks, they rejected pederasty. In fact, the Romans set forth a concept of unacceptable sexual behaviors, or *stuprum*, which outlawed any form of pederasty, “...to have sexual relations with a free Roman citizen outside of marriage, regardless of whether it involved a man or woman, was generally considered outrageous...that brought into disrepute the *pudicitia* (honor) of freeborn Roman men and women.”⁶ Thus, as marriage mainly applied to men and women, Roman men could only perform homosexual acts with slaves, prostitutes and foreigners — to have relations with a male in one’s own freeborn class would be considered barbaric. In the socially acceptable hierarchy of homosexual relations, *virtus* was seen as true manliness which coincided with *imperium*, which was to dominate. Men who were seen as effeminate would be negatively labeled *mollis*, or soft, by Roman writers.⁷

⁵ Smalls, 2008: 36

⁶ Aldrich, 2006: 49

⁷ Williams, 2010: 139-140

Figure 3⁸



The *Warren Cup* captures acceptable homosexual relations in the Roman world. It is in this work of art that we see the concepts of *virtus* and *mollis* at play. Cast in silver, the cup has stood the test of time with its base, stem and body remaining virtually unharmed. However, its handles are missing. Upon first glance at its lustrous surface, one cannot ignore the explicit scenes depicted. Two different moments are captured, crafted in the repoussé technique, producing sharp and prominent

forms. On one side of the cup, an older male with a beard connects with a beardless male as they engage in anal intercourse. The bearded, wreathed man is clearly the active partner, who is performing his Roman birthright of masculinity by being dominant. The beardless male, likely much younger than his lover, lays his hand over the elder, possibly stabilizing himself as he rests his body weight onto his partner. The dominant figure's gaze focuses on his genitalia, with both faces displaying the utmost seriousness as the pressure intensifies. The naturalistic relief work is complemented by the light that bounces off the cup, highlighting the musculature of both figures

⁸ *Warren Cup*

and exaggerating the contour of their forms. The scene takes place in a lavish, romantic setting. Fabrics drape the room, and a kithara is propped up behind them. The addition of multiple fluffy pillows and blankets shows the couple is in a setting meant for maximum comfort, pleasure and intimacy: possibly a brothel. Voyeurism is at play as a fellow slave or prostitute peeks through the door at the passionate dalliance. The other side of the cup shows a similar intimate scene between two clean-shaven males. The receptive partner lays outstretched on the cushion in the foreground with his leg held up by the insertive one, who is again wreathed. The submissive partner is much smaller in scale than his counterpart, with softer musculature. He is clearly prepubescent and may be physically uncomfortable with the sexual act as he tightly grips the duvet, creating creases in the bedding. Tableware such as the *Warren Cup* were produced for Rome's elite, reflecting societal occurrences and converting them into dinner conversation.

As the Romans Latinized the Greek religion and made it their own, myths reflected socially acceptable homosexual relations. One of the most famous homosexual tales is of Jupiter (or Zeus) and Ganymede. *Homosexuality in Greek Myth* by Bernard Sergent quotes the Homeric *Hymn to Aphrodite*, ““It was for his beauty that Zeus carried off the blonde Ganymedes who lived among the immortals and served as cupbearer to the gods in Zeus's abode. He was a marvel to behold, and all the immortals honored him, who poured the dark nectar into a golden bowl.””⁹ This is a prime example of homoerotic practices related to the gods, with Jupiter, the leader of Olympus, kidnapping a boy he was enamored with and making him his by placing him under a form of servitude. This popular myth echoed the rights of male Roman citizens with their ability to engage in sexual relations with both men and women, as Jupiter was also married to the goddess Juno.

⁹ Sergent, 1984: 207

While the gods symbolized mythological homosexual occurrences, the actions of Rome's emperors further reflected homosexual behavior in real-life society. While many Roman emperors had wives, it was common for them to also have male partners. Emperor Nero went as far as marrying some of his male servants, switching between the role of the bride and groom in the multiple ceremonies.¹⁰ Even Augustus, the first emperor who expanded Rome from a Republic to an Empire, was rumored to be effeminate, "Suetonius relates the gossip spread by Lucius Antonius to the effect that Augustus had shared favors not only with Julius Caesar...that he was in the habit of singeing the hairs on his legs with hot nutshells so that the hairs might grow softer."¹¹ While these rumors might have been spread to cast rulers in a negative light, there are examples of male citizens who would pay prostitutes to take the dominant role over them, relinquishing all expectations of *virtus* in the privacy of their bedroom chamber. The most notable example of an emperor's homosexual relations is the story of Hadrian and Antinous. Hadrian was known for being an admirer of ancient Greek culture "who spoke better Greek than Latin."¹² While Hadrian did have a wife, he met and fell in love with Antinous, who was from Asia Minor, in the eastern part of the empire. Their relationship echoed the one of Jupiter and Ganymede – with the all-powerful emperor taking Antinous from a commoner to his closest companion. Since Antinous was foreign-born, their love was permissible, "...true Roman men, who possess *virtus* by birthright, rightfully exercise their dominion not only over women but also over foreigners, themselves implicitly likened to women. An obvious implication is that non-Roman peoples were destined to submit to Rome's masculine *imperium*."¹³ When Antinous drowned in the River Nile as a late teen Hadrian "wept like a woman."¹⁴ Hadrian founded a city

¹⁰ Aldrich, 2006: 54

¹¹ Williams, 2010: 141

¹² Cromton, 2003: 106

¹³ Williams, 2010: 148

¹⁴ Cromton, 2003: 107

in Antinous' name and deified him – creating a cult following – showing just how devoted the emperor was to his partner.

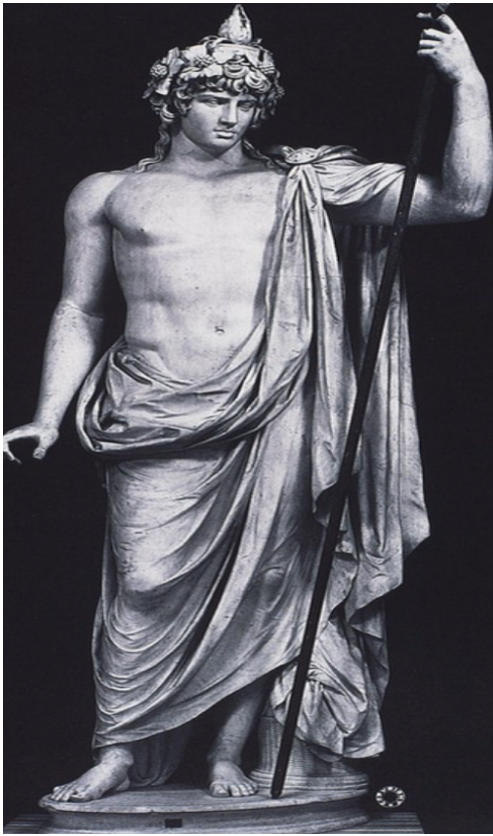


Figure 4¹⁵

This colossal marble statue of Antinous is a testament to Hadrian's infatuation with the Greek world. It was likely produced around 130-138 AD, towards the end of Hadrian's life, which may have been part of the emperor's initiative to not only deify Antinous but to spread his image throughout the empire. The sculpture is purely Greek in style. It honors Antinous as the ideal, youthful male that he was, a popular subject in the Hellenic world. The youth's stomach, chest and arms cast shadows with chiseled musculature. He stands in the Classical contrapposto pose – with one leg flexed forward

and the opposite arm raised. However, this isn't a secular depiction of an idealized man with a flawless face: Antinous is deified. He wears a wreath with grapes and holds a staff suggesting he embodies the qualities of Dionysus (or Bacchus) – fitting as the god ruled over life's pleasures. His garb looks thick and luxurious, as the drapery creates deep grooves that fall to his feet. The sculpture highlights Grecian influences on Roman art during the Hadrianic era, as well as Antinous' elevated status as the ideal receptive partner.

Roman views on masculinity, societal taboos such as stuprum, the absorption of the Greek pantheon, and the lifestyles of its emperors capture the role male homosexuality played in ancient Rome. Although influenced by the Greeks, Roman society curated its own rules

¹⁵ Portrait statue of Antinous

regarding sexuality. Just as Roman politics prized conquering opponents, Roman homosexuality too became a game of the aggressor and the conquered.

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