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The Role of Male Homosexuality in Ancient Greece

To know the history of homosexuality is to know the history of humanity. Homosexuality is a natural part of human nature that can be found dating back to the earliest civilizations. Every culture, however, has its ways of determining and enforcing social norms: creating a variety of views on sexuality and love in general. Ancient Greece is no different. Starting around 480 BC was the Classical era of Greece. Finally, after years of bloody battles with the Persians in the East, the city-states constituting the empire united to defeat them within a few decades. The result of this newfound freedom created a golden age in Greek society. Athens was crowned the shining jewel of the civilization, becoming home to the famous Parthenon and the source of wealth within the empire. The Classical era solidified the Greeks as the main military and cultural power of the Mediterranean. The rapidly developing society institutionalized all parts of Greek society, including love and homosexuality, taking long-observed customs, and molding them into social orders. Male homosexuality can be examined in Greek society through its views on love, religion, the system of pederasty and the symposium.

Sexuality and love are not viewed the same today as they were in ancient Greece. Nowadays, everything is about labels. Labeling someone's sexuality boils down to who they are into a simplified definition that the labeled individual must stick with. With identities like pansexuality, labels are evolving past the rigid standards of simply being straight, gay or bisexual, instead focusing on the human connection between two individuals regardless of sex

and gender. This is closer to the way the ancient Greeks viewed sexuality: as one without labels. As Francis Marc Mondimore explains in *A Natural History of Homosexuality*, “Sex was necessary, and marriage the only legitimate setting, for procreation, but sexual pleasure was available, for men at least, in a variety of forms outside of marriage as well...a man did not have to be sexually faithful within marriage to be honorable.”¹ It is shown that Ancient Greece was an incredibly patriarchal society that kept women in the private sphere of the home while men were granted full rights as citizens to lead society, resulting in certain freedoms like homosexuality. Eros, meaning love, was mentioned as two different categories in Plato’s text *Symposium* by Pausanias. Pausanias argues that there is a common love, one that exists between men and women who are physically attracted to each other and reproduce offspring through the body, and a heavenly love between men and the young men they court and nurture, with this love being an attraction not through the body but through the mental connection and passion that both have for one another.² This philosophy may reflect the misogyny that occurred in the ancient Greek culture which viewed female citizens as subordinate to male citizens, but it also provides a direct insight into how love was justified at the time.

While many today people use their religion as a justification for homophobia, the Greeks looked to religion as a reflection of their own homosexual practices. Based on a polytheistic ideology that relied on tales and myths to explain how the world functioned, the Greek pantheon was filled with homoerotic and homosexual stories. Athenian playwright Aristophanes described the history of sexual attraction stemming from protohuman ancestors who were made of two bodies in one, like conjoined twins, some half male and female, and others with both halves made up of the same sex.³ When Zeus split the two halves of the early humans, it is said

¹ Mondimore, 1996: 7

² Cantarella, 1992: 17-18

³ Mondimore, 1996: 9

descendants of them will seek their other half, therefore justifying same-sex relationships without labels but rather rationalizing the right of sexual fluidity in men.⁴ Aside from the human nature of sexuality, most gods themselves were known to have male lovers, with one of the most famous tales being that of 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.””⁵ This is a prime example of homoerotic practices related to the Greek gods, with Zeus, the leader of Olympus, kidnapping a boy he was enamored with and making him his. This myth played into the ideology of male citizens possessing the ability to engage with both attractive men and women, as Zeus was also married to the goddess Hera.



Figure 1⁶

Pictured is a votive statue of Zeus and Ganymede from around 470 BC, with its production taking place in the center of the Transitional stage that preceded the Classical era. During the Transitional stage, Greek artists began experimenting with emotions and action in their work that differed from the stiff sculpture of the Archaic period. These ideas are clearly reflected in this statue, which was likely dedicated to the god depicted: Zeus. Made of terracotta, the work has some damage in certain places, but the scene is clear. Zeus is in motion as he whisks away the teenage Ganymede from his mortal realm. His long chiton

⁴ Mondimore, 1996: 9-10

⁵ Sergent, 1984: 207

⁶ Votive Statuary Group: Zeus and Ganymede

dramatically folds with intricate drapery as his body pushes forwards. It is crucial to note the differences in power at hand. Zeus is colossal in comparison to Ganymede. The artist masterfully sculpts Zeus' muscular chest and legs while Ganymede's body is much softer, though his musculature can not be fully analyzed due to his missing arms and lower legs. Zeus is bearded while Ganymede shows no facial or bodily hair, signifying that not only is Zeus older, but he is the dominant figure in the relationship. While Zeus carries a staff, which could symbolize him guiding the way up to Olympus and his dominance, Ganymede holds a chicken, potentially indicating his humanity in the form of the common bird. The facial expressions of the two males say it all. Ganymede is shown with emotionless, straight lips as he's being kidnapped while Zeus shows hints of the Archaic smile, as he enthusiastically claims his new living toy.

The concept of an older man having a personal relationship with an adolescent boy is not exclusive to the gods. In fact, it was one of the primary forms of homosexual behavior for male citizens in Greece. The system was called pederasty, stemming from the Greek word *paiderasteia* with *pais* meaning boy and *eran* meaning "to love."⁷ Pederasty is defined in James Smalls' *Gay Art*, "Athenian society viewed *paiderasteia* as a principal means for education and socialization of young free-boys into manhood and citizenship. As an institution, it served as a compliment, not a rival, to heterosexual marriage." Men had to uphold Greek society, they were the ones who fought in battles, led religious and legal institutions, and determined the future of their city-state. Pederasty, therefore, served as mentorship for aristocratic young boys and men groomed into becoming proper citizens through sexual, emotional and physical actions.

Pederasty was divided into two groups. There were the *eromenos*: the younger, submissive pupil,

⁷ Smalls, 2008: 17

and the *erastes*: the older, usually bearded, dominant mentor.⁸ The *eromenos* were usually aged 12 to 17, as body hair and manly characteristics were still developing.⁹

Pederasty was not a casual relationship; it was an established system that had many rules. One of the primary rules prohibited the *eromenos* from being the dominant aggressor to the *erastes* in the relationship, “also discouraged was the courtship or sexual activity between two boys or men of the same age or social rank. Intergenerational and correct class courtship was the expectation.”¹⁰ When the *erastes* chose a boy to court, the *eromenos* was not to give in to any physical advances too soon, or he would lose his honor and worst of all, be considered feminine.¹¹ It was up to the *erastes* to diligently pursue the *eromenos* to woo him through wit and emotional connection. Oral and anal sex was a major taboo in pederasty as it was reserved for female/male marriage, prostitutes of both sexes and slaves, as well as being associated with animalistic behavior not fit for the refined males in the pederastic relationship.¹² Kissing, fondling and intercrural masturbation were accepted once the courting stage was over, but there are instances where pederastic relationships had intercourse.

The educational component of pederasty took place in the gymnasium. The gymnasium in Greek society is not akin to the ones we have today. It was more than a place to train the body, it functioned as a social club. The gymnasium was the place to embrace athleticism and nudity, “...athletic nudity was progressive, civilized [behavior] rather than savage behavior.”¹³ Embracing nudity was an inherently Greek trait, as it showed supremacy over barbarians and the gymnasium fostered growth in combat training which was the goal for creating the perfect citizen. With the gymnasium containing some of the greatest statues of the ideal male nude, it

⁸ Mondimore, 1996: 8

⁹ Cantarella, 1992: 37

¹⁰ Smalls, 2008: 18

¹¹ Cantarella, 1992: 19-20

¹² Smalls, 2008: 21

¹³ Percy, 1996: 114

was meant to instill not only the physical but mental importance of being strong to defend the city-state: *eromenos* and *erastes* even fought battles in pairs, while nude.¹⁴

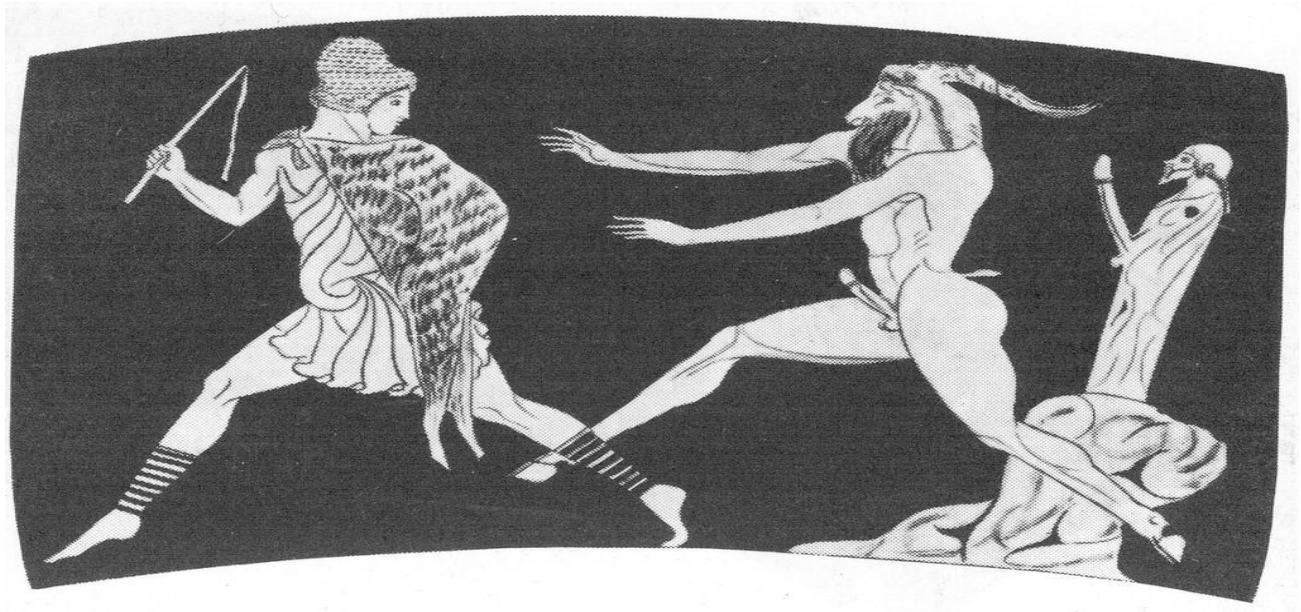


Figure 2¹⁵

The red-figure amphora above is a scene of action coming from the early Classical era. On the right is Pan, a supernatural being easily identified by his horns, goat-like head and tail. On the left is a young shepherd, holding his whip, running away from Pan's advances, similarly to how *eromenos* was expected to resist their *erastes* when starting a pederastic relationship. The young man looks back with wide eyes filled with fear. He sees Pan with his arms extended, catching up to him. Pan's eyes staring back at the poor boy are dark, almost lifeless indicating his animalistic nature. The directness of Pan's chase, with an erect phallus, shows that he does not conform to the rules of man and is willing to commit rape to satisfy his urges. He is clearly a wild spirit who does as he pleases. While creatures like Pan, satyrs and centaurs are allowed to behave in an uncivilized manner in public, this behavior from *erastes* and *eromenos* would be

¹⁴ Smalls, 2008: 25-26

¹⁵ Vessel (bell-krater; red-figure)

highly prohibited. Societal judgment would also follow if the *eromenos* did not end their pederastic relationship, marry a woman and take the place of an *erastes* once of age, continuing the cycle of pederasty and their duties as citizens.¹⁶

While the overall goals of pederasty taught *eromenos* the moral, physical, spiritual and romantic traits required for proper male citizens and warriors through camaraderie with their *erastes*, there were special events they could partake in. The *symposia* became a leisurely activity for the male Greek gentry and their *eromenos*. While it was a time of sophisticated relaxation, *symposia* banquets furthered the educational side of pederasty as men gathered to discuss morals and philosophies.¹⁷ The *symposia* turned wine consumption into a hierarchy; women, children and adolescents weren't allowed to drink it or participate in the symposium unless women and *eromenos* were chosen to be cupbearers for the men.¹⁸ Therefore, wine and the symposium became intertwined as another privilege reserved for male citizens.



Figure 3¹⁹

¹⁶ Mondimore, 1996: 8

¹⁷ Smalls, 2008: 18

¹⁸ Sergent, 1984: 18

¹⁹ Tomba del Tuffatore: North Slab: symposium scene with kottabos

The Tomb of the Diver is a pit grave of monumental importance to the history of Greek painting but also the homoeroticism in the symposium. Dating back to 480 BC, the Tomb of the Diver was discovered in Paestum: a colonized Greek city on the Italian peninsula. The tomb presents a rarity in Greek art, being a true representation of Greek fresco paintings; many of which did not survive the test of time. While the capping travertine stone contains symbolism of the passage between the realms of life and death, the four surrounding walls depict the pleasures of life, specifically the symposium. On one of the longer sides of the tomb is depicted a row of couches with men reclining on top of them. Of the five men shown, each has a visible abdomen and pectoral lines drawn showing an emphasis on the importance of attaining the perfect musculature in Greek society. With only a few minor damages to the wall, the fresco is almost perfectly complete, allowing the eye to grasp the complete image. The focus on homoeroticism leads us to the couple on the left. The two men recline on the same couch, separated by a small arm pillow. The man toward the left is unbearded, holding a lyre, implying that he is younger than the bearded man adjacent to him. In a way, the two men almost mirror each other, with the younger man extending his hand towards the other's chest, while the older man's hand caresses the back of the youth's head. As the elder slightly opens his mouth, the couple's eyes meet at the same level, staring directly at each other. They are locked in an eternal gaze, almost at the climax of their intended actions but frozen in time. The men in the scene all wear wreaths, displaying the exalted practice of the symposium. The man to the left of the flirtatious couple stares at them in a rather voyeuristic manner, with an open mouth and pursed lips. The other two men on the wall focus on their *kylikes*, possibly engaged in a game of "who can throw the wine sediments the farthest" and asking for refills from the nearby servant.

Overall, the role of male homosexuality in ancient Greece functioned to preserve the Greek identity. With an empire centered around military power and cultural supremacy, the views on love and sexuality were twisted to uphold those values through systems such as pederasty. While homophobes today argue that homosexuality is a threat to masculinity, the Greeks embraced homosexuality to build masculinity.

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