

Example of an excellent student research paper, in Walter Williams' Transgender Studies class

Kyle McNeal 10 December 2009 SWMS 355 Professor Walter Williams USC

Transgender Identities in the Ancient Mediterranean

The interaction between religion and a society's construction of gender has important ramifications for transgender communities within that culture. This relationship is especially compelling in the Ancient Mediterranean, in which a number of cultures with diverse spiritual and social environments thrived prior to the spread of Christianity. Within these cultures, religion provided a space for transgender individuals within a larger society that enforced strict regulations on gender binaries. This paper will focus specifically on the Greco-Roman Empire and the pre-Islamic cultures of the Middle East. Transgender communities within the Greco-Roman and pre-Islamic cultures demonstrate some of the commonalities found throughout the Mediterranean. Namely, the ability of these cultures to accommodate transgender identity within their religious institutions allows transgender people to occupy a mildly tolerated space within their culture.

Before examining these transgender communities in depth, however, it is important to explicitly define the terminology that will be used throughout this paper. Firstly, "transgender" is used differently throughout academic literature. For the purposes of this paper, the term "transgender" will be used liberally to identify any individual whose gender identity or gender expression does not entirely correspond to their assigned sex. This umbrella term includes crossdressing, androgyny, intersexuality, and transsexuality; where relevant, these terms will also be employed to indicate specific behaviors or identities. The regions discussed will be collectively referred to as the Ancient Mediterranean; however, the time frame and geographical space covered is quite large, and cannot be exhaustively discussed within the bounds of this paper. As such, the paper will focus on a selection of cultures which illustrate the most important aspects of Mediterranean transgenderism. "Greco-Roman culture" refers to the historical and mythological tradition beginning with early antiquity in Greece and ending with the fall of the Roman Empire and onset of the Dark Ages in the 5th and 6th centuries AD. "Pre-Islamic culture" refers to the pagan religions of the Middle East prior to the introduction of Islam in the 7th century AD, with specific consideration of traditions practiced by the peoples of Ancient Mesopotamia in modern-day Iraq as well as those of Phrygia in modern-day Turkey.

Greek mythology has a long and complex history; little is known of early belief systems, and many inconsistencies and alternative variations exist of prominent Greek myths. However, it is clear that the divine had an extremely influential role on Greco-

Roman society for many centuries. In general, the mythological traditions were closely related to the aspects of human existence which were most prevalent in everyday Greek life. For instance, many immortals were given responsibility over important crops, family, or the household. Mythology also played an important role in creation theory; it explained why the world existed, and why society was constructed as it was (Graves 4-17). Accordingly, gender had a very important role to play in Greek mythology. Ancient Greeks looked to the narratives surrounding their deities for guidance on how society should be structured, and what part men and women were to play within that society. Moreover, mythology also provided insight into how society should approach those individuals who somehow transgress the standard male-female gender binary. As is often the case in the study of mythology, messages regarding gender identity were very mixed.

In many ways, nonconformity to the gender binary within Greek mythology was often used to reinforce the importance of the strict delineation between men and women in society. This is seen in the myth of Hermaphroditus, son of the prominent gods Hermes and Aphrodite. At the age of 15, the naïve young boy went adventuring on his own. While in the forest, the nymph Salamacis tried to convince Hermaphroditus to be her lover; the young boy curtly denied her proposal, and continued on into the forest. As she watched, Hermaphroditus dove into a forest lake and began playing. Salamacis suddenly jumped into the pool as well, forcing herself upon the young Hermaphroditus; as she did so, she cried out: “Grant this, you gods, that no day comes to part me from him, or him from me.” In answer to her prayer, the Gods bound Salama-cis’s body to Hermaphroditus’s, creating one intersex being. Hermaphroditus was dismayed at his predicament, and so cursed the lake so that any man who entered the lake “may rise again supple, unsinew’d, and but half a man” (Ovid). The myth of Hermaphroditus is the source of the term “hermaphrodite,” and is unique in its portrayal of intersexuality in Greek mythology. The myth reveals the dominant perception in Greek society of those who do not fall easily into the category of either “man” or “woman”: intersexuality is portrayed as a curse, and those who are intersex are deemed “but half a man.” As a commentary on the social status of transgender people in Greece, the myth of Hermaphroditus shows the more derogatory perspective of those not conforming to the gender binary; those who do not contribute to the dominant social construct are viewed as undesirable and unwelcome.

However, the opposite message can be seen in the popular Greek character of Tiresias. Tiresias is a prevalent character throughout Greek mythology; the blind seer played the role of wise advisor in a number of plays, including *Antigone*, *The Bacchae*, *The Odyssey*, and *Oedipus the King*, and is an archetypal figure in world literature. However, a lesser known story is that told by Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, detailing the source of Tiresias’s wisdom. As a young man, Tiresias was walking

when he encountered two snakes mating on the ground; without reason, Tiresias parted the two snakes, and was immediately transformed into a woman. At first Tiresias was unhappy with his fate; however, he ultimately lived the next seven years as a woman, until he was magically returned to a man after once again separating two snakes he found mating. Later, the gods Zeus and Hera were arguing over whether men or women enjoy sex more; because of Tiresias's unique insights derived from his time as both a man and a woman, he was called upon to settle the question. Upon siding with Zeus, Hera struck Tiresias with blindness; Zeus, however, gifted the man with the gift of prophecy. (Ovid 3.316-338) Through his unusual and undermentioned experience as a transgender woman, Tiresias was seen as benefiting from an enhanced understanding of the world. As one author notes, "Though the tales that emphasize Tiresias's prophetic insights in later years make no reference to these events of his youth, one could still play with the notion that some part of his wisdom derives from perspectives gained during the years he spent as a woman" (Downing 183). Tiresias was a valued contributor to society, and was relied upon regularly throughout Greek literature as a wise and insightful advisor. This interpretation of the value of transgender people in Greek mythology differs greatly from that of Hermaphroditus, and demonstrates the very mixed attitudes toward gender nonconformity in Greek antiquity.

Perhaps the most important transgender representation in everyday life for citizens in Greece was that of the gender-bending goddesses. While all goddesses, by virtue of their powerful positions in Greek society, defied the traditional feminine role, several goddesses did so explicitly and consequentially. Foremost of these are Athena, Artemis and Hecate (Allen 1). Athena, favorite amongst the goddesses of Greece, was the goddess of wisdom and military victory. Greek myths state that Athena had no birth mother, which in many ways explains why she was imbued with such masculine characteristics; her sole parent was the hypermasculine Zeus. She is generally depicted as a warrior, wearing helmet and armor and wielding a shield, and ranked higher even than most male gods in the hierarchy of Olympus. Similarly, Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, is patron of a patently masculine activity. Moreover, Artemis refused to be wed to a man, and often times punished men for expressing interest in her. The goddess Artemis is often depicted in gender-neutral clothing; while her robe is feminine, her belt is identifiably masculine, as is her weapon of choice: the bow and arrow. The goddess Hecate, known in Rome as Diana, acted as intermediary between the Underworld and the Earth. Hecate was feared amongst mortals and immortals alike for her great power, which she was not hesitant to use against those she disliked. While she was more feminine than Hecate in appearance, her personality was devoid of traditionally feminine attributes: she was considered cold and remorseless, even to her fellow immortals (Britannica). These female characters were important in debunking the strict gendered traditions of Greco-Roman culture; however, more

important than the goddesses themselves were the mortal worshippers holding spiritual positions in their temples.

Transgenderism was not only a mythological or spiritual element in Greek society; many aspects of religious practice in the mortal world incorporated transgender individuals. This was especially prevalent in goddess worship, where biologically male followers of the goddesses would assume feminine roles in order to serve as priestesses in their temples. This phenomenon was a common occurrence, and has been cited to varying degrees in the worship of Artemis, Hecate, Diana, and others. For some, as in the case of Artemis, transgender worship simply constituted the adornment of male priests in the clothing of the goddess; this ritualistic crossdressing was done in order to communicate directly with the goddess, who would speak neither to biological females nor males in men's clothing. However, for Hecate, transgender worship was taken much further. In many temples of Hecate, males would castrate themselves in order to serve as a priestess to the goddess. As patron goddess of witchcraft, castration was oftentimes done during the casting of spells and other magical rituals in honor of Hecate. These MTF priestesses, known as the Semnotatoi, were imbued with rights and privileges that neither men nor women were given in the temples of Hecate (Conner). They served a special function in the worship of the goddess, and as such occupied a safe space within the spiritual institutions of Greek society.

However, the safe spaces for transgender identities provided by Greek spirituality did not extend into secular society. As noted in *Sexual Ambivalence: Androgyny and Hermaphroditism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, "the possession of both sexes at once rendered all reproduction impossible and undermined all life as a couple and a family- and even all social organization since, at that time, the latter rested upon a strict division of roles and functions that was, in the last analysis, founded upon the sexual difference" (Brisson 7). Similarly, a castrated person could occupy the social role of neither man nor woman, husband nor wife, father nor mother; as such, they did not fit into the strict organization of Greek and Roman society, and threatened traditional understandings of interpersonal relationships. Many transgender followers of Hecate did not live in or serve the temple, and instead performed witchcraft for citizens of major Roman cities as their principal source of income; this practice was viewed as dark and blasphemous, and was not highly viewed within Greek society. Many of these practitioners had voluntarily undergone the ritual castration also practiced by Hecate's MtF priestesses (Platine 2). These participants in the occult were often the victims of violent crimes, and at times were even subject to state-sponsored purges. The marginalization and discrimination against these individuals within the Roman Empire reflects the very limited acceptance for transgender identities in Greco-Roman culture. While religious figures with transgendered identities would be mildly

tolerated in protected spiritual spaces, no such behavior would be endured within secular Roman communities.

The safe space for transgender identity within Greco-Roman spiritual institutions did not exist indefinitely. As the Roman Empire declined and the Dark Ages began to take effect, cults of the Olympian gods slowly dwindled of their own accord; religious practices in general waned, as communities tended not to identify themselves as strongly with Greco-Roman culture without the influence of a strong central Roman Empire. This process was exacerbated by the growing influence of Christianity; as the early figures of Christianity spread their value systems across the Western world, many temples were pillaged for what was construed as immoral behavior. Writings from early Christians were harshly critical of transgender behavior in order to distinguish the new religion from the polytheistic Greek practices, which included gender-bending rituals (Britannica). By the 4th and 5th centuries, transgender identity in the context of spiritual ritualism was no longer a reality in the European Mediterranean.

However, Greco-Roman culture was not the only society to adopt transgender practices as part of its social construct. In fact, the most detailed surviving accounts of ancient transgenderism in the Mediterranean are those of the pre-Islamic Middle East. Prior to the introduction of Judeo-Christian religions, the Middle East was home to a highly variable system of polytheistic spirituality. Similarly to the Greco-Roman model of transgender spirituality, much of the justification for transgender behavior was derived from their religious beliefs; however, this social space for transgender identity overflowed into secular society in the pre-Islamic Middle East far more extensively than in ancient Greece and the Roman Empire. While transgender communities seem to have originated in the context of polytheistic religious cult practices, this limited acceptance for transgendered individuals eventually crept into mainstream society. These populations occupied a special role in pre-Islamic society; known as the mukhannathun, these male to female crossdressers and transexuals were relatively welcomed in secular society until the introduction of conservative Muslim values in the 7th and 8th centuries.

One of the earliest recorded communities of transgender individuals is that of the Gala, the third-gender priestesses serving the goddess Inanna of Babylonia during the 8th century BC. The goddess Inanna herself was a symbol of gender deviance, and was often portrayed as androgynous. She was simultaneously the hyperfeminine goddess of sexuality and a hypermasculine god of war. For this reason, the worship of Inanna often incorporated transgender elements (Harris 82). The temple practices of Inanna were highly complex; there were a number of different types of Gala, each of which served a different function in the rites of their goddess. One type of Gala priestess was the Kurgarru, a biological male who wore a robe that was feminine on

one side and masculine on the other. The Kurgarru were highly esteemed in Babylonia; in one story of Inanna, the genderless Kurgarru were created in order to save Inanna from the Underworld. However, even more prestigious were the Assinnu, or the transsexual priestesses of Inanna. The Assinnu underwent ritual castration as part of a *mes*, or a divine calling of the goddess. The Assinnu were believed to have been imbued with great powers of protection and fortune. Warriors of Ancient Mesopotamia would touch the head of an Assinnu before battle, believing just this brief contact would spare them from danger. However, the most important role of the Assinnu was that of a hierodule, or sacred prostitute. The Assinnu were believed to be the physical incarnation of the goddess Inanna, and by sleeping with an Assinnu a follower of Inanna was essentially coupling with the Goddess herself (Platine 2). Not much is known of the *Gala* in ancient Babylonia; however, it is evident that the transgender priestesses of Inanna held a lofty position in the spiritual institutions of Mesopotamia.

The most well-known and well-documented instance of transgender identity within the spiritual practices of the pre-Islamic Middle East were those of the Phrygian goddess Cybele in the 6th-4th centuries BC. Cybele was central to Phrygian worship; as Mother Goddess, Cybele was given power over the Earth, mountains, and wild animals. Worship of Cybele was particularly unique, as religious practices often included ecstatic and orgiastic rituals. Her followers, called Corybantes, were infamous throughout the Mediterranean (Conner). In fact, the goddess Cybele was worshipped throughout the Mediterranean in various forms; in Greece she was known as “Meter,” and was worshipped similarly to the Phrygian Cybele. The goddess was followed by a group of transgender Corybantes known as Gallae, who were biological males who would adopt female attributes in order to worship the goddess. The exact nature of transgender behavior amongst the gallae is uncertain, and varied widely between different temples. While some cult followers would simply adopt the clothing, make-up, and mannerisms of a priestess, others would undergo ritual castration in order to become closer to the goddess. The Gallae performed a very specific role in both Phrygian and Greek society: they were the sole individuals capable of communicating with the goddess, and were essential to many ecstatic rituals in honor of Cybele (Lucker 18-27). This distinct role created a very mixed attitude toward the Gallae; while their unique position gave them a mystical and impressive place in society, they were also feared and ridiculed by those not associated with the cult of Cybele. This transgender community had important ramifications for the treatment of transgender individuals in the mainstream society of the pre-Islamic Middle East.

Outside the realm of pre-Islamic spirituality, a community known as the Mukhannath emerged, ultimately establishing itself as a component of secular society. This group

was entirely unincorporated into the male/female gender dichotomy of the Middle Eastern social construct; instead, they were viewed as outsiders. While the Mukhannath were biologically male, they wore women's clothing, make-up, and hairstyles, and used feminine mannerisms and speech. They were passive sexual partners for men, and often engaged in prostitution; in some instances the Mukhannath were eunuchs (Haggerty 173-175). However, this is not to say they were not important elements of pre-Islamic society. Mukhannath were highly reputed as singers and entertainers, and in the years prior to the introduction of Islam were seen as the pinnacle of artistic talent. They were further empowered by their outsider status; while they were free to mingle with women in ways that men could not, they were also free from the social limitations placed on women by the strict societal standards. The Mukhannath are unique within the Mediterranean cultures, as they are the rare community that managed to thrive outside the protected institution of religion and goddess worship. For a number of years the Mukhannath were tolerated, although controversial, members of society.

However, much like the transgender priestesses of ancient Greece, the pre-Islamic trans-gender communities of the Gala, Gallae, and Mukhannath were quelled by the influence of new religious values in their culture. The prophet Muhammad made his opinion of transgendered individuals in Islamic society blatantly clear in a 8th century hadith, or written record of his teachings, in which it was noted that "The Prophet cursed men who imitate women (*al-mukhannathin min al-rijal*) and women who imitate men." A second hadith states that "There was a mukhannath who used to be admitted to the presence of the Prophet's wives. He was considered one of those lacking interest in women. One day the Prophet entered when this mukhannath was with one of his wives... the Prophet said, 'Oho! I think this one knows what goes on here! Do not admit him into your presence!' So he was kept out." (Ibn Hanbal) The introduction of these narratives to mainstream Middle Eastern culture resulted in heightened animosity towards the mukhannath, beginning with the lowered social status of the mukhannath, and culminating in banishment and execution for many transgendered individuals for moral indecency. The temples of Hecate and Cybele did not survive the arrival of Islam; polygamist religious practices were quickly expelled from the region, as were the special spaces for transgender identity infused into the pre-Islamic Mediterranean's spiritual institutions.

The Ancient Mediterranean was home to a number of diverse cultures in the many years prior to the introduction of Judeo-Christian religion. However, as the sampling presented in this paper suggests, there are many commonalities in the way these cultures addressed transgenderism. In the realm of polytheistic spirituality, male to female transgender behavior was commonplace and marginally accepted. While at times scorned or marginalized, the *semnotatoi* of Hecate, the *kurgarru* and *assinu* of

Inanna, and the gallae of Cybele occupied a rare and special space in the spiritual traditions of their people. Transgender identity was expressed differently between the numerous cults of the polytheistic Mediterranean; crossdressing, androgyny, and transsexuality were all present in numerous forms. By analyzing the spiritual deities and mythology of the Greco-Roman and pre-Islamic societies of this region, both the impetus for acceptance and the causes of marginalization are clear. The incorporation of the transgendered into the societies of the Ancient Mediterranean was contested by some, and accepted by others. However, this acceptance had its limits; the secular mukhannath were an uncommon example of mainstream transgenderism, and were highly controversial in pre-Islamic cultures. This dynamic and complex treatment of transgendered individuals in the Ancient Mediterranean was largely erased by the massive influence of Christianity and Islam in the region. However, records of these unique and innovative spaces for transgender identity within social structures based on a strict gender binary continue to provide a useful commentary on the role of the transgendered in a world that ostracizes the unfamiliar and criminalizes the unique.

Works Cited

- Allen, Mercedes. "Transgender History: Trans Expression in Ancient Times." The Bilerico Project: Daily Experiments in LGBTQ. 12 February 2008. .
- Brisson, Luc. *Sexual Ambivalence: Androgyny and Hermaphroditism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Conner, Randy. *Blossom of Bone: Reclaiming the Connections Between Homoeroticism and the Sacred*. Harpercollins: 1993.
- Downing, Christina. "Same-Sex Love in the Age of Heroes." *Myths and Mysteries of Same-Sex Love*. Continuum Publishing, 1991.
- Encyclopedia Britannica. Encylopedia Britannica, Inc. Chicago, Illinois. .
- Graves, Robert. *The Greek Myths*. London: Penguin Books, 1992.
- Haggerty, George. "Mukhannath." *Gay Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia*. Volume 2. Taylor & Francis, 2000.
- Harris, Rivkah. "Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites." *History of Religions* 30.3 (1991): 261-278. Ibn Hanbal. *Musnad*. Cairo, 895.
- Lucker, K.A. "The Gallae: Transgender Priests of Ancient Greece, Rome, and the Near East." *New College of Florida* (2005): 1-27.

Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. London: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1998. Rowson, Everett. "The Effeminate of Early Medina." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111.4 (1991): 671-693.

Platine, Cahtryn. "We Are an Old People, We Are a New People: Transsexual Priestesses, Sexuality and the Goddess." *gallae.com*. 2007. .