



## Subjects of the Visual Arts: Harmodius and Aristogeiton (Sixth Century-514 B. C. E.)

by Nikolai Endres

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Athenian lovers Harmodius (alternatively transliterated as Harmodios) and Aristogeiton (Aristogiton) were remembered in ancient Greece as the great tyrannicides.

Aristogeiton resented the advances made by Hipparchus, the brother of the reigning tyrant Hippias, toward his friend Harmodius. Rebuffed, Hipparchus insulted Aristogeiton's sister and forbade her to take part in the Panathenaic Procession, thus disparaging her virginity and questioning her marriageability.

Provoked by this personal quarrel, the two friends planned to assassinate the two brothers. At the Greater Panathenaea festival in 514 B. C. E., Hipparchus was stabbed, but Hippias was not hurt. Harmodius was killed on the spot, and Aristogeiton was executed under torture.

After Hippias' expulsion in 510 B. C. E., Harmodius and Aristogeiton were made heroes of Athens, celebrated as patriots, democrats, lovers, and martyrs. Two public statues (the first pillars to commemorate mortal benefactors), created by Antenor, were erected in the agora; *skolia* (drinking songs) celebrated their courage; coins were struck with their image; a law forbade speaking ill of the couple; their descendants were given hereditary privileges, such as *sitesis* (the right to take meals at public expense in the town hall), *ateleia* (exemption from liturgies), and *proedria* (front-row seats in the theater); and their names were prohibited for slaves.

One *skolion* proclaims: "I will carry my sword in a myrtle bough / Just like Harmodios and Aristogeiton / When they killed the tyrant / And made Athens a place of equality under the law." The two lovers are thus presented as a model of *isonomia*, of political equality and responsible rulership.

Thucydides (who, together with Herodotus and Aristotle, is our main source for details about the lives of the couple, who nevertheless remain rather shadowy) stresses the lovers' *eros* time and again, thus linking erotics and politics.

It may also be significant that Harmodius and Aristogeiton, one aristocratic and the other lower in rank, bridged class barriers, representing a particularly democratic mode of sexuality, which was later to be celebrated by such English gay writers as Edward Carpenter and E. M. Forster.

Pausanias, in Plato's *Symposium*, celebrates Harmodius and Aristogeiton as an example of how *eros* can foster idealism. For them, the pursuit of freedom (at least in terms of Athenian ideology) was more important than their life. And in the *Republic*, Plato, again alluding to the famous couple, proposes that the ideal philosopher subdues tyrants, liberates the city, and founds a just regime for all citizens--all because of his erotic attachment to truth.

After Xerxes stole Antenor's statues during the Persian Wars in 480 B. C. E. (returned about 150 years later,



A copy of a classical statue of Harmodius and Aristogeiton. Image appears under the GNU Free Documentation License version 1.2.

probably by Alexander the Great), a second statue group in bronze was erected by Kritios and Nesiotes. In this group, Aristogeiton, the *erastes* or lover, appears mature, steady, and older, while Harmodius, the *eromenos* or beloved, is young, bold, and eager. As customary, both stand in the nude.

As Sara Monoson notes, "their postures are similar, and the composition employs a large number of parallel axes, giving the impression that their movements are choreographed: they are depicted acting in concert, as a unity." The two lovers thus invite comparison to, identification with, and emulation of the Greek pederastic ideal, a homoerotic bond to savor for Greek boys and men alike.

In addition to depiction in art, the couple has also been celebrated in Western literature. For example, Montaigne, in his *Essays*, expresses his love for Etienne de la Boétie by evoking the famous pair (1580-1595); Lord Byron pays tribute to the heroes in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-1818); A. C. Swinburne in "Athens: An Ode" (1882); Edgar Allan Poe in "Hymn to Aristogeiton and Harmodius" (1827); H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) in "Myrtle Bough" (1927); and Mary Renault in *The Praise Singer* (1978). Less flatteringly, even Hitler and Stalin appropriated the two for Nazi and Communist propaganda.

Harmodius and Aristogeiton stand in a long line of homoerotic couples celebrated in the ancient world: Zeus and Ganymede, Apollo and Hyacinthus, Hercules and Hylas, Achilles and Patroclus, Orestes and Pylades, David and Jonathan, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Nisus and Euryalus, Hadrian and Antinous, and Castor and Pollux. On them is based a founding myth that homoerotic love conquers all.

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**Nikolai Endres** received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 2000. As an associate professor at Western Kentucky University, he teaches Great Books, British literature, classics, mythology, and gay and lesbian studies. He has published on Plato, Petronius, Gustave Flaubert, Oscar Wilde, E. M. Forster, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mary Renault, Gore Vidal, Patricia Nell Warren, and others. His next project is a "queer" reading of the myth and music of Richard Wagner. He is also working on a book-length study of Platonic love as a homoerotic code in the modern gay novel.