



## Greece: Ancient

by Eugene Rice

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The institution of pederasty (*paiderastia*) was a conspicuous feature of ancient Greek public and private life.

The gods had boyfriends. Poseidon desired Pelops, seduced him, and took him to Olympus in a golden chariot. Radiant Apollo loved Hyacinthus, the youngest and handsomest son of a king of Sparta, and taught him archery, music, divination, and all the exercises of the wrestling ring. According to the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*:

Wise Zeus abducted fair-haired Ganymede  
For his beauty, to be among the immortals  
And pour wine for the gods in the house of Zeus,  
A marvel to look upon, honoured by all the gods.

The earliest documented instances of man-boy relationships date from the second half of the seventh century B.C.E. For nearly a millennium, texts and artifacts of varying quantity, interest, and weight confirm the ubiquity of pederasty in the Greek-speaking world. Herodotus, the first great historian in the Western tradition, included "copulating with boys" in a list of the "good things of life."

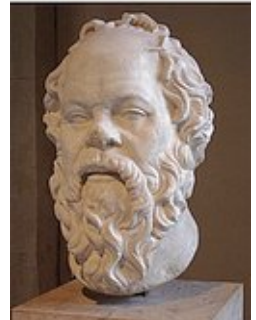
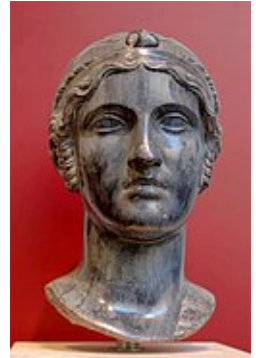
### The Structure of Early Greek Pederasty

The model of pederasty current in archaic and classical Greece paired a citizen of the *polis* (the Greek city-state), by definition a freeborn adult male, and a boy of equal origin, class, and status.

The relationship was overtly sexual but regarded by most citizens as broadly educational as well. Ideally, the relationship should be untainted by money, coercion, or risks to the boy's reputation and masculinity.

The social base of the institution was aristocratic, the pedagogical context preparation of the well-born male for war and citizenship. The haphazard training combined a culture of athletics, public male nudity (at festival games and the gymnasium complex the contestants were always naked), and the symposium or all-male drinking party, site of recitations of epic and lyric poetry, philosophical talk, music and dance, as well as wine, courtship, and carousal. Idealized portraits of symposia are among the most attractive works of Plato and Xenophon (ca 427-ca 354 B.C.E.).

The visual icons of the pederastic culture were sculptures of the young male nude: the marble *kouroi* of the archaic period or, to cite arbitrarily one beautiful example among many, the bronze statue of a youth,



**Top:** A bust of Sappho.  
**Center:** A ceramic object depicting a scene of pederastic seduction (ca 480 B.C.E.).  
**Above:** A bust of Socrates. Photograph by Eric Gaba.

The photograph of the bust of Socrates appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike License.

stylistically reminiscent of Praxiteles, found in 1925 in the sea off Marathon (now in the National Museum, Athens).

## Role

Strict conventions of role and age governed behavior. The lover (*erastes*, plural *erastai*) was aggressive in pursuit; the younger loved one (*eromenos*, plural *eromenoi*) had to be courted with gifts and told in verse how handsome and desirable he was. The sexual role of the *erastes* was perceived as active, that of the *eromenos* as passive. When the mode of intercourse was anal, the *erastes* was the penetrating party. Typically, roles did not alternate in the same relationship.

The appetites attractive boys inspired in their lovers could be so intense that otherwise disinterested observers likened their behavior to madness. The lyric poets named Eros the "bitter-sweet" and the "limb-loosener." They listed the afflictions (*pathemata*) the young god made them suffer: a fluttering heart, ringing ears, a mute tongue, burning skin, cloudy vision, a trembling body, pallor, sweat, and shortness of breath. Boy-crazy *erastai* pictured themselves helpless in the grip of Eros.

About the feelings of *eromenoi*, we know almost nothing. In Plato's *Symposium*, one of the interlocutors asserts that these are the "best" boys, and that "they love men and enjoy living with men and being embraced by men"; but no poem, nor any written word at all, addressed by a boy to his lover survives to support this statement.

Relationships were brief. The *erastes* burned with desire; the properties of the boy were his youth, beauty, and desirability. But as the poets never tire of reminding us, youth and desire are both fleeting, and remain in unison for one season only.

Relationships were unequal as well. One might suppose, rightly, that the inequality favored the boy; for while the *erastes* was a suppliant, the boy was free to respond or not--one of the most common topics of pederastic verse is the arrogant, unresponsive boy. Yet a more important inequality must have favored the man: the unequal expectation of sexual pleasure.

## Age

To say that Greek *erastai* were boy-lovers (*paidophilai* and *paiderastai*) is true but inexact. *Erastai* were pederasts, but not pedophiles in the modern sense.

The canonical ages between which boys could be honorably, publicly solicited for sexual favors were fourteen, the conventional age for the onset of puberty, and eighteen, when ephebes began their military service. Greek *erastai* especially doted on sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds. The poet Scythinus of Teos, a contemporary of Plato, writes, "sixteen is the fatal age when a boy possesses every charm." Some citizens, exceptionally, stretched the limits of desirability downward to twelve and upward to twenty--and, very exceptionally, higher still.

How old were the *erastai*? The youngest were beardless or lightly bearded youths in their late teens and early twenties who were making the transition from pursued to pursuer. The vase painters show them beardless and courting boys only a few years younger than themselves.

About the upper age limit, the vases indicate an *erastes* is adult by showing him with a full black beard.

A helpful clue is age at first marriage. According to Plato and Aristotle, Greek men married in their early to mid thirties. If, as we know to be the case, most *erastai* eventually married and had children, and if many of them afterwards curtailed their pederastic activity as their physicians and conventional opinion pressed them to do, it should follow that the typical *erastes* was a bachelor in his twenties or early thirties.

One of the epigrams of the poet Strato of Sardis (ca 125 C.E.) accurately summarizes the taboos governing age. "It is disgraceful to have sex with underage boys and equally inappropriate to be a lover of young men, for their season is past. But it is twice as disgraceful for a grown-up young man to submit passively to a lover as it is for the lover to desire and seduce him."

There were exceptions. An anonymous papyrus from the second century C.E. asks us to remember how many boys the poet Anacreon (ca 570-485 B.C.E.) and wise Socrates had loved even when their hair was gray and how delightful their lives were in old age because of this. According to his biographer, Antigonus of Carystus, Zeno of Citium (335-263 B.C.E.), founder of the Stoic school of philosophy, never had sex with a woman, but favored boys all his life.

### **Modes of Intercourse**

The testimony of the vases about age differentials is straightforward and dovetails well with the literary evidence. But the relation of picture to text and convention to reality is more difficult to parse in the representation of sexual acts.

When the vases show man-boy copulation, the act is between the thighs and face-to-face. Shall we conclude that the ordinary mode of pederastic intercourse was intercrural?

There are certainly texts, most of them archaic and classical, which would encourage us to think so. Solon, lawgiver of Athens, having fallen in love with a boy in the flower of youth, confessed in verse his "yearning for [the boy's] thighs (*meroi*) and sweet lips." Anacreon begs a youth to make him a gift of his "slender thighs." Ganymede's thighs, wrote Sophocles in the *Colchian Women*, "set Zeus's majesty aflame." And Aeschylus, in *The Mirmidons*, has Achilles, grieving over the body of Patroclus, wildly reproach his dead love for not having kept the "splendor of his thighs" unharmed and safe for him.

Equally compelling evidence over a much longer period makes it plain that anal intercourse was the sexual act men liked best. It was practiced regularly with women as well as with boys. The problem with anal intercourse was that the receptive partner in a male relationship was perceived to be acting sexually like a woman.

Aristophanes (died ca 385 B.C.E.), for example, makes fun of pederasty and cruelly mocks the receptive party in adult relationships. All his examples of male-male sexual intercourse, whether pederastic or androphile, are anal. He defames the passive party as "cistern-assed" or "wide-assed" or a man with a "white rump" (because he shaves his buttocks); and he abuses real persons by calling them *katapugon*, a male who offers his buttocks to another (the word has a pejorative connotation akin to "faggot"). There are many attestations in graffiti of the word *katapugon* and its variants, as in *Olympiodoros katapugon* (on a potsherd found during excavations in the market place of Athens).

Hellenistic, and later, texts confirm the same preference and the same prejudice. Strato, for example, says that during casual calculations he has discovered that the numerical values of the letters in *proktos* (anus) and *chrusos* (gold) are the same: this proves the anus is golden. In his epigrams, lovers want to kiss their *eromenos*, embrace him, sleep with him, and penetrate him anally (*pugizein*, from *puge*, another word for anus).

Otherwise popular sexual acts considered inappropriate for freeborn males in a same-sex relationship were fellatio (typically performed by female prostitutes for their male clients) and masturbation (restricted to foreplay, and practiced solo as a substitute for intercourse).

### **Malakoi and the "Female Disease"**

The usual Greek noun and adjective for the sexually passive male is *malakos* (plural, *malakoi*, and the condition is *malakia*), literally "soft," unmanly or effeminate, a meaning firmly tied to the sexist convictions--more or less universal in Greece--that the male sex is superior to the female, the female is a "crippled male" and an "aberration of nature" (Aristotle), and the male is active by nature and the female passive.

When used in a sexual context, the word always refers to a passive male. In the *Laws*, Plato censured the *malakia* of a man whose sexual behavior imitated that of women. Cratinus, an older contemporary of Aristophanes, satirized such men in his play *Hoi malakoi*. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, an author of the first century B.C.E., called Aristodemus, tyrant of Cumae, *malakos* because as a boy he was effeminate and allowed himself to be penetrated. In Lucian's *Dialogues of the Gods*, Hera calls Zeus a pederast (*paiderastes*) and Ganymede *malakos*. And recall that *malakoi* are the sinners St. Paul pairs with *arsenokoitai* at 1 Corinthians 6: 9-10: the former being the receptive partners in anal intercourse, while the latter are the inserters.

Greeks medicalized, mythologized, and further problematized passive male desire by naming it the "female disease" (*theleia nosos*), a curse (so Herodotus tells us) first visited by Aphrodite on a band of Scythians who had plundered her temple at Ascalon in Syria. The goddess turned her victims into "men-women" (*androgynoi*). This enabling myth would make it easier for later philosophers and doctors of medicine to shame willingly receptive parties in male-male intercourse by diagnosing their preference as the "female disease."

The Hippocratic treatise *Air, Water, and Environment*, names the condition and discusses its feminizing effects in some detail. When Origen, the greatest of the early Greek Christian theologians, wanted to ridicule the emperor Hadrian's *eromenos*, the beautiful Antinous, he claimed that the youth's virility was so precarious he was unable to defend his manhood from the female disease.

We can begin to see why the very boys Plato called "best" because they were so bold and brave and masculine, so obviously destined for military command and public office, could nevertheless by some people be judged shameful, shameful because in their adolescence they had been submissive in same-sex intercourse.

One way Greeks tried to ease the tension between honor and shame that strained the pederastic relationship was to argue that respectable pederasty was, and should be, sexless. This was the solution of Plato and other high-minded reformers.

A more practical tactic was to assume as a given fact of nature that boys, precisely because they were not adults and therefore not citizens, were exempt from the reprobation which fell on passive adults.

Other claims were less plausible. Representing *eromenoi* on vases with tiny unaroused penises and in postures of intercrural rather than anal intercourse (rubbed not penetrated) signalled that decent, modest boys, persuaded to submission only by duty and compassion, got no pleasure from the act, from which it was supposed to follow that even though in fact they allowed themselves to be used sexually as women they were nevertheless free of the female disease.

### **Sappho and Sapphism**

We may get closer to the historical Sappho (she flourished in the first quarter of the sixth century B.C.E.) if we compare her to Socrates, a married man who idolized adolescent boys. Sappho was a married woman who loved adolescent girls. The comparison has ancient sanction: the second-century sophist Maximus of Tyre observed that Socrates and Sappho studied the same kind of love, male-male in the one case, female-female in the other. They were "lovers of many" and allured by all beautiful bodies. "For what Alcibiades, Charmides, and Phaedrus were to Socrates, so were Gyrimna, Atthis, and Anactoria to Sappho."

In sum, the shape of eroticism that emerges from Sappho's single poem to survive complete, and from many of the fragments, appears to have been predominantly pederastic, a female counterpart to the relationship of *erastes* and *eromenos*. Sapphists were not depicted as "acting like men," and Sappho herself cultivated the femininity of her girls as carefully as *erastai* protected the masculinity of their *eromenoi*.

What astonishes still is that the Roman poet Ovid (43 B.C.E.-17 C.E.) is the first author who can be shown with certainty to speak of Sappho's eros for her own sex. For some six centuries after her death, ancient critics, familiar with a far wider range of her poetry than we, pictured Sappho not as a lover of girls but as a promiscuous lover of males. At least four male poets were asserted to have been her lovers. The playwright Menander, writing about 300 B.C.E., launched an early version of a tenacious legend: Sappho fell in love with a handsome ferryman named Phaon; her love was unrequited; in despair, she threw herself off a high cliff into the sea.

In Rome, during the first century C.E., Sappho began to acquire the defining characteristics of a tribade: aggressive, delighting in masculine pursuits, assuming the sexually active role with women. (The word, though Greek, appears for the first time around 90 C.E. in several of Martial's epigrams.) Ovid masculinizes her by reimagining the legendary story of her unrequited love for Phaon as a fable of gender reversal. Ovid portrays Phaon as a tender adolescent, the first down just appearing on his cheeks (when he would have been more appropriately loved by men) and Sappho as a plain, mannish, middle-aged woman who has usurped the role of pursuer.

We catch another moment of transition to tribadism in a verse by Horace--the phrase is "*mascula* Sappho." The adjective has provoked a copious commentary. Some say he meant that Sappho wrote as well as a man, others that Sappho preferred intellectual pursuits to "the distaff and the spindle," or that *mascula* was a reference to the bravery of her suicidal leap.

Gradually, opinion clustered around the view that *mascula* implied tribadism, though the implication was regularly denied. Porphyrius, a third-century commentator on Horace, is explicit: "Sappho is masculine, either because she wrote poetry, an art more often cultivated by men, or because she is maligned as having been a tribade."

### **The Age of Hadrian, and Beyond**

The early structure of pederasty--asymmetry of age and role, mode of intercourse, and the gender troubles associated with consensual passivity--remains surprisingly stable from the classical period to the end of antiquity. At the same time, later Greek texts of a welcome diversity suggest that the male-male sexual culture that flourished in the Greco-Roman *cosmopolis* of the second and third centuries C.E. was more flexible, looser socially, and more egalitarian than that shaped by the constraints of the classical *polis*.

A collection of model love letters by the rhetorician Flavius Philostratus (ca 170-245 C.E.) offers a sample of atypical relationships and attitudes. In one letter, the *erastes* is poor. He is trying to persuade the handsome boy he is in love with to prefer him to rich suitors who are also courting him. The rich, he claims, offer only money; they buy their boyfriends. The poor man offers instead true love and good character: "The rich man calls you his *eromenos*, I call you my master. He calls you his servant, I call you my god."

In another letter, the lover is a foreigner rather than a citizen. He supports his suit by citing famous *eromenoi* who were complaisant to foreigners: Patroclus did not spurn Achilles; Agesilaus, king of Sparta, loved the Persian boy Megabates; Zeus loved Ganymede, a mortal and son of a Trojan prince. The moral: Put aside the restrictive conventions of the past. "Let our tribe be the tribe of Eros!"

In a third letter, all the classical pederastic conventions are overturned. The boy is a prostitute. His happy client, assuming the role of *erastes*, tells him to be proud of his naked beauty and his generosity in sharing

it: "Your house is a citadel of beauty, those who enter are priests and sacred envoys, their payments are tribute money. Rule graciously over your subjects, take their offerings, accept their adoration."

### **Taxonomies of Sexual Orientation**

The earliest surviving classification of sexual preference is Plato's creation myth in the *Symposium*. In the beginning, there were three sexes: male, female, and androgyne, a third sex anatomically both male and female. These creatures were spherical. They had four hands and as many legs, and their faces and genitals were inconveniently located on opposite sides of their bodies. So Zeus ordered Apollo to cut them in half and move their genitals to the front. Each of us, ever since, has been seeking our matching halves, whence Plato's conceit that love is a name for the desire and pursuit of the whole.

Apollo's surgery produced two sexes and three innate inclinations of desire: chips off the male block naturally desire other males; females descended from the primordial female whole naturally desire other females (Plato coins the word *hetairistriaí* to name them).

The third class comprises men and women split from the primitive androgynous sex. Each of them naturally loves and desires only members of the opposite sex. Plato is very close here to modern gay, lesbian, and heterosexual.

### **Ptolemy**

Ptolemy, the great astronomer and mathematician, whose system of planetary motion shaped Western cosmology until Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton displaced it, produced a sexual map far more elaborate than Plato's.

Ptolemy lived and worked in Alexandria in the first half of the second century C.E. His vastly influential astrological work, the *Tetrabiblos* or *Mathematical Treatise in Four Books*, offers a veritable encyclopedia of sexual types devolved from the influence of the planets.

Allied with Venus in honorable positions, for example, Mars makes his subjects erotic, masculine, and passionate for both young men and young women (not boys and girls). These men are also "cheerful, fond of dancing, artistic, spendthrift, quick-tempered, and jealous."

Other configurations of the heavens account for bisexuals who have a preference for boys and bisexuals with a preference for girls. Ptolemy is equally familiar with men with a life-long preference for boys, men infatuated with boys, men who want to copulate only with other adult males, and men who desire males of any age; with men who desire only women and women who desire only men; and with women who desire only women--he uses the word "tribades" to denote them and tells us they call their partners their "lawful wives."

In same-sex relationships, he carefully distinguishes the active and passive parties, making clear his disapproval of the passive in the male pair and the active in the female. When Mars and Venus are unattended in feminine signs, their male subjects become unmanly (*malakoi*), assume the passive role of women, and engage in sexual intercourse contrary to nature (*para phusin*). Tribades, on the other hand, "have sex with other women and perform the functions of males by assuming the active role." This practice, too, is "against nature."

### **Male-directed Eros in the Greek Novel**

Ptolemy's types take on a rounder, more human shape in the fictive characters of the Greek romances of the second and third centuries C.E. The central narrative running through them all is the tale of a young man and young woman from the urban elite who fall in love at first sight, swear eternal fidelity but are

separated, undergo wild and dangerous misadventures, manage to retain their virginity, find each other again, marry, and consummate their mutual love.

Paralleling this heterosexual narrative are stories of male same-sex romance. In these, the male characters are said to be "by nature lovers of boys," like rude Gnathon in Longus's *Daphnis and Chloe*, or they are described more generally as driven by "male-directed eros," like Clinias and Menelaus in Achilles Tatius's *Leucippe and Clitophon*.

In an influential passage of *Leucippe and Clitophon*, Clitophon and Menelaus, a young Egyptian he meets on his travels, debate the respective merits of love of women and love of boys. What are useful to retain from a discussion stuffed with what were already clichés are the suggestions that the sexual dispositions of Clinias (who is Clitophon's cousin and best friend) and Menelaus, both lovers of boys, are permanent and exclusive, that love of males equals love of women (for the debate ends in a draw), and that "male-directed eros" defines a condition very close to what we call sexual orientation, which is itself an astronomical and astrological term.

There are other examples of exclusive orientation and long-term attachment in the *Ephesian Tale* of Xenophon of Ephesus. The hero (Habrocomes) and heroine (Anthia) are attracted only to each other. A third character is Habrocomes's best friend, Hippothous, described as a lover of males (rather than of boys).

After the accidental death by drowning of his first love, a youth the same age as himself named Hyperanthes, Hippothous has become a brigand and taken part in any number of improbable adventures. Eventually, a rich old woman falls in love with him, and poverty provides enough incentive for him to marry her. She dies soon after, leaving him her money.

Free again, and a man of means, he shares his good fortune with his second great love, a handsome young Sicilian aristocrat named Cleisthenes.

At the end of the novel, Habrocomes and Anthia at last consummate their marriage, and Hippothous "marries" handsome Cleisthenes by adopting him as his son. After Hippothous erects a great tomb for Hyperanthes on the island of Lesbos, the two couples settle in Ephesus and live happily, side-by-side, ever after.

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