



Mediterranean Homosexuality

by Matthew D. Johnson

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The Mediterranean basin has borne a paradoxical dual symbolism in the northern European consciousness. On the one hand, the Mediterranean has been regarded as the cradle of human (but more particularly European) civilization, the birthplace of philosophic and aesthetic ideals that have served to guide subsequent initiatives in the arts and sciences for millennia. On the other hand, the Mediterranean has been viewed as a seductive zone inhabited by sexually licentious perverts, notably men who desired and had sex with pubescent boys.

Some admirers of the achievements of classical Greece or the early modern Italian city-states refused to reconcile the fact that many of their idols personified social mores that were in flagrant contradiction with the imagined ideals of a pan-European civilization, as well as the very real sexual customs and religious attitudes of northern European societies. "Omit: a reference to the unspeakable vice of the Greeks," a Cambridge don cautions his students in E. M. Forster's 1914 novel *Maurice*, as they read Plato's *Symposium* aloud.

Yet other philhellenes (including several, such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, and John Addington Symonds, who were among homosexual liberation's early luminaries) found a synergy in the cultural productions and the alleged sexual excesses of men such as Socrates, Aristotle, Alexander, Hadrian, Leonardo, Michaelangelo, and the Sufi ecstatic Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi. Modern European lesbians drew strongly on the works of Sappho for inspiration and identification.

More recently, the concept of "Mediterranean homosexuality" has been adduced as a contrast to the predominant form of same-sex sexuality in Western Europe and North America. In this contrast, Mediterranean homosexuality is seen as characterized by a sharp dichotomy between active and passive partners, with only the passive partner in sexual relations ascribed a homosexual identity (and stigmatized), while the homosexuality predominant in North America and Western Europe is seen as one that emphasizes egalitarian relationships in which sexual roles are not rigidly polarized. Moreover, in the Mediterranean basin same-sex sexual relationships are often assumed to be age-asymmetrical and perceived in terms of adult male privilege. However useful such generalizations may be, the reality of Mediterranean homosexuality (as well as North American and Western European homosexuality) may be more complex than theory can accommodate.

The Mediterranean as a Site of Sexual Deviance

As social opprobrium and legal prosecution for sexual minorities mounted in northern Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, more and more northern European men and women came to see the Mediterranean as not simply a psychic but also a literal refuge, a place where the inhabitants were unabashed in their sexual expression and where, consequently, their own repressed fantasies could at last be consummated. This idea flourished in the literature and art of the time--from Goethe to the English Romantics, from Leo Tolstoy to Henry James, from D. H. Lawrence to Lawrence of Arabia. The tradition has been continued in contemporary film representations of locations such as Tuscany.

Nor is this knee-jerk identification of the Mediterranean as a site of sexual deviance strictly a modern invention. By the close of the fifteenth century, Italian men had cultivated a reputation for sodomy that was known far and wide north of the Alps. Reformers such as Martin Luther even played upon this scandalous reputation in their widely published (if often libelous) attacks on the corruption and decadence of the Roman Catholic Church. No doubt such pamphleteering may have had the unintended effect of luring others to the South in search of this well-advertised vice.

What these representations of "Mediterranean" sexual life ignore, however, is the limited extent to which the societies of the Mediterranean basin share customs in common, as well as the fact that these customs have changed over time. The Rome of the early Empire is not the same as the Rome of the sixteenth century C. E., which in turn is not the same as Rome today. Moreover, these societies have their own proscriptions for sexual behavior that, while they may be dissimilar from northern European mores, are no less rigidly codified in their particulars.

Theories of Mediterranean Culture

Contemporary interest in developing a general theory of "Mediterranean" culture is likely derived from works of mid-twentieth century comparative anthropology that speculated about the role of honor and shame in national cultures such as Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, Turkey, the Balkan States, and emerging post-colonial states in Palestine and North Africa. While these studies do not directly address homosexual behavior, sexual expression and gender relations certainly play an integral role in the honor/shame matrix.

Beginning in the 1970s, studies in the history of homosexuality have postulated that Mediterranean societies have followed a different and even atavistic socio-historical trajectory regarding sexuality. Attitudes conditioning gender relations and intergenerational relations, resulting in absolute adult male sexual privilege over the bodies of both women and boys, have often been assumed to have been widespread throughout the Mediterranean basin and to have largely resisted change from the time of Socrates up to the present day.

Scholars such as Randolph Trumbach have gone so far as to propose the existence of a "Mediterranean model" of male homosexual behavior, in which sexual relations are strongly stratified by the relative ages of the partners. This "age-differentiated" model of homosexual relations is imagined to stand in contradistinction to a "gender-differentiated" model common to other societies around the globe. In the latter model, homosexual behavior requires a change in gender status or identity on the part of one or both partners in order to be consummated. The two models are supposed to be antithetical to one another; indeed, in the European context, the "gender-differentiated" model is assumed to have incrementally superseded the "age-differentiated" model in the centuries following the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution.

Qualifications to the Theories

Yet comparing historical and ethnographic evidence from various Mediterranean societies suggests that this distinction is not so absolute, nor its transformation so seamless. In fifth-century B. C. E. Athens, for example, sex between males that was socially sanctioned was conceived as a pedagogical relation between a man and a boy of approximately equal class status, if not age. Sexual relations, instigated by the elder, insertive partner, were considered an element of the youth's initiation into manhood and participation in civic life.

But the Attic conception of permissible sex between males, which has been liberally described, reviled, and celebrated in both antique and modern times, appears to be a rather idiosyncratic phenomenon. Later Mediterranean societies followed the same pattern of stratification by age in male-male sexual relations, but without the same larger social significance. Sex between males in fifteenth-century Florence, for

example, was stratified along lines of class as well as age, with unwed bourgeois men seeking out the favors of boys who prostituted themselves on city streets for clothes and other niceties. There was no question here of boys being initiated into manhood, except insofar as boys adopted an insertive role in intercourse upon reaching a certain age, as did Athenian men nearly two thousand years before.

Early modern Florence, as described by Michael Rocke, also provides an example of the curious social and legal approbations attached to male-male sexuality in the Mediterranean basin. Religious reformers railed from the pulpit against the crime of sodomy, so ubiquitous in Florence that an estimated two-thirds of the male population had engaged in it. The city-state went so far as to establish a special tribunal that occupied itself solely with sodomy prosecutions, and encouraged the citizenry to inform on practitioners of this vice via anonymous "tip" boxes in prominent locations around the city.

Yet, perhaps because of its ubiquity, the typical sentence for a convicted Florentine sodomite was a small fine, no more punitive than a contemporary parking ticket. Many prominent men were convicted more than once without much apparent damage to their reputations. In northern Europe, meanwhile, sodomy was much less aggressively policed, but the handful of prosecutions most frequently ended in execution.

Conceptions of Masculinity

In both classical Athens and Renaissance Florence, the apparent impunity of sodomy has been explained by the sodomites' adherence to a culturally normative conception of masculinity, one in which adult male sexual privilege extended to women and boys (but not to other adult men), and in which effeminate behavior in men was deemed intolerable.

In the comedies of Aristophanes and in Roman satire, for example, effeminate men who desire to be sexually penetrated by men (and thus usurp the role of boys) are roundly ridiculed and denigrated; Amy Richlin has described these figures, characterized by the Greek *kinaidos* or the Latin *mollis*, as the proper historical antecedents to the modern homosexual. Florentine men who had a reputation for effeminacy, or who continued to engage in sodomy once they were of marriageable age, appear to have suffered more at the hands of the tribunal than others.

Yet in contemporary Mediterranean-influenced societies, effeminacy and receptivity in intercourse as markers of homosexuality appear to occasion a larger degree of tolerance than men who pass as normatively masculine and engage in sex with men nonetheless. As George Varas, a New Yorker of mixed Greek and West Indian heritage, states in an interview with author Ron Suresha: "On the Latin side . . . it seemed that you were accepted, in an odd sort of way, if you were effeminate or not very butch. It was almost expected that there would be men who were *maricones*, if you will. If you happened to be a regular butch guy who only liked guys, though, they didn't like that at all. That was almost as if you were infiltrating them, or perhaps shaking their foundations of what manliness was supposed to be."

Complex Realities

Historical and literary explorations of "Mediterranean homosexuality" do not admit much of the complexity hinted at here.

Even as the projection of northern European sexual fantasies onto an imagined, exotic "Mediterranean Other" has served to obscure elements shared among sexual cultures in the region, as well as regions such as Latin America that have been heavily influenced by Mediterranean customs, it has generated tremendous cultural productions in its own right, contributions that are key to understanding northern European conceptions of sexual propriety and homosexuality. Ultimately, the idea of "Mediterranean Homosexuality" may say more about northern Europe than about same-sex sexuality in the Mediterranean.

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