



This detail from a design on a ceramic cup (ca 480 B.C.E.) depicts an adult man kissing a youth.

Pederasty

by Vern L. Bullough

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Pederasty (or Greek *Paederasteia*) is the erotic relationship between an adult male and a boy, generally one between the ages of twelve and seventeen, in which the older partner is attracted to the younger one who returns his affection.

Greek Pederasty

Such relationships were widespread in ancient Greece, so much so that Plato called the relationship the feature that distinguished Hellenistic civilization from "barbarian" cultures. William Percy, one of the more recent scholars on the topic, believes the custom was not institutionalized in Greece until the seventh century B. C. E., when marriage was either forbidden or strongly discouraged for men before their thirtieth year.

The term pederasty is a more specific one than pedophilia, since it is age-controlled (no young children) and excludes females. One of the purposes the Greeks advanced for such relationships was to teach the boy how to become a man.

Although there are many references to the custom in both the surviving Greek and Roman literature, most scholars have been reluctant to discuss the subject, and few traditional histories of Greek life or culture by modern writers included a discussion of it until the last part of the twentieth century. Some individuals, notably the Marquis de Sade and Friedrich Nietzsche, earlier discussed institutionalized pederasty in Greece, but their writings on this topic were generally ignored by scholars.

Many scholars who acknowledge the existence of Greek pederasty are unwilling to look upon it as involving sexual activity. Some couples undoubtedly limited their physical contact to the gymnasium--wrestling, reclining together on couches, but not going beyond kissing and fondling. Some presumably ejaculated between the thighs or buttocks of the boys, yet others, perhaps most, penetrated their lover anally. Such activities appear on vase or other paintings.

Oral genital contact was apparently rare and was much disapproved of in the few passages that mention it. Greek sources, according to Percy, do not speak about mutual masturbation or fisting, although the Greeks did have a word for inserting a finger into the anus.

One of the questions that recent students of Greek culture have not been able to answer is whether pederasty led to androphilia, that is, homosexual relations between adults. The evidence is unclear. Both Brongersma and Eglinton insist on the difference between pederasty and androphilia. Social constructionists, such as David Halperin, argue that pederasty did lead to androphilia, while Dover says the evidence does not unequivocally support such a view.

Outside the Greek Tradition

Pederastic relationships are known outside of the Greek tradition, and there are many societies in which the principal homosexual love object for males is the adolescent boy. Such relationships have been known in Korea, Japan, China, and many of the Islamic countries where contact between males and females was limited.

Among the Sambia of Papua New Guinea, pederasty is a traditional practice. In this society, the ingestion of semen via fellatio is believed essential for a boy's proper masculine development. The boys are inseminated from about age eight until around age fifteen, then they become inseminators until they are married, at which time they cease regular same-sex sexual practices.

Pederasty in the West

In the West, the relationship between the predominantly androphilic homophile movement and the pederasts has been contentious. Though some in the American gay community welcomed what they called boy lovers, most excluded them for political if no other reasons.

In Germany a separate pederastic-oriented movement, the *Gemeinschaft der Eigenen* (Community of the Exceptional), was organized at the turn into the twentieth century and created its own literature. One of the first writers of note was the anarchist John Henry Mackay who, writing under the pseudonym of Sagitta, composed a whole series of books in defense of boy love at the beginning of the twentieth century. Adolf Brand and Benedict Friedlaender and to a lesser extent Hans Blüher also wrote about pederastic love in German.

In England and America, in the period from the end of the Victorian era to the period between the World Wars, a pederastic-oriented poetic movement developed, now known as the Uranian Poets. These writers turned to the extensive pederastic literature of the ancient world for inspiration, but focused on the trials, tribulations, challenges, and rewards of boy love in a Christian society intolerant of their love.

In the United States, J.Z. Eglinton's *Greek Love* (1964) defended the rights of pederasts. Beginning in the 1950s local groups in the Netherlands and in Scandinavia, West Germany, Belgium, and Switzerland appeared. From 1987 to 1997 a scholarly journal, *Paidika*, edited by Joseph Geraci, was published in the Netherlands. The journal, after years of harassment, concluded its ten years of publication with a book-length final edition.

NAMBLA, the North American Man/Boy Love Association was organized in Boston in 1978. Despite repeated attempts by American authorities to suppress it, the association continues to publish a *Bulletin*, carefully vetted of material that the government might use to attack it.

Conclusion

In Greco-Roman antiquity, the predominant form of same-sex sexual relationships was pederastic, but in the modern West the predominant form is androphilic. Hence, the pederast in contemporary times is definitely a minority within a minority.

Moreover, what was an institutionalized practice in ancient Greece is frequently seen as a subversive and corrupting activity in the contemporary West, with the adult partner subject to draconian penalties for engaging in sexual activities with an underage boy.

The glbtq movement for equality has largely distanced itself from pederasty, in part because homophobes have often accused homosexuals of child molestation and "recruitment," but also because there are real questions about the effects of age-asymmetrical sexual relationships on adolescents.

Although most pederastic relationships are consensual, and often involve mentoring and support for the

youthful partner from the adult, there is nearly always a power imbalance that makes such relationships unequal. Many adults who had such relationships in their adolescence remember them fondly. Not all do.

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About the Author

Vern L. Bullough, a SUNY Distinguished Professor Emeritus, also founded the Center for Sex Research at California State University, Northridge. He was the author, co-author, or editor of more than 50 books, about half of which deal with sex and gender issues. A past president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, he earned numerous awards for his writing and research, including the Kinsey award. He wrote more than 150 refereed articles, and hundreds of others. During his career, he lectured in most of the 50 states, and in more than 25 foreign countries.