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The Myth Of Homosexuality In Ancient Greece

 Council of European Canadians



by [Archie Munro](#)
(Traduit en français)

The belief that ancient Greek society maintained an indulgent attitude towards homosexuality — particularly pederasty — is widely held, both without and within WN circles. Greg Johnson, for example, [says](#):

Homosexual pederasty, which still remains a taboo in our culture, was widely practiced by the ancient Aryan peoples of the Mediterranean world. The Persians, Greeks, and Romans all practiced it, including some of the manliest men in history and legend, like Achilles and Alexander the Great.

There is no question that homosexual behavior was not only tolerated by ancient Aryan peoples, it was considered normal, in some cases even ideal. It was ascribed to the gods (Zeus and Ganymede) and lauded by poets, philosophers, and historians. It is hard to maintain hateful Jewish attitudes toward homosexuality if one really understands and appreciates the greatness of classical pagan civilization ... Queer-bashers are in the grip of Jewry without even knowing it.

[Adonis Georgiades](#) disagrees. He is the current vice-president of Greece's New Democracy party and a man of socially conservative but economically liberal convictions (for example, he

cast his vote in the Greek parliament in favour of the notorious ‘second memorandum’). His 2004 book, *Homosexuality in Ancient Greece: The Myth is Collapsing* (available online [here](#)), is a polemical review of the evidence. To Georgiades, the evidence demonstrates that homosexuality was not considered acceptable, let alone ‘ideal’, in ancient Greece. The sources he examines include but are not limited to the following.

- Greek mythology;
- the works of Athenian comic poets, such as Aristophanes;
- vase illustrations;
- the laws of Athens and Sparta as seen in: descriptions by various authors of antiquity, including Plutarch, of Spartan sexual mores;
- Timarchus’ and Demosthenes’ unsuccessful legal suit, brought in Athens in 346-5 BC, against Aeschines;
- the counter-case successfully brought to conclusion by Aeschines against Timarchus.

Crucially, Georgiades also considers the translation of two pairs of ancient Greek words. The first, examined principally through the works of Plato and Xenophon, is *erastes-eromenos*. This pair is conventionally but, according to Georgiades, quite misleadingly rendered in English as ‘lover’-‘loved one’. The second is the distinction between the terms *pornos* (‘male prostitute’) and *hetairos* (‘male companion’). As the book shows, this second distinction is particularly relevant to the Aeschines-Timarchus lawsuit mentioned above. The successfully prosecuted case against Timarchus indicates that — in Athens at least — even unpaid homosexual conduct was sufficient to expose the practitioner to the risk of losing his civil rights. I will return later to Georgiades account of the primary sources.

My overall impression, as a non-specialist, is that Georgiades’ conclusions are sound, original and worthy of a wider readership. Perhaps the book’s greatest weakness is the poor quality of the translation and proofreading. The purpose I have in mind here, however, is not to review the book exhaustively. Instead I will summarise its most important arguments and then try to illuminate its most interesting, though not entirely explicit, theme: ‘pederastic’ relationships in ancient Greece, far from being motivated by the sexual drives of older men towards younger, were an aspect of what Kevin MacDonald might call the group evolutionary strategy of the Greek polis. The men of ancient Greece did not live in a Freudian haze; they were concerned with identifying transcendent reality and bringing it about in their community, for the sake of the common good. I will explain further on what I mean by this. First, though, I will say a little about my own motivations in writing this article.

The conventional position on Greek homosexuality has two main parts:

1. homosexual behaviour was more acceptable and (therefore) prevalent in ancient Greece than in the Christian West; and
2. pederasty in particular was commonly practiced, at least by the Greek elites.

I won't bother to pretend that I approach these arguments with an open mind. In fact, I find them at once disturbing and logically implausible. They are disturbing mainly because they are implicitly Freudian. The underlying assumption appears to be that Greek society did not repress 'natural' tendencies to 'polymorphous perversity'. This means that, for example, sexual relationships between older and younger men were thought normal. According to this view, the *erastes-eromenos* relationship was a sort of institutionalised pederastic cruising — at its core, merely an expression of the base sexual urges of individual men. The truth, however, is that the ancient polis was a collectivist entity which produced, for its size, a greater share of accomplished men than any other type of state in history.



There is another disquieting aspect of the theory. It is a commonplace that ancient Greece was the 'cradle of Western civilisation'. But constantly repeated claims that the sexual mores of Greece were qualitatively different from those of the traditional West are designed to deny our perception of fundamental continuity with this heritage. I think there is in it, too, an insinuation that the absence of sexual strictures in Greek society forestalled the development of sexual neuroses in talented individuals and so allowed them to realise their own greatness. In familiar Freudian style, the theory pathologises the traditional Christian West. Even at the risk of being accused of committing the 'moralistic fallacy', I would say that there are very good reasons for being suspicious of claims that the free expression of homosexuality was approved of in ancient Greece.

This brings me to the theory's *prima facie* implausibility. Its corollary is that we are supposed to accept that all (or most) men of all ages would engage in pederasty if it were not subject to social repression. We are asked to believe that many of the greatest men of ancient Greece — real or mythical and in all fields of endeavour — were either pederasts or homosexuals of some other kind. Among such men, allegedly, are Solon, Socrates, Sophocles, Alexander the Great, Aeschylus, Alcibiades, Achilles, the Theban Sacred Band (which may not even have fought at the decisive battles of Leuctra and Chaeronea) and the elite Spartan hippeis. Many of the Olympian gods are said to have been similarly characterised.

Perhaps there is some demonstrable correlation between homosexual behaviour and greatness; if so, I am unaware of it. But the fact is that, even in the contemporary, post-Christian West, in which traditional morality is everywhere under assault and 'polymorphous perversity' on the verge of wholesale institutional approval, homosexuality remains uncommon. Is the assertion of thoroughgoing homosexuality in ancient Greece credible, then, on the basis of numbers alone? I am inclined to think not.

I am equally unconvinced by the theory that the condemnation of homosexuality in the West is nothing but a Jewish artefact which came to us with Christianity. The most economical explanation, it seems to me, is that the dog wagged the tail rather than the other way around: Christian dislike of homosexuality was fundamentally a reflection of the fact that traditional Western society regarded it as undesirable. In short, I can't see how the truth of the matter can be perceived from within either a tacitly Freudian or an anti-Christian framework.

In assessing the social acceptability or otherwise of homosexuality, it is of course important to discriminate among the respective attitudes of the law, the lower classes, the upper classes and the intelligentsia. It is conceivable, for example, that the law may have penalised the practice even as artists and philosophers — especially would-be state makers such as Plato — idealised it. Georgiades, I think, succeeds in demonstrating that homosexuality was universally thought unacceptable: penalised in law and deplored by all social classes, including by philosophers such as Plato. There are four main lines of attack in his book.

Firstly, there are the relatively short chapters on homosexuality in the Greek myths and on the treatment of the subject by the comic poets of Athens. Both chapters can be dealt with quite briefly.

Homer was the first to write down two myths which have become vital to the Greek homosexuality narrative — those of Achilles and Patroclus, and of Zeus and Ganymede. Homer himself never characterises the relationship between either pair as in any way homosexual (despite this, [Wikipedia](#) informs us that "The myth was a model for the Greek social custom of *paiderastía*, the socially acceptable romantic relationship between an adult male and an adolescent male").

Xenophon, in his 4th century BC Symposium, has Socrates agreeing with Homer. He argues in the following terms about the relationship between Zeus and Ganymede.

Zeus let the women he fell for to remain mortal, if he loved them for their physical beauty; but he made immortal whomever he loved for the beauty of their souls. Among them you can see Heracles, the Dioscouri and others. I also claim that Ganymede was brought to Olympus for the beauty of his soul, not of his body. His very name confirms what I am saying, as it is said about it in a passage from Homer, 'One takes pleasure in listening to him'. There is also another passage from Homer which says 'one who had wise thoughts'. So, if Ganymede has got his name after these two, he has been honoured among the gods not for his pleasant body, but for his wisdom.

I will come back later to the philosophical distinction between 'celestial' and 'vulgar' love.

The Athenian comic poets had an irreverently hostile attitude to homosexuality. Aristophanes, for instance, uses such epithets as *katapigon* ('given to unnatural lust') and *euriproktos* ('wide-breeched'). What is more, Georgiades says:

Aristophanes, willing to express his aversion towards this act, never uses the words *erastes-eromenos*, 'lover-loved one'.

This is another, highly significant, word pair I will return to in time. The plot of the famous play *Lysistrata* is also instructive. According to Georgiades:

In this play Athenian women decide not to have sex with their husbands, in order to force them to stop the war with Sparta. If homosexuality was so widely practiced, this decision would mean nothing to men, since they could turn to each other to satisfy their desires. But this is not what happens. On the contrary, men give way rather quickly, because they cannot stand this compulsory abstinence.

Georgiades disputes that Aristophanes was writing for a lower class audience, and therefore pandering to their prejudices against homosexuality, while the upper class had no such prejudices. The patrons of the Classical theatre were, after all, drawn from the Athenian aristocracy. If the heads of the polis were really idealisers of homosexual behaviour, why would Aristophanes have been so insulting towards it?

Next, the book re-examines the evidence from vase illustrations, the source most often cited to support the notion of widespread and socially-condoned homosexuality in ancient Greece. Georgiades states that approximately 80,000 complete pieces of Attic ware remain, an estimated 1 per cent of the total produced during the Archaic and Classical eras. In the most influential modern study of the subject, [Greek Homosexuality](#), by Kenneth Dover, 600 of these vases are cited as containing 'homoerotic' themes. But, Georgiades says, only about 30 of the 600 pots depict homosexual scenes. The rest:

... are totally irrelevant, showing heroes, battles or mythological themes, or represent heterosexual scenes.

Moreover, anal penetration involving men or boys is never shown:

Only satyrs take part in scenes [involving anal penetration], and satyrs were known to be perverted and were represented as such.

Georgiades further asserts that the remainder of the 30 homosexual scenes—pederastic acts, involving an older and a younger man or boy—show either sexual fondling or ‘intercrucial intercourse’. The latter, Georgiades believes, was not practiced in real life. Instead, it was a sort of artistic stand-in for homosexual anal sex and had to be used in a culture in which a vase painter could hint at the act but never depict it openly, likely owing to general public revulsion. If it could be unreservedly accepted, this clever speculation would further undermine the case for the normalcy of homosexuality in ancient Greece. However, this is the only aspect of Georgiades’ critique which, to my mind, is somewhat doubtful. There are, for instance, the first, seventh and ninth illustrations [here](#), none of which appears to involve satyrs. The first is fairly obviously inauthentic—an example of the sorts of modern, mass-produced lookalikes that can be found in many tourist shops in Greece (the photo even looks as though it was taken in a tourist shop). The ninth and most egregious seems to depict Zeus and Ganymede. I am unsure of its authenticity, but the facial expression of Zeus is anomalous. The seventh likely involves a woman and two men. Still, since I cannot find confirmation of the provenance of these three pieces, I reserve my judgment on the matter.



Even with such hesitations duly conceded, it’s hardly necessary to point out that representations of human homosexual practices on vases are not necessarily evidence of their social acceptability. Although I cannot unequivocally accept his argument that only satyrs are involved in homosexual scenes, if Georgiades’ claims for the figures are accurate, Dover and other purveyors of the ‘gay vase theory’ have still engaged in a sleight of hand: 30 of the 600 cited vases amounts to a mere five per cent of the total. Perhaps to make up the shortfall,

Dover uses his imagination. Georgiades quotes several examples. Apparently, in one scene, showing a warrior:

... a spear, carried pointing halt downwards, prolongs the line of a youth's penis, and its blade and blade-socket symbolise the glands and retracted foreskin.

Once such inventive interpretations are discounted, the much-touted the 'gay vase theory' seems, to put it mildly, a bit weak.

Thirdly, Georgiades looks at accounts of the sexual mores of Sparta and Athens, as glimpsed through accounts of their laws. The picture is of a Sparta which heavily penalised pederasty. According to Xenophon's *Respublica Lacedaemoniorum*, Lycurgus, the (semi-)mythical Spartan lawgiver:

... approved only of when a person, being such as he had to be and admiring a boy's moral and intellectual self, tried to be his blameless friend and associate with him; he (Lycurgus) even thought of this as the most noble form of education. But, when one turned out to yearn for the boy's body, which was the basest thing to do according to Lycurgus, he ordered that lovers should hold themselves off the loved boys, just as parents or brothers abstain from having sexual intercourse with their children or brothers.

The morality of the Spartans (here, 'Lacedaemonians'), as depicted in Xenophon's *Symposium*, is also set firmly against pederasty. In this passage Socrates equates it with *anaideia*: 'shamelessness'.

Lacedaemonians ... believe that a loved boy cannot succeed in anything noble, when one yearns for his body ...

Plutarch speaks of the severity of Spartan punishments for pederasty:

The aim was to love the moral and intellectual self of earnest boys and, when a man was accused of approaching them with lust, he was deprived of civic rights for life.

It's worth noting that, normally, Plutarch is heavily relied on by pro-homosexuality scholars as a source. A number of other things are worth mentioning about this passage.

First is the distinction it makes between 'celestial' and 'vulgar', or sexual, love. Both Xenophon and Plutarch attribute this distinction to the thought of even the relatively unphilosophical Spartans. It is best encapsulated in English by the word 'Platonic', but, as we will see, it has a lineage in ancient Greek thought which long precedes Plato. Second is the use of the phrase 'earnest boys', which connotes studiousness, industry and seriousness — all qualities indispensable to leading participants in the political life of the Greek polis. Third is that the penalty for pederasty specified is the complete loss of an individual's right to involvement in Spartan politics.

Athenian law, for its part, mandated a heavy fine or death to pederasts loitering about schools or making lewd suggestions to boys:

If someone insults [in this instance, Georgiades says, ‘insult’ has the sense of ‘being lustful to someone’] a child, woman or man, free or slave, he should be denounced by any Athenian to the six junior archons and they should bring the case before court within thirty days, if there aren't other urgent public affairs; if there are, whenever this is possible. And, when he is found guilty, he must immediately be sentenced to pay a fine or be executed.

Moreover, the case of Timarchus shows that the Athenians penalised homosexual relations of all kinds, even between adult males, with great severity.

In 346 BC, when war between Athens and Macedon was imminent, Aeschines was accused by Demosthenes, through Timarchus, of having accepted bribes from Philip II of Macedon during his service as ambassador to the northern Greek kingdom. Aeschines responded by bringing a counter-suit against Timarchus which alleged that he had engaged in homosexual behaviour. Aeschines' intention was to demonstrate that Timarchus was for this reason unfit to bring a suit against him in an Athenian court. The counter-suit was successful: Timarchus was effectively disenfranchised. But what kinds of homosexual acts was Timarchus accused of?

The usual explanation is that Timarchus is alleged to have prostituted himself and that this was the reason for his being barred from participation in political life. Georgiades' view is otherwise. He shows that Aeschines' speech, which quotes extensively from the laws of Athens, uses the word *hetairos* ('male companion'), not *pornos* ('male prostitute'), in reference to Timarchus. One of the meanings of *hetairos* is, apparently, an unpaid (though, in Timarchus' case, a 'kept') homosexual partner.

Furthermore, Georgiades contends that civic exclusion was one possible sentence — the other was a heavy fine — for those accused of being either a *pornos* or a *hetairos*, in the relevant sense of the word. This argument is again backed by excerpts from Aeschines' speech.

According to Georgiades, the case against Timarchus demonstrates that not only prostitutes but also the 'passive' and the 'active' *hetairos* were subject to the penalty of civic exclusion. In this case the 'active' *hetairos*, Misgolas, who admitted to having 'kept' the 'passive' Timarchus, paid a fine of 1,000 drachmae rather than face the court.

Aeschines' speech was contrived to appeal to the sentiments of an Athenian jury, which comprised members drawn from all social classes. As pointed out [here](#), it is more than probable that Aeschines anticipated that his citing of anti-homosexual legislation would find approval among all Athenians, regardless of their social class. This, along with the attitudes expressed in the plays of Aristophanes and the paucity of the evidence from vase paintings, suggests that there is no good reason to believe that either the Athenian government or its elite was any more pro-homosexuality in its outlook than were the common people.

So much, then, for the legal status of homosexual behaviour in Sparta and Athens.

Finally, there is a crucial chapter which discusses the true meaning of *erastes-eromenos*, generally translated into English as ‘lover’-‘loved one’. I mentioned earlier Georgiades’ account of the very harsh punishments meted out to men in both Athens and Sparta who preyed on boys. Such punitive laws alone imply that those Athenians, including Plato and Xenophon, who used the terms *erastes-eromenos* (no primary sources from Sparta have survived) are unlikely to have used them to denote pederasty in the modern sense of the word.

In essence, Georgiades’ argument is that, to the ancient Greeks, the word pair *erastes-eromenos* (as well as the word *paiderastia*) did not denote homosexual relations. Instead, the *erastes* was the mentor, the *eromenos* his protégé, and *paiderastia* the non-sexual relationship between them.

The philosophical underpinning of relationships among older and younger men was in the distinction between two impulses given to men by Aphrodite — the ‘celestial’ and ‘vulgar’ love I mentioned earlier. Greek gods are well known for their multiple attributes, and an older man’s love of a younger male citizen of his city was expected to be inspired solely by the ‘celestial’, not the ‘vulgar’, Aphrodite.



Those who attempt to represent Plato’s *Symposium* as praising sexual pederasty are therefore, according to Georgiades, mistaken. Of ‘vulgar’ and ‘celestial’ love, Plato in fact says:

... love of the vulgar Aphrodite is, just as its name signifies, vulgar and acting occasionally. And it is the one which takes control of the vulgar people. These people ... care only for the sexual act itself and are neglectful of whether it is moral or not ... But love of celestial Aphrodite is the one where women do not take part, only men. This is pederasty. And it is the older and the chastest kind of love. So, those who are animated by this form of love, turn to males, because they love the most vigorous and thoughtful.

Georgiades argues that this passage can be taken as a clear statement against sexual pederasty. The ‘pederastic’ relationship — that is, between *erastes* and *eromenos*, or ‘lover’ and ‘loved one’ — was to be educational, not sexual. Plato again:

... there are also those with fecund souls, those who bear, in their souls more than in their bodies, the things that deserve to be born from the soul ... And, since he is waiting to give birth, he embraces beautiful bodies rather than ugly ones, and, if he meets a beautiful, brave and noble soul, he embraces more eagerly this combination of body and soul. To such a person he speaks, without difficulty, of virtue, of how an honest man should be, of which activities suit him; and he tries to educate him.

In short: beautiful bodies, beautiful souls (and minds). The philosophers of the greatest centuries of ancient Greece, such as Pythagoras, Parmenides, Socrates and Plato himself, differentiate between the perfection of an immutable superlunary reality, on the one hand, and the transitory and unreal material world on the other. It is from the pre-Socratics that Plato derives his famous 'allegory of the cave'. To engage in 'celestial' love of the soul and intellect is, in a sense, to know reality. To practice 'vulgar' love of the body is to be constrained by the base and illusory world of matter. Georgiades shows that Plato's attitude towards homosexuality was not fundamentally different from the shared outlook of all classes and the law in ancient Athens. To him, as to them, homosexuality was base.

The Greeks in general identified physical beauty, morality and intellectual ability very closely with one another. Physical beauty carried with it the suggestion that its owner was closer to the heavens — like Ganymede, better human material in every way — than others less gifted. It could be argued that it's easy to be misled by Plato's talk of 'beautiful bodies', and perhaps on this basis the charitable would give the motivations of pro-homosexuality scholars the benefit of the doubt. But Georgiades is in no doubt in concluding that the 'pederasty' of the Greek polis was biopolitical, not sexual. He does not use this word, but his summing up amounts to much the same thing. The 'pederastic' relationship was:

... a most educational one. Its aim was to initiate the adolescent Athenians not in mathematics or music, but in the secrets of social life, the way the system of government was functioning, the good manners, the moral values, virtue and, also, the dangers of life. An elder Athenian was assuming this role towards an adolescent, between 12 and 18, that is, until the boy was old enough ("until he starts having a beard", the texts say) to have no need of such guidance.

This passage recalls Xenophon's and Plutarch's representation of the correct treatment of 'earnest' young Spartans. In Sparta, as in Athens, the *erastes-eromenos* relationship was apparently intended to prepare worthy young men for participation in the public life of the polis. Xenophon, again speaking of Sparta, says in his *Respublica Lacedaemoniorum*:

| I think I must speak of pederasty, since it is a way of educating.

Considering the highly collectivist nature of both Sparta and Athens, I would like to expand a little on Georgiades' biopolitical theory. The practice of 'pederasty', as a moral and political education, was aimed at securing the future of the polis through tutelage of the best, not all, young men — physically, intellectually and morally — in the community. This meritocratic selection was conducted by citizens of citizens, within their own organically-constituted city.

The 'loved ones' who were selected and tutored by their 'lovers' were intended to act, when they had become mature citizens of the polis, as elite exemplars and executors of its political and moral tradition. Central to the ideology of the polis was that it comprised free people of a common stock: a truly national community. As is well known, the cities of Greece were in an almost constant state of competition, and frequently of outright warfare, throughout the Archaic and Classical periods. From the vantage point of the long philosophical tradition represented by Pythagoras, Parmenides, Socrates and Plato, 'pederasty' was nothing less than an attempt to bring the polis into line with the divine order through preparing its best available human material for leadership. From the perspective of a Greece in which interstate competition and warfare was practically the norm, 'pederasty' was a sort of group evolutionary strategy to secure the national community in the face of numerous hostile rivals. Each view is entirely compatible with the other.

Seen through an implicitly Freudian lens, tutelage of the young in ancient Greece was a mere cover for satisfaction of the endemic pederastic impulses of individuals rather than a collectivist project to realise the ideal of a healthy and supremely competitive national community. Georgiades has done important work in making out a convincing case to the contrary.