# Homosexuality in Ancient Greece

Expressions of **homosexuality in ancient Greece** were common. The ancient Greeks are famous for their homosexual exploits. This is only a recent development. Until the second half of the 20th century, historians tried not to refer to the sexuality of the ancient Greeks. In 1901, an English classicist named John Addington Symonds published A Problem in Greek Ethics addressing homosexuality in Ancient Greece, but it was provided only to "medical psychologists and jurists" and the number of copies was intended to remain under 100. The first major treatment of ancient Greek homosexuality in English was Greek Homosexuality by K.J. Dover, published in 1978.

By contrast, ancient Greek homosexuality is now a popular topic, and those who argue for full acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle regularly appeal to these practices and attitudes of the widely-respected ancient Greeks.

However, the practices of the ancient Greeks differ significantly from those generally advocated by moderns. Greek homosexual practices involved beautiful expressions of love and devotion, but were also firmly embedded in their culture of social status and thereforehad distinct limitations.

Homosexual relationships seem to have been prevalent in ancient Greece. It is possible Achilles and Patroclus of Homer's Iliad were icons of male homosexuality. Aristotle stated that the Cretans encouraged homosexuality as a population controller on the island community in his *Politics*. Greek poets wrote of same-sex love and notable philosophers and writers such as Plato, Xenophon, Plutarch, and pseudo-Lucian discussed the topic. Plato is quoted as commenting:

*Homosexuality is regarded as shameful by barbarians and by those who live under despotic governments just as philosophy is regarded as shameful by them, because it is apparently not in the interest of such rulers to have great ideas engendered in their subjects, or powerful friendships or passionate love-all of which homosexuality is particularly apt to produce.*

Tragedies on the theme became popular, and Aristophanes made comical theater about sexual relationships between males. Vases portray numerous homoerotic relationships and hundreds of inscriptions celebrate love. Famous politicians, artists, and writers are believed to have had homosexual relationships. Diogenes Laeurtius wrote of Alcibiades, the Athenian general and politician of the 5th century BC, "In his adolescence he was interested in the wives and as a young man in the husbands."

The form of homosexuality that was most common in ancient Greece was **pederasty**, meaning a relationship between an adult man and a male youth. For the Greeks, pederasty was more than a sexual past-time or preference - it was nearly a social institution. A same-sex relationship between an older man, probably in his 20s or 30s, known as the erastes, and a beardless boy, the eromenos or paidika, became a cultural ideal. The relationship was regarded as mutually beneficial, as the older man would educate, protect, love, and provide a role model for his lover, while the eromenos offered his partner with beauty, youth, admiration, and love.

The relationship began with a ritual, involving presents and other norms, and the erastes was to demonstrate that he had nobler interests in the boy rather than a purely sexual interest. The boy was not to submit too easily, and if pursued by more than one man, was to show discretion and pick the nobler one.

Another common form of homosexuality in classical Greece originated in the symposion, an aristocratic male drinking group. Guests reclined on a type of sofa in front of low tables laid with light snacks and an alcoholic water-wine mixture. The wine was poured by young male or female slaves, often chosen for their beauty. There were games, entertainments performed by the slaves, speeches, and conversations. The evening often ended with a drunken riot through the streets.

According to the Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World, the symposion was the main reason for the importance of homosexuality in ancient Greece, as it became the focus of expressions of love and sex both physical and spiritual. Homosexual expressions occurred between drinkers and slave boys, and the "idealization of these emotions inspired some of the highest expressions of love in European literature."

In ancient Greece, same-sex romantic and sexual attractions were often regarded as a matter of taste or preference rather than a moral issue. Yet, **social status** was very important, as was the differentiation between the active and passive roles in male homosexuality. Only free adult men had full social status, women and male slaves were not problematic sexual partners. Sex between freemen, however, was problematic for status. The central distinction in ancient Greek sexual relations was between taking an active or passive role. The **passive role** was acceptable only for inferiors, such as women, slaves, or male youths who were not yet citizens. For these reasons, the pederasty was the ideal form of homosexual relationships. A free male youth was a more noble partner than a male slave (and perhaps more than a woman as well) because he could be from a noble family and would eventually become a free citizen.

In contrast, attraction to males and homosexual relationships in the active role with one's social inferiors was common, approved by society, and could even be regarded as a **sign of masculinity**. There were stories of same-sex exploits associated with Greek gods including Zeus, and other key figures in Greek myth and literature, perhaps including Achilles and Hercules. Plato, in the Symposium, argues for an army of same-sex lovers. Thebes formed such a regiment, the Sacred Band of Thebes, formed of 500 soldiers famous in the ancient world for their valor in battle.