

A Brief History of Western Homosexuality

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Many people consider homosexuality to be a modern-day phenomenon. This could not be further from the truth. Homosexuality has been documented in Western society as far back as the Ancient Greeks. Virtually every civilization since has had some record of the presence of homosexuality, from Ancient Greece to Rome to Victorian England, right up to the present day. Because of the brevity required for this article, the focus will be on male homosexuality from Classical Greece to the late Medieval period.

"Homosexuality," Plato wrote, "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."¹ The Ancient Greeks regarded homosexuality as a normal part of life, but only within certain parameters. The relationship was supposed to be between a 'beardless' youth and an older man. The elder was supposed to be the 'active' partner; it was shameful for him to be the 'passive' partner. The youth should not accept money from the man, nor was he supposed to enjoy the act of penetration. Once the youth reached adulthood and recognition as a citizen, the relationship was supposed to lose its sexual side.² Even the greatest of the gods, Zeus, is portrayed as pursuing homosexual as well as heterosexual romances.

In the later half of the first century BC, the Roman poet Propertius wrote, "May my enemies fall in love with women and my friends with boys...[for pederasty] is a gently flowing river, marked by no shipwrecks. What harm can one come to in such a

narrow channel?"³ In some ways, Roman tolerance for homosexuality paralleled earlier Greek attitudes: so long as it was practiced in an 'appropriate' manner, homosexuality was acceptable. In Rome, this meant pursuing a young slave. By law, free youths were set off-limits. The Romans - like the Greeks - deplored freemen taking the 'passive' role in sexuality, as stated by the philosopher Seneca: "To be *impudicus* (that is passive) is disgraceful for a free man."⁴ For slaves, however, "There is nothing shameful in doing whatever the master orders."⁵ It was considered disgusting to continue sexual relations with a slave who was old enough to have facial hair, but not illegal.

The introduction of Christianity into the Roman world brought the old Hebrew prejudice against homosexuality into the Empire. At first, it was tolerated - in fact, it was practiced by more than a few Roman Emperors. In the fourth century AD, a writer defended Constantine's continuation of the tax on homosexual prostitutes, saying that it allowed them to continue their practices with impunity. This tolerance, however, did not last.

In 533 AD, homosexuality became entirely illegal in Rome. Emperor Justinian was known to castrate those found guilty of homosexuality.⁶ The laws on the books actually proscribed death, but that punishment was generally not meted out.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire, the status of homosexuality changed yet again. In most areas, there were no laws against homosexuality. Sixth century Spain is the exception to the rule, where homosexuality was prohibited along with Judaism. The laws appear very close together in texts, suggesting that they were seen in similar contexts - perhaps as being offensive to God's order.

¹ Plato, quoted by John Boswell in "The Church and the Homosexual: An Historical Perspective, 1979 (Keynote address to the Fourth Biennial International Convention)"

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/1979boswell.html>

² Dover, Kenneth James, *Greek Homosexuality*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978) pp 91-109

³ Propertius, quoted in Veyne, Paul, "Homosexuality in ancient Rome," in *Western Sexuality*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1985), p 33

⁴ Ibid, p. 31

⁵ Ibid, p. 31

⁶ Bullough, Vern. *Homosexuality: A History* (New York: Garland Press, 1979) p33

In general, early medieval rulers generally did not attack homosexuality directly. Even Charlemagne did not legislate against homosexuality, despite the fact that he was greatly upset when he discovered that some of the monks in his kingdom were practicing it. From guides to penances distributed throughout Europe, it appears that homosexuality was viewed no more harshly than other types of extramarital sex.⁷ That is to say, the lack of persecution most certainly did *not* denote approval, as was seen in Greece and to a lesser extent in Rome. It was simply no worse than any other sex act committed outside of marriage.

The 12th century is regarded as a sort of ‘little Renaissance’. There was a sudden flourish in scholarship, and at the same time an increased tolerance for homosexuality. It is during this period that a series of poems about Ganymede – Zeus’s male lover – were written in Latin, the language of scholars and educated individuals. However, this increase in tolerance was short lived.

It is the late medieval philosopher Thomas Aquinas who brings homosexuality into the notoriety that persisted until very recently, and continues albeit

on a lesser level. In his writings, Aquinas described homosexuality as the worst of sexual sins. He argued that homosexual sex acts are the “greatest sin among the species of lust” because they are contrary to the natural order of things as ordained by God.⁸ For better or for worse, Thomas Aquinas’s position as a major Christian philosopher has caused this view to be assimilated into Western society. The Inquisition charged and tried people for sodomy – the medieval word for ‘unnatural’ or ‘unusual’ sex acts – along with its infamous trials for heresy. Homosexuality was held in such low regard that in Florence and other Italian cities, municipal brothels were opened to “[turn] men away from homosexual practices.”⁹ In 14th century Florence and Venice, men were put to death for sodomy.

This medieval heritage of intolerance continues to affect the West today. True, homosexuality is no longer a crime to be punished with death or castration. It has not, however, returned to the pre-Imperial Christian levels of acceptance, even in the United States.

⁷ Boswell, John *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) chapter 7

⁸ Aquinas, Thomas *Summa Theologica*, II-II

⁹ Karras, Ruth Mazzo, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 32

