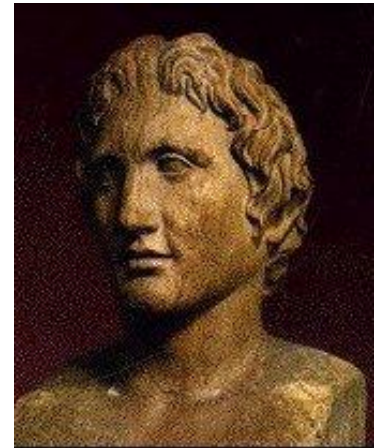


# Alexander's Sexuality

## Introduction

The study of homoeroticism in ancient Greece has been the subject of serious study for the past 20 years since Sir Kenneth Dover's groundbreaking (and still seminal) work, *Greek Homosexuality* (1978, now in a 1989 revised edition).

Other important work in monograph form includes Marilyn Skinner's *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* (2004), James Davidson's *Courtesans and Fishcakes: the Consuming Passions of Classical Athens* (1998), John Winkler's *The Constraints of Desire* (1990), and David Halperin's *100 Years of Homosexuality* (1990). Yet none of these mention Alexander much, if at all.



One study that did was Daniel Ogden's "Homosexuality and Warfare in Ancient Greece" from *Battle in Antiquity* (1996). Ogden's paper collected a wide variety of ancient citations for many Greek cultures, not just Athens, and gave due attention to variations on the Athenian model, particularly with regard to military practice --- all of which made it a very valuable contribution to the ongoing scholarly discussion. Nonetheless, I found his analysis of Alexander somewhat uncaredful and would caution readers on that score.

My remarks here address particularly the nature of Alexander's relationship with his lifetime friend and chiliarch, Hephaestion Amyntoros. Despite Mary Renault's romanticized, fictional portrayal of Bagoas in *The Persian Boy*, it was Hephaestion who enjoyed Alexander's primary affective attachment --- this, regardless of any sexual involvement. Hephaestion, not any of Alexander's three wives, was the king's real "significant other". For more information on Hephaestion himself, please visit my website [Hephaestion - Philalexandros](#).

## Was Alexander the Great gay?

Let me turn to one of the "hot" modern questions about Alexander. Was Alexander the Great gay?

No. I say no, not because he had no relationships with men and boys but because our term "homosexual" and "gay" are inappropriate terms for antiquity. Some may feel this to be splitting hairs. It is not. Language shapes us and the way we see the world. The ancient Greeks had no word that corresponded quite to our term "homosexual" --- hence my preference for "homoerotic".

The problem is that people on both sides of the modern argument insist on looking at the question as if Alexander and Hephaestion lived now. But they didn't. They lived then. And they thought about it all differently from the way we do. Too many people insist on filtering facts through the beliefs and customs of their own society (or religion or political agenda), and don't see that people in other places and times really can think differently about very basic things, including sex.

In general, the model for homoerotic attachments in antiquity was that of elder *erastes* (lover, pursuer, and active participant) and younger *eromenos* (beloved, pursued and passive participant). Individuals did not switch roles as the mood struck, and at least in Athens, coeval partnerships were frowned on. This summarizes the widely accepted "Dover Model," also called the penetration model, and should disqualify Alexander and Hephaestion who, Curtius tells us (3.12.16), were coevals. [Note that *aetas* does not mean the exact same age, merely the same stage of life and for reasons I won't go into here, Hephaestion was probably the elder by a year or so.]

Yet the model above is a largely Athenian pattern based on *Athenian* evidence... And it's quite the mistake to assume that *Athenian* norms held true in other Greek city-states. Evidence suggests that in Macedonia, pairs could be coevals, particularly among the adolescent Royal Pages (Arr. 4.13.3). There was still likely a small age difference, and an *erastes-eromenos* pattern was apparently maintained. Nonetheless, it was possible for two young men of roughly the same age to be sexually involved without that attachment being frowned upon. Thus, an affair between Alexander and Hephaestion cannot be disqualified, as a strict reading of Athenian model would suggest.

## Women

In modern studies, Alexander has been both portrayed as homosexual, and defended from such "allegations". One side accepts a reputed disinterest in women, while the other tries to deny it. Neither gives proper attention to Alexander's circumstances or to the ancient social realities.

Alexander was on an extended campaign which kept him constantly moving. Furthermore, relationships between men and women in ancient Greece and Macedonia, particularly within the upper classes, differed radically from those of today, and the polygamy of the Macedonian royal house would have been different yet again from that of a private family in the Greek south. So the fact that Alexander's primary affective relationship might have been with another man is not only unsurprising, but perhaps predictable. [For Macedonian royal polygamy, see William Greenwalt's "Polygamy and Succession in Argead Macedonia", *Arethusa* 22 (1989) 19-45.]

Alexander had three wives (Roxane, Stateira, Parysatis) and perhaps two mistresses (Barsine, Pankaste/Kampaspe), and there is suggestion that he had occasional assignations as well. [Plut. *Mor.* 180f = 760c; it is amusing that it is Plutarch who relates this tale, despite that author's valiant attempt to paint Alexander as a paragon of Greek sexual morality in chapters 21-22 of the *Alexander*.]

The simple truth is that a liking for women need not be false in order of an equal liking for men to be true. As typical of his era and culture, Alexander seems to have liked both.

## Hephaestion

Let us return now to the question of what involvement, if any, Alexander had with his life-long friend, Hephaestion.

Our three Greek historians (Arrian, Diodorus and Plutarch) never term him *erastes* or *eromenos*, only *philos* or *malista timomenos*. Alexander himself calls him *philalexandros* (friend of Alexander). Curtius and Justin use only *amicus*, never *amans*. The only implication of a sexual relationship or use of the term *eromenos* for Hephaestion occurs in late sources or those of dubious authorship. [Ael. *VH* 12.7, Epic. *Dis.* 2.12.17-18, Diog. *Epistles* 24, and Luc. *Dial. Dead* 397.]

So while we do have evidence that it was possible, in Macedonian society, for young boys of roughly the same age to form attachments to one another which included a sexual expression, there is no indisputable evidence for such an attachment between Alexander and Hephaestion.

The evidence that does exist is circumstantial only. Personally, I find it perfectly convincing, but I do think we must acknowledge that we cannot state with certainty that Alexander and Hephaestion were lovers, either as young men, or continuing throughout their lives.

## Circumstantial Evidence

But let us turn to this circumstantial evidence. First, and perhaps most important, is the literary comparison made between their friendship and that of Achilles and Patroklos, which 4th century Greece assumed to have had a sexual side. [For mention of Achilles and Patroklos as lovers in material with which Alexander himself was probably familiar, see Pl. *Sym.* 180a, TGF F135-36 (Aeschylus' *Myrmiddons*), and Aesch. *Tim.* 1.141-42.]

The problem with this bit of circumstantial evidence is that we cannot be sure when the comparison came about. Was it used in Alexander's own lifetime by Alexander and Hephaistion themselves? Certainly Alexander cast himself as Achilles! But was Hephaistion also cast as Patroklos at the time, or was this done later by the poetasters?

Much depends on what one makes of Arrian's story (1.12.1) that Hephaistion laid a wreath on Patroklos' grave at Troy, as Alexander laid one on Achilles'. Arrian gives this as a *logomena* --- a mere story: "They say...". The tale was not, apparently, found in Arrian's chief sources (Ptolemy and Aristobulos). It is difficult what, or how much, to make of it. Did Arrian include it as part of a complicated flattery for his patron, the emperor Hadrian (who, as we recall, loved the youth Antinoos)? Certainly, others in Alexander's train were compared to figures in the Achilles legend (most notably old Lysimakhos as Phoenix). As Cohen has pointed out, these Homeric tales were living reality to the Macedonians. [Ada Cohen, "Alexander and Achilles--Macedonians and 'Mycenaeans'", in *The Ages of Homer: A Tribute to Emily Townsend Vermule*(1995).]

So while we need not let skepticism completely overwhelm us, I'm afraid the verdict on the veracity of the Achilles/Patroklos pastiche must remain "unknown."

## Hephaistion's Significance

Perhaps a safer allusive comparison is found in Curtius (7.9.19) wherein a certain young Euxenippos is compared to Hephaistion and found wanting in virility. While Curtius' use of *concliatum* does not have to mean "beloved," that seems to be the thrust of the passage (pun intended). Euxenippos was a pretty boy who had caught the king's eye. (Alexander would hardly be the first Macedonian king to have a fling with one of his Pages.) This makes the boy's comparison to Hephaistion particularly suggestive. Has the king's current *eromenos* been set beside his old flame and come off the worse for the comparison? I believe this passage makes far more sense if we assume a romantic affair at some point between Alexander and Hephaistion.

Finally, Hephaistion's death and Alexander's grief is, itself, an indication of Hephaistion's significance to the conqueror. If Alexander is understood to be mourning a spouse (or spouse-equivalent), the severe nature of his mourning is far more comprehensible --- and proves, in fact, not to be abnormal or pathological at all, contrary to much ancient and modern opinion. Yet, again, Alexander's bereavement is not proof of a sexual relationship between the two; it only proves, or at least suggests, that Hephaistion occupied the central emotional place in Alexander's life.

We must remember that the two of them had been friends at least nineteen years, if we accept Mieza as the *terminus ante quem* for their meeting. During much of this, they would have lived in close quarters on campaign and no doubt seen one another daily when not away on independent missions. Nineteen years is longer than many modern marriages.

Whatever the truth of their sexual involvement, their emotional attachment has never been seriously questioned. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle speaks of the true friend as the "second self" (1170b) and postulates there is only one special friend (1171a). At least some of his teachings seem to have made an impression on his student! [For further comment on Alexander's bereavement, see now "The Mourning of Alexander the Great," *Syllecta Classica* 12 (2001) 98-145.]

## Conclusion

Finally, I would like to point out that whatever one chooses to believe about Alexander's sexual relationship with Hephaestion, it would be quite reductive to characterize it solely as an affair of the gonads.

Greek *philia* included a level of friendship that was particularly intense, one which is sometimes difficult for us now to grasp. In our societies, friendship all too often exists on the boundaries of other relationships --- those with our family or lovers. For the Greeks, though, such was not the case, and perhaps they were richer for it.

In short, our models of friendship are not consonant with theirs, and in these ancient societies where homoerotic desire was freely, sometimes emphatically, expressed, intense friendship might well develop a sexual expression even while that expression was not the focus of the friendship, or even thought of as particularly characteristic of it.

Thus, it would be inappropriate to refer to the friend as "lover" except in very specific circumstances, as such would fall short of encompassing the whole. Alexander's choice of *philalexandros* for Hephaestion said far more about the nature of his affection than calling him merely *eromenos*.

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The material here is based on "An Atypical Affair? Alexander the Great, Hephaestion, and the Nature of Their Relationship", by Dr. Jeanne Reames-Zimmerman, *The Ancient History Bulletin* 13.3 (1999) 81-96. The material may not be reproduced without permission from the author. This pothos.org article was fully revised on 17th December 2004.

## Additional Note from the Author

I have found portions of this article very selectively quoted to support political or social positions that **I do not** support --- which, in fact, I may find disquieting. If such quotes are within fair-use rights, I can hardly forbid them. And it's not disagreement or differing opinion that disturbs me --- it's the use of my own words to justify modern political agendas with which I don't agree that disturbs me... Particularly when it's not made clear that **I don't** subscribe to them.

Homosexuality and gay rights are topics that evoke strong feelings. Therefore let me be **extremely clear** where I stand: I am in support of civil rights for gays and lesbians, up to and including marriage. Anti-gay writings that quote me in support of their positions **do not** reflect my own opinions, and I do not believe that current research into ancient Mediterranean sexuality is driven by a 'gay agenda'. Like any good historical research, it's driven by a quest for the truth, insofar as we can know it, and pursued by scholars of **all** affective-sexual orientations. By the same token, however, gay rights activists who would overdraw the parallel and claim Alexander as a gay hero, refusing to recognize differences between now and then, are equally without historic basis. Please allow the historic truth to be duly complicated, as it so often is.