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Men and Boys

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The Greeks and Greek Love: A Bold New Exploration of the Ancient World

by James Davidson
Random House, 789 pp., \$45.00

Images of Ancient Greek Pederasty: Boys Were Their Gods

by Andrew Lear and Eva Cantarella
Routledge, 262 pp., \$41.95

From antiquity to the present, nothing has given admirers of the Greeks so much embarrassment and caused so much downright revulsion as the widespread Greek practice of men making love to young boys. We owe the word “pederasty” for this activity to Greek *pais* for boy and *erastês* for lover.

Our tolerance for explicit descriptions of sexual acts in the post-Kinsey era has encouraged the growth of a minor industry in the study of Greek homosexuality. The Greeks themselves had no word for homosexuality, and “pederasty” represents only a part of what that modern word covers. But with the ample textual and visual evidence that survives from the ancient world, historians and scholars have set to work with brio in the spirit of pioneers in a new discipline. If the clinical detail is new, the discipline is not. The study of Greek sexuality, continued in the books by James Davidson and Andrew Lear and Eva Cantarella under review, has a long pedigree, going all the way back to the Romans, who absorbed Greek culture into their empire.

Cicero and his contemporaries considered pederasty something uniquely Greek, and he mocked philosophers who extolled the supposed virtue that an older lover imparted to his beloved. “Why is it,” he wrote in his *Tusculan Disputations*, “that no one loves an ugly adolescent or a good-looking older man? It is my impression that this custom started in the gymnasia, where such liaisons were available and allowed.” Cicero called as a witness the early Roman poet Ennius, who wrote that the beginning of such disgraceful conduct was the display of naked bodies among the citizenry (*nudare inter civis corpora*).

The very word “gymnasium” is formed from the Greek for nude (*gumnos*). Opportunities for pederastic activity there evidently explain legislation from two Greek cities to control access to the boys undergoing physical training. A Hellenistic inscription from Beroea in Macedonia explicitly forbids younger men between twenty and thirty years of age from approaching the adolescents in the gymnasium or talking to them. Such men would be precisely in the age group of most *erastai* who would solicit boys in their teens. A still-unpublished inscription from Amphipolis, also in Macedonia, regulates the training of ephebes (boys between eighteen and twenty) and states,

The trainer [*paidotribês*], naked, will be in charge and shall train and compel [the ephebes] to exercise. No one else shall exercise with the ephebes except for the ephebarch [the officer in charge] and the trainer.... If anyone instructing the ephebes leads a dissolute and imprudent life and does not properly care for the ephebes’ education but clearly does something that would injure an ephebe or be shameful, the ephebarch shall fine him.¹

Nudity continued to be traditional in Greek gymnasia and in wrestling schools throughout antiquity, and it was normal at great Panhellenic athletic competitions such as the Olympics.

Thucydides, who was as sober and unimpeachable a historian as Greece ever produced, declared that nudity had been introduced from Sparta not long before his own time—the second half of the fifth century BC. If he is right, nudity cannot have brought in pederasty, even if facilitating and encouraging it. Already in the early sixth century the renowned Athenian lawgiver Solon had written a poem in praise of the thighs and mouths of boys, and the liberation of Athens from the tyrant Hippias later in that century followed a lover’s rage, as Thucydides again tells us, after the tyrant’s brother Hipparchus propositioned Harmodius, the youth loved by Aristogeiton. The famous pair of lovers enjoyed a huge posthumous reputation for killing Hipparchus and ultimately bringing down Hippias. Statues of them commemorated the event.

It is hard, therefore, to accept that pederasty arrived only with public nudity, but Sparta was renowned for more than its nudity. The love of boys had been practiced there from an early time. Plutarch reports that the legendary Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus mandated a curious practice for all Spartan males on the eve of marriage. The groom had to spend his first night with his bride when she was shaven and dressed up as a boy, as if somehow to ease the transition from homosexual activity to heterosexual. On the island of Crete it appears to have been customary for a youth to stage a mock rape of another boy and then live with him in seclusion for several months before returning to the community. This sort of thing has reasonably implied to many historians some kind of initiation, and it is clear that the Spartan and Cretan customs were closely connected with the bonding of young men to create an effective army.

In the twentieth century, anthropological interpretations, inspired by Margaret Mead or Ruth Benedict, sought an answer to Greek pederasty through initiation rites. But even if this may help in understanding the Spartans or the Cretans, it does little to explain the Athenians. For them, as all readers of Plato's *Symposium* or *Phaedrus* know, education or what is now called the mentoring of a younger person by someone more experienced appears to be the principal objective in the love of an older man for a youth. Socrates' infatuation with the handsome Alcibiades is the most famous example.

Modern discussion of this issue can be traced back to the great work on the Dorians (*Die Dorier*) by Karl Otfried Müller in 1824. Both Sparta and Crete were populated by Greeks called Dorians, who were traditionally thought to have invaded the region long before, and hence the relevance of pederasty to a study of the Dorians. Through an English translation that Müller himself supervised, the book acquired currency in the Anglophone world, where it came to the attention of Oscar Wilde's teacher J.P. Mahaffy in Ireland. His notorious student, who obviously had a deep interest in what the Greeks were up to, is believed to have created the name of Dorian Gray from Müller's Dorians.² Meanwhile Müller's work was substantially enlarged by a true pioneer in the subject, Moritz Hermann Eduard Meier, who, as Davidson writes, published an extensive analysis of Greek pederasty in a German encyclopedia as early as 1837. Among the few who have read this work it still commands respect.

The Germans continued their leadership in this field when, in 1907, Erich Bethe published a widely noticed article on Dorian boy-love (" *Die dorische Knabenliebe*"), in which the native Greeks were relieved of responsibility for their regrettable sexual proclivities because the Dorians were imagined to have imported them. Despite a few insubstantial contributions in the course of the twentieth century, not much new was added until 1978 when K.J. Dover of Oxford published his book *Greek Homosexuality*. Dover was universally recognized as one of the world's greatest living Greek scholars and had impeccable credentials through his many publications, including a widely respected commentary on Aristophanes' play about Socrates, *The Clouds*. His laser-like intelligence, together with his deep knowledge of both classical Greek and Greece, transformed the entire subject. Bernard Knox reviewed *Greek Homosexuality* appreciatively in these pages and saw at once that it would be a classic.³

Dover's book was as clear as it was thorough. He documented the conventions of pederasty by appealing to the many vase paintings that depicted courtship and consummation. These conventions had already been recognized by the twentieth century's greatest authority on Greek vase-painting, Sir John Beazley, although that gentle-man had, Davidson writes, presented his discoveries with characteristic understatement as illustrations of "Life in the Socratic Circle." It was Beazley who first saw that the approach of a lover (*erastês*) to a potential beloved (*erômenos*) conventionally involved

the older man touching the boy on the chin with one hand and on the genitals with the other. He also realized that consummation normally took the form of the lover inserting his erect penis between the boy's thighs. Dover described this kind of intercourse as "intercrural" (from the Latin *crus*, *cruris* —for leg), a word that has now become ubiquitous in works on Greek sexuality.

I ntercrural intercourse is obviously the explanation of Solon's notorious longing for an adolescent thigh. This revelation put an end to earlier attempts to deny the authenticity of the great man's words. Dover also discussed at length our one substantial literary text on Greek homosexuality, the speech of the orator Aeschines against Timarchus in the fourth century BC. Since male prostitutes had no civic rights and were legally forbidden to speak in the assembly, Aeschines responded to a prosecution launched by Timarchus with a demonstration that the man had sold his body as a male prostitute. This speech constitutes a rare and detailed glimpse into a world that is altogether different from pederasty, and it provides an interesting point of comparison.

Aeschines' speech leaves no room for doubt that sex between adult males was practiced but not always approved by the Greeks, and that homosexual sex for pay was utterly unacceptable—although it obviously occurred. On the other hand, the speech shows that the love of a boy was quite another matter. Aeschines declared that the opposition could not possibly impugn his own personal conduct, since it involved no more than consorting with boys in the gymnasia and being the lover of many of them. Dover comments delicately that Aeschines' admission "may come as a surprise to a modern reader."

Unpaid, consensual sex between Greek adults raises other questions. Ancient Greece was full of male couples, both legendary and historical, who appear to have bonded for military or heroic purposes. Alongside Harmodius and Aristogeiton were the Homeric Achilles and Patroclus, whose relationship was as puzzling in antiquity as it is now: Were they devoted friends or lovers? If the latter, Achilles seems to have been the junior partner. The pederasty of Sparta and Crete evidently led to bonds that strengthened the loyalty and courage of their soldiers long after the bloom of adolescence had faded. In fourth-century Thebes a famously successful unit of soldiers known as the Sacred Band consisted entirely of pairs of lovers, who fought together side by side and inspired each another. Their ultimate defeat at Chaeronea in 338 BC during the struggle with Philip of Macedon was commemorated by a mass grave. The skeletons of 255 warriors found in the nineteenth century near Chaeronea are generally thought to be the remains of the Sacred Band, and we know from the traveler Pausanias that their memory was honored in later antiquity. So there was clearly space in ancient Greece for unpaid homosexuality between adults.

Dover's book set the gold standard for the entire subject of Greek homosexuality, although most of it was devoted to pederasty, for which documentation is richest. He included a few

pages about lesbianism, but he had infinitely less material because women were sequestered in Greek society and had no civic rights or obligations. Apart from Sparta, where there is some evidence for female nudity and lesbian attachments, images of women who are not figures from mythology generally show priestesses, slaves, or prostitutes. A single Attic vase depicts one woman masturbating another, but female homosexuality remains largely hidden. Lucian alludes to it in his *Dialogues of the Prostitutes*, and Herodas writes about it in one of his mimes, but Sappho is the most famous exemplar. For a long time historians discounted the obvious implications of the melting lyrics she addressed to other women until a fragment of papyrus revealed that she had mentioned a dildo. Despite the exiguous evidence for female homosexuality Dover did what he could, but pederasty understandably dominated his work just as it dominated Greek society.

None of the longer books that have been published on Greek homosexuality in the thirty years after Dover comes close to his lucid, concise, and scholarly exposition. One of the longest and most diffuse of these later books is James Davidson's *The Greeks and Greek Love*. In nearly eight hundred self-indulgent and often repetitive pages, Davidson, professor of classics and ancient history at the University of Warwick, England, not only reports much of what we know already about pederasty and other forms of homosexuality, including lesbianism, but he tries to move away from what he considers an excessive emphasis on sexual penetration to a broader picture of affective relationships. By pointing to relationships that go beyond mentoring and intercrural encounters, he tries to diminish Dover's work. But even if we can agree with his denial that everything had "been settled once and for all by Sir Kenneth Dover in AD 1978," he fails to undermine Dover's immense authority.

Perhaps if Davidson had had a good editor and been compelled to reduce his sprawling text to a third of its present length, with the suppression of all too frequent personal asides (such as when he reached puberty), his book might have carried more conviction. It appeared in the United Kingdom two years ago. The American publisher had plenty of time to demand a more streamlined and better-edited product, and a more accurate one too. The very first illustration in the book, of a fresco from Paestum in Italy, is misidentified as coming from beneath the Erechtheum on the Acropolis. The account of the Chaeronea burial of the Sacred Band has been labeled inaccurate in a recent article.⁴

Nevertheless, Davidson's recent account of pederasty under the guise of Greek love is undoubtedly timely, because it comes at a moment when Western nations have been profoundly shaken by revelations of child abuse. Many cases that do not involve physical brutality have occurred in religious settings when an older man, usually a priest, has taken advantage of his role as a spiritual counselor to initiate sexual contact. The understandable shock that such conduct has stirred up here and abroad and the substantial payments that

have been offered in mitigation serve to remind us just how far removed our morality is from that of the ancient Greeks.

Most instances of priestly child abuse would readily fall within the parameters of Greek pederasty. Child abuse is the elephant in the room in contemporary accounts of Greek sexual norms. Both the nature and the longevity of pederastic practice in antiquity, including its espousal by Romans as diverse as the poet Horace and the emperor Nero, to say nothing of Hadrian and his beloved Antinous, are as inescapable as the enthusiasm with which the Greeks borrowed from the Romans their unpalatable taste for bloody gladiatorial combat.

The short book by Andrew Lear and Eva Cantarella, *Images of Ancient Greek Pederasty*, could not be more different from Davidson's massive volume, not only in size but in structure. It is no less well informed but much more limited in its aims by comparison with the scholarly splatter of *The Greeks and Greek Love*. Its abundant illustrations of acts that not long ago would have been considered strictly X-rated show how far we have advanced in candor. Many of the scenes that Beazley had wryly attributed to the Socratic circle now adorn the pages of Lear and Cantarella, with excruciatingly detailed verbal descriptions of exactly what is going on. The size and state of every penis is duly noted, and unanswerable questions—such as why a boy who is submitting to intercrural intercourse does not have an erection himself—are solemnly addressed.

The real contribution of this volume is the posthumous publication of a comprehensive register of all pederastic scenes on Greek pottery that had been prepared by the late Keith DeVries. It appears as an appendix, in accordance with permission granted by DeVries before his death, and it provides cross-references to the standard Beazley catalogs of Greek vases. The presence of the list underscores, however, the great weakness of the Lear-Cantarella volume, and that is its nearly total exclusion of images that do not appear on painted Greek pots. Although the book is called *Images of Ancient Greek Pederasty*, it contains, apart from the famous sculpture of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, no images from sculpture, metalwork, gems, cameos, wall painting, or even reliefs on unpainted pottery. Since relevant painted vases and vase fragments come to an end in the fourth century BC, Lear and Cantarella provide nothing from subsequent periods.

But the Greeks continued to practice pederasty, and, if Lear and Cantarella had troubled to look at nonceramic images, they would have been amply rewarded. To take just one example, an unguent vase in bronze from Herstal in Belgium, first published in 1900, depicts four sober philosophers in a bookish environment who reappear in the object's upper register in four vivid scenes of copulation with boys.⁵ Neither Davidson nor Lear and Cantarella mention this piece, and, as we will see, it is not the only important item that they have missed outside the pottery. Although the inscriptions at Beroea and Amphipolis

reveal that some Greek communities made serious efforts to regulate pederasty, postclassical literature continues to be full of allusions to it.

In her brief opening survey of literary texts, Cantarella tries to provide a context for the images of pederasty to follow. She naturally cites Solon's notorious poem, as well as the traditions about Sparta and Crete. She, like Lear, is not much interested in the later history of the subject, but she does cite the Greek poet Strato of Sardis, who wrote about a hundred epigrams in praise of pederastic love, under the proud title *Mousa Paidikê* (Muse of Boys). Many of these poems are as explicit as the vase images that Lear discusses. Since it is likely that Strato reflected, or perhaps inspired, the rampant Hellenism of the Roman imperial court, either under Nero or Hadrian (dates are uncertain), his testimony has some bearing on the efflorescence of pederastic literature and activity in that period, to say nothing of the Herstal vase.

The raunchy but stylish *Satyricon* of Petronius, written in the first century AD, is a prime exhibit, but equally overt are the lyric verses of the Latin poet Statius in praise of Earinos, the beloved eunuch-boy of the emperor Domitian. Hadrian's infatuation with Antinous led to the dissemination of this langorous youth's image throughout the Roman Empire, as well as to his divinization after death and the renaming of an Egyptian city as Antinoopolis. Hadrian's Greek contemporary Plutarch wrote an entire treatise on love, the *Amatorius*, in which he calmly addressed the competing claims of pederastic and conjugal love. Although he had no reproach for those who preferred boys, his own preference, for which he argued strongly, was marriage with a woman. No wonder the Christians warmed to Plutarch.

The fashionable pederasty of elite Romans, who accepted, as Cicero had not, the Greeks' approval of the love of boys, had a curiously vivid reprise in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The so-called Uranians in England tried, under suitable cover, to recapture the pederastic atmosphere of Plato, and the poet Stefan George did something similar in Germany with his famous circle that honored his "experience" with the boy Maximin. Among the Uranians was the most important collector of Greek erotica in modern times, a man without whom many of the images in Davidson and in Lear and Cantarella would be unknown. This was an expatriate American, Edward Perry Warren, from a Boston family whose wealth derived from the paper manufacturers S.D. Warren & Company, an antecedent of the present Scott Paper Company.

Warren set himself up at Lewes in Sussex, where he brought together both young men and Greek antiquities in a refined and opulent atmosphere. He and his friend John Marshall collected Greek objects aggressively in Rome, principally between 1892 and 1902 but also later.⁶ Much of their collection went, either by sale or gift, to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The erotica lay stored in the dark for half a century until it was finally accessioned

and catalogued in the 1950s. But the pieces had been known to Beazley through his personal acquaintance with Warren, and when they reappeared in the 1960s, accompanied by an article by Emily Vermeule on “Some Erotica in the Boston Museum,” there was no turning back.⁷ It is astonishing that Warren finds no place at all in the books under review.

It is even more astonishing that both books omit what are arguably the most impressive of all images of ancient Greek pederasty, the scenes on the two sides of a magnificent silver cup that Warren bought in Rome in 1911. The piece was said to have come from near Jerusalem. In the early 1950s it was denied entry into the United States, on the grounds of immorality, as part of a sale from Warren’s estate. But when its existence finally became publicly known in the more liberated 1990s it was recognized for the masterpiece it is, and £1.8 million were raised for the British Museum to keep it in Britain. It was first put on public display in 2006, accompanied by a sixty-four-page booklet by the museum’s curator Dyfri Williams. The failure of Davidson and of Cantarella and Lear to take note of this exceptional piece reflects their overall neglect of postclassical and nonceramic art. The Warren cup, through its superb craftsmanship, takes us directly into the Hellenic world of the Roman Empire in the mid-first century AD.

Both sides of the cup depict anal intercourse between a man and a boy. In one scene the two participants are clearly not far apart in age, and the passive partner sits astride the other while holding on to something resembling a subway strap to secure his position. In the other the boy is conspicuously younger and lies sideways across the lap of the older partner. (See illustrations on pages 10 and 12.) Since both Davidson and Lear-Cantarella have much to say about a classical vase in the British Museum that shows a boy about to sit down upon the erect penis of a seated man, it would have obviously been helpful to mention the sitting scene on the Warren cup, which is likewise in the British Museum, not only as a parallel but as proof that such a scene could still be appreciated on a luxury object after many centuries.

Since 1931, when A.E. Housman published in Latin his pathbreaking study of ancient sexual behavior in a German journal,⁸ scholars of the ancient world have been sensitive to the different attitudes of Greeks and Romans toward active and passive roles in homosexual intercourse. In general a male could assume the active role without any diminution of virility, but not the passive. Yet this view has necessarily to be nuanced by the literature and images of Greek pederasty. For a boy under eighteen or even an ephebe between eighteen and twenty, the passive role, if consensual, seems to have been part of the process of growing up and did not reflect on his masculinity. The preference that the classical vases suggest for intercrural intercourse look like a way of avoiding more intrusive sexual acts, but of course without any direct testimony we will never know. To judge from Solon, men found male adolescent thighs particularly seductive, but the intercrural option did not close off others.

We will also never know how many liaisons with boys ripened into lifelong attachments. Some clearly did, but probably without a sexual component as often as with one. Equally, we have learned from Aeschines that an *erastês* had no problem in moving from one boy to another without incurring the slightest opprobrium, provided that no money changed hands. Yet in later centuries, cities can be seen restricting access to the gymnasia and protecting their youth from anything shameful. Then we find the Warren cup and the public pederasty of Roman emperors. This came at the very time that Plutarch, who was friendly with many of the leading figures of his day, could launch his strong plea for the joys of conjugal love even as he offered a sympathetic account of pederastic love. The sexual life of the ancient Greeks was as variegated and inventive as its resplendent culture. It was neither consistent nor uniform. To this day it stubbornly resists all modern ideologies and prejudices, and yet it had its own principles of decency. In sex, as in so much else, the ancient Greeks were unique.

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- 1 The Amphipolis inscription on the “ephebarchs” was discovered at the entrance to the *palaestra* (wrestling area) of the gymnasium. Kalliope Lazaridis and Pantelis Nigdelis will publish this text, and they have generously allowed me to refer to it. ↵
 - 2 Michael S. Armstrong, “‘Jene eigenthümlich dorische Männerliebe’: K.O. Müller’s *Die Dorier* and Greek Homosexuality,” in *Zwischen Rationalismus und Romantik: Karl Otfried Müller und die antike Kultur*, edited by William M. Calder III and Renate Schlesier (Hildesheim: Weidmann, 1998), p. 19. ↵
 - 3 *The New York Review*, January 25, 1979: “The subject was one which needed to be exposed to the light of day; we can be thankful that it has been done by a great scholar and one who treats the subject without prejudice either way.” ↵
 - 4 John Ma, “Chaironeia 338: Topographies of Commemoration,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 128 (2008), p. 70, n. 44. ↵
 - 5 See Corinne Bonnet’s discussion of Franz Cumont’s perplexity in publishing this vase in 1940: “‘L’immortalité appartient au sage’: Franz Cumont et l’art érotique,” *Dialogues d’Histoire Ancienne*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2000), pp. 77–97. ↵
 - 6 David Sox, *Bachelors of Art: Edward Perry Warren and the Lewes House Brotherhood* (London: Fourth Estate, 1991), p. 50. ↵
 - 7 *Antike Kunst*, Vol. 12 (1969), pp. 9–15. ↵
 - 8 “Praefanda,” *Hermes*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (1931), pp. 402–412. Editors in Britain found the material too explicit even in Latin. ↵