

## EARLY GREECE

776–480 BCE

## • A Millennium of Greek Love •

In all history, no society has aroused the same enthusiasm as ancient Greece. This is a truism, yet the fact remains incontestable. Greek achievements in literature, art, and architecture set norms for the Western world for two thousand years. When we think, we still employ the intellectual categories its philosophers and scientists devised. By resisting Persian might, Greece made Europe possible. In politics, democracy was a Greek invention. Though women and slaves failed to share the benefits of freedom and equality, it was these ideals that ultimately called into question their own exclusions. Above all, the Greeks charm us by their sociability, their lively openness to ideas, and their liberality of spirit. Civilization, already millennia old in Egypt, Sumer, India, and China, took a vast leap forward under the stimulus of the Greek experiment.

Yet there was one aspect of Greek life that students of antiquity long chose to consign to the category of the “unmentionable.” In E. M. Forster’s novel *Maurice*, the Cambridge translation class is routinely cautioned, “Omit: a reference to the unspeakable vice of the Greeks.”<sup>1</sup> The novel is set in 1910, but four decades later a scholar of repute could still remark, “This aspect of Greek morals is an extraordinary one, into which, for the sake of our equanimity, it is unprofitable to pry too closely.”<sup>2</sup> And indeed, despite the importance of the subject, no book on Greek homosexuality was circulated openly in English until 1978. Christian Europe, from the fourth century onward, regarded same-sex relations as anathema, and its nations competed in devising punishments for “unnatural” crimes. Homosexuality became the *peccatum non nominandum inter Christianos*, “the sin not even to be mentioned among Christians.” Such references as did appear were mainly confined to legal treatises, where penalties were spelled out, or to works of moral theology, where it was necessary for completeness’ sake to list the worst human vices.

In Greek history and literature, on the other hand, the abundance of ac-

counts of homosexual love overwhelms the investigator. Homer's intentions in the *Iliad* (c. 800 BCE) have been the subject of much debate. There is ample evidence, however, that by the beginning of the classical era (480 BCE) his archaic heroes Achilles and Patroclus had become exemplars of male love. Greek lyric poets sing of male love from almost the earliest fragments down to the end of classical times. Five brilliant philosophical dialogues debate its ethics with a wealth of illustrations, from Plato and Xenophon to Plutarch and the pseudo-Lucian of the third century CE. In the public arena of the theater we know that tragedies on this theme were popular, and Aristophanes' bawdy humor is quite as likely to be inspired by sex between males as by intercourse between men and women. Vase-painters portray scores of homoerotic scenes, hundreds of inscriptions celebrate the love of boys, and such affairs enter into the lives of a long catalogue of famous Greek statesmen, warriors, artists, and authors. Though it has often been assumed that the love of males was a fashion confined to a small intellectual elite during the age of Plato, in fact it was pervasive throughout all levels of Greek society and held a honored place in Greek culture for more than a thousand years, that is, from before 600 BCE to about 400 CE.

Greek religion, too, testifies to the hold pederasty had upon the Greek imagination. Mythology provides more than fifty examples of youths beloved of deities.<sup>3</sup> Poetry and popular traditions ascribe such affairs to Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo, Hercules, Dionysus, Hermes, and Pan—that is, to nearly all the principal male gods of the Olympian pantheon. Only the war god Ares is (surprisingly) missing. Among the poets, Sappho, Alcaeus, Ibycus, Anacreon, Theognis, Pindar, and a host of contributors to the Greek Anthology sang of same-sex love. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides produced important plays, now lost, on the subject. The lives of Greek political leaders in a host of cities record episodes, crucial or trivial, of homoerotic passion. These include Solon, Peisistratus, Hippias, Hipparchus, Themistocles, Aristides, Critias, Demosthenes, and Aeschines in sophisticated Athens; Pausanias, Lysander, and Agesilaus in militaristic Sparta; Polycrates in his cultivated court on Samos; Hieron and Agathocles in Sicilian Syracuse; Epaminondas and Pelopidas in bucolic Thebes; and Archelaus, Philip II, and Alexander in semi-barbarous Macedon. Socrates spoke, and Plato and Xenophon wrote, of the inspirational powers of love between men, though they decried its physical expression. After Plato's death the presidency of his Academy passed from lover to lover. Among the Stoics, Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus extolled the love of boys. We know much less of the lives of Greek artists, but Phidias's love for Pantarces was memorialized in marble. In the later Hellenistic age (332 BCE–400 CE) Plutarch, Athenaeus, and Aelian recorded the history of Greek love from its earliest times, while poets from Theocritus to Nonnus celebrated pederastic affairs in idylls, epigrams, and epics. This is an astounding record, including as it does most of the greatest names of ancient Greece during the greatest period of Greek culture.

Throughout these accounts, male attachments are presented in an honorific light, though there were always some skeptics. But for many biographers, for a man not to have had a male lover seems to have bespoken a lack of character or a deficiency in sensibility. It is this enthusiastic note, marked by a kind of spirited *élan*, that so clearly distinguishes the Greek view of homosexuality. We hear it sounded clearly and strongly in what is probably the most notable defense of male love in Greek literature, the speech that Plato puts in the mouth of Phaedrus at the beginning of the *Symposium*. Here is how the idealistic Athenian praises the male eros:

For I know not any greater blessing to a young man who is beginning life than a virtuous lover, or to a lover than a beloved youth. For the principle that ought to be the guide of men who would nobly live—that principle, I say, neither kindred, nor honor, nor wealth, nor any other motive is able to implant so well as love. Of what am I speaking? Of the sense of honor and dishonor, without which neither states nor individuals ever do any good or great work . . . And if there were only some way of contriving that a state or an army should be made up of lovers and their loves, they would be the very best governors of their own city, abstaining from all dishonor and emulating one another in honor; and it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that when fighting at each other's side, although a mere handful, they would overcome the world.<sup>4</sup>

Phaedrus believes that no man would run away in battle if his lover's eyes were upon him: this would be too ignominious to imagine. We shall consider Plato's reservations more generally in a later chapter. But Phaedrus is giving voice to what was probably the typical view of an educated Greek of his time. Nor was this view restricted to intellectual circles. Its peculiar note of exaltation echoes repeatedly through all levels of Greek society. Like the rest of humanity, the ancient Greek was susceptible to various erotic moods—heroic, tender, frivolous, ribald, even, on occasion, brutal. But the notion of the potential ennobling effect of such love remained common currency from almost the earliest days of recorded Greek history down to the triumph of Christianity. It cast over the idea of *paiderastia* a strong aura of glamor. On public occasions it might be respectfully saluted before an audience made up of all classes, as in the case of Aeschines' speech to the jurors of Athens. Belief in its edifying possibilities was one of the pieties of the tribe, not just for an elite but for the average citizen.

### • Homer's *Iliad* •

The ancient Greeks had no word that corresponded to our word "homosexual." *Paiderastia*, the closest they came to it, meant literally "boy love," that is, a relation between an older male and someone younger, usually a youth between the ages of fourteen and twenty. The older man was called the

*erastes* or lover. Ideally, it was his duty to be the boy's teacher and protector and serve as a model of courage, virtue, and wisdom to his beloved, or *eromenos*, whose attraction lay in his beauty, his youth, and his promise of future moral, intellectual, and physical excellence. In the *Symposium*, Phaedrus and the other speakers are always careful to use one term or the other as the occasion requires.

This is especially striking in Phaedrus' discussion of the *Iliad*. Here he finds his ideal lovers, for Achilles determines to revenge the death of his comrade-in-arms Patroclus, even though he has been warned by the gods that this will cost him his life. But Phaedrus is puzzled as to which role to assign to which man. He notes that Aeschylus, in one of his most famous tragedies, the *Myrmidons*, had made Achilles the protector, the *erastes*. But Phaedrus thinks this is at odds with Homer, since the *Iliad* emphasizes the remarkable beauty of Achilles, which in Phaedrus' view, qualifies him rather for the role of the *eromenos*.

Plato wrote the *Symposium* about 385 BCE. By that time a well-established Greek tradition saw Achilles and Patroclus not just as comrades in battle but as lovers in the full physical sense. But did Homer himself mean us to perceive Achilles and Patroclus as lovers? At least since Plato's day, the question has been a matter of debate. Aeschylus, writing a century earlier, clearly regarded their relation as sexual. We know his *Myrmidons* was an extremely popular tragedy, though only fragments have come down to us. These fragments, however, make the erotic nature of their love quite explicit. In them Achilles reproaches his dead friend for letting himself be killed, and in the agony of his grief speaks over Patroclus' naked corpse—in language whose directness must have startled even the Athenians—of the “devout union of the thighs.”<sup>5</sup> Aeschylus' sexual reading of the relation was shared by many (though, as we shall see, not all) Greeks at the zenith of the classical period.

We find evidence for this interpretation in a speech made by the Athenian politician Aeschines at his trial in 345. Aeschines, who is seeking to emphasize the importance of *paiderastia* to Greek culture, argues that though Homer does not clearly state that Achilles and Patroclus are lovers, sophisticated Greeks will read between the lines: “Although [Homer] speaks in many places of Patroclus and Achilles, he hides their love and avoids giving a name to their friendship, thinking that the exceeding greatness of their affection is manifest to such of his hearers as are educated men.”<sup>6</sup> Other ancient writers follow this tradition, which seems to have been the predominant one.

The question is of historical as well as literary importance. Homer's two epics, generally supposed to have been composed between 800 and 700 BCE, are by far the most important source we have for the state of Greek manners and morals in archaic times. They are of unique significance for the period before Greek literary texts began to be abundant, that is, before 600. Thus it is noteworthy that Homer in depicting male companionship in the *Iliad* does not use the classical terms *erastes* and *eromenos* and gives us no clear in-

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1. Achilles binds the wounds of Patroclus. Painted pottery, fifth century BCE.

stance of the typical Greek love relationships so often depicted in later poetry, philosophy, and biography. Apparently, in Homer's Ionian culture, homosexuality had not taken on the form it was later to assume throughout the Greek world. Some scholars, like Bernard Sergent, have argued that it had, though it was not reflected in Homer.<sup>7</sup> But Sergent's view that ritualized man-boy relations were widely diffused through Greece and Europe from prehistoric times is a theory for which the evidence is slim.

It is impossible to fit the roles Achilles and Patroclus play in the *Iliad* into the classical Greek pattern. Achilles is clearly the dominant member of the pair. Among the Greeks assembled on the plain of Troy, he has the greatest prestige as a warrior and athlete: he gives the orders and takes the lead. Patroclus performs some domestic chores, such as cooking and nursing the wounded, as a squire might. This could be seen as fitting him for the *eromenos* role, but Homer tells us Patroclus is older than Achilles and, as Phaedrus notes, pointedly stresses Achilles' youth and beauty. And both engage in relations with the opposite sex: on one occasion, the two men retire to opposite sides of their tent to enjoy the favors of captured slave women.

Nevertheless, the emotion Achilles and Patroclus feel for each other is in-

tense and absorbing. Achilles treats Patroclus with an indulgent tenderness strikingly different from the arrogance and egotism he routinely exhibits. Usually Greek warriors fought for their own personal glory or for their clan or city. But in Book 16 Achilles indulges in a romantic fantasy that exalts their personal relationship over all else. He wishes that the other Greeks might all perish so that he and Patroclus might face the foe alone together and win the honor of conquering Troy.<sup>8</sup> When Patroclus is slain fighting in Achilles' armor, Achilles goes wild with grief. He caresses and embraces the body of his dead friend, smears his own head with ashes, and refuses to eat and drink. Finally, the desire to kill Hector, who had killed Patroclus, moves him from the sullen refusal to fight he has shown till then, even though he knows this will mean his own death.

Serious attempts to edit Homer's text in a scholarly fashion were made in Alexandria in the second century BCE. Aristarchus of Samothrace, who has been called "the founder of scientific scholarship," believed Homer did not intend to present Achilles and Patroclus as lovers. Since, however, he thought the "we-two alone" passage did imply a love relation, he argued that it must be a later interpolation.<sup>9</sup> But most modern editors have accepted the lines, and other passages show emotions that at least approximate them. Aristarchus' view, of course, is paradoxical: even a Greek who wanted to rule out an amorous interpretation of the men's relationship thought these lines argued against such a view. Clearly, if modern scholarship is perplexed by this question, so were the Greeks. On balance it seems reasonable to trust the received text, conceding that it suggests (as even Aristarchus was forced to admit) a lover-like relation and yet provides no indication that this love took on an explicitly sexual form, as it did in Aeschylus.

### • Crete, Sparta, Chalcis •

Whatever view we take, we are left with an intriguing problem. Since *paiderastia* does not appear in Homer as the important institution it later became, we must ask when did the change occur and what brought it about? The most celebrated answer is the so-called Dorian hypothesis first put forth by K. O. Müller early in the nineteenth century and more fully developed in a controversial essay published by Erich Bethe in 1907.<sup>10</sup> According to this theory, *paiderastia* was part of the culture of the warlike Dorian tribes who swept down from northwestern Greece in the twelfth and eleventh centuries BCE, conquering most of the Peloponnesus and such islands as Crete, Thera, and Rhodes. They drove the original inhabitants—the Ionian Greeks—eastward to the shores of Asia Minor (modern Turkey) but left important Ionian settlements in Athens and on Euboea, the long narrow island that hugs the east coast of the Greek peninsula.

Without question, man-boy relations played a significant part in the social

organization of such Dorian communities as Crete and Sparta. Plato singles out both cultures in the *Laws* disapprovingly, because of the license he thought they provided for the physical expression of same-sex love. Aristotle also claimed that the Cretans encouraged homosexuality, specifically as a check to population. The Cretan “lawgiver,” he tells us, devoted much ingenuity to “segregating the women and instituting sexual relations among the males so that the women would not have children.”<sup>11</sup> But by far the most detailed account we have of the way Cretans ritualized homosexuality and incorporated it into their culture appears in Strabo’s *Geography*. Strabo, who lived at the time of Augustus, drew on Ephorus of Cyme, who wrote about 380 BCE. The passage is of such anthropological interest that it is worth quoting at length:

[The Cretans] have a peculiar custom in regard to love affairs, for they win the objects with their love, not by persuasion, but by abduction; the lover tells the friends of the boy three or four days beforehand that he is going to make the abduction; but for the friends to conceal the boy, or not to let him go forth by the appointed road, is indeed a most disgraceful thing, a confession, as it were, that the boy is unworthy to obtain such a lover; and when they meet, if the abductor is the boy’s equal or superior in rank or other respects, the friends pursue him and lay hold of him, though only in a very gentle way, thus satisfying the custom; and after that they cheerfully turn the boy over to him to lead away; if, however, the abductor is unworthy, they take the boy away from him.

It is the boy’s character—his “manliness”—not his beauty that recommends him to a lover. The boy then retires with his lover to a country retreat, where he is given a military outfit, an ox (to sacrifice to Zeus), and a drinking cup—three costly gifts. Moreover,

it is disgraceful for those who are handsome in appearance or descendants of illustrious ancestors to fail to obtain lovers, the presumption being that their character is responsible for such a fate. But the *parastathentes* [who “stand by” their older lovers in battle] receive honors; for in both the dances and the races they have the positions of highest honor, and are allowed to dress in better clothes than the rest, that is, in the habit given them by their lovers; and not then only, but even after they have grown to manhood, they wear a distinctive dress, which is intended to make known the fact that each wearer has become *kleinos*, for they call the loved one *kleinos* [distinguished] and the lover *philetor*.<sup>12</sup>

It seems likely the Spartans developed their own form of institutionalized man-boy love under Cretan influence.<sup>13</sup> In Sparta the boy in such a pairing was called the “hearer” (*aites*), while his mentor was called the “inspirer” (*eispnelos*). Plutarch tells the story of a man who was punished because his

pupil cried out in pain in battle.<sup>14</sup> This pattern of mentorship was supposed to have been inaugurated by Sparta's legendary lawgiver, Lycurgus, who had visited Crete. Xenophon, in his account of Spartan customs, says Lycurgus explicitly forbade sexual contact and that the Spartans maintained that such pairings were chaste. But, he adds, "I am not surprised, however, that people refuse to believe this. For in many states the laws are not opposed to the indulgence of these appetites."<sup>15</sup> The Athenians shared Xenophon's skepticism. In Attic speech, to "laconize" meant to sodomize, by implication ascribing this practice to the Laconians, that is, the Spartans.<sup>16</sup>

Since Bethe, the theory of the Dorian origin of Greek *paiderastia* has often been called into question. Kenneth Dover, in his classic study, points out that Plato's *Symposium* names not Crete and Sparta but Elis and Boeotia, two non-Dorian communities, as those whose laws most unqualifiedly endorsed boy love.<sup>17</sup> Elis, a few miles northwest of Olympia, was the city responsible for the administration of the Olympic games. As for Boeotia, proverbially rustic and uncouth in Athenian eyes, its capital was Thebes, where the famous Sacred Band of male lovers was later organized. At any rate, it seems to have been the Ionians (whose dialect Homer employed) who were exceptional in lacking the practice.

More recently, William Percy, in an excellent study, has argued that its first institutionalization occurred not in the Dorian north but in Crete itself and not until the seventh century.<sup>18</sup> Percy marshals impressive evidence to show that most Greeks perceived Crete as the preeminent source of pederastic traditions. He also argues that mainland cities had ample reason, because of their own exploding populations, to follow the Cretans' example. Yet there is one episode, recounted in Plutarch's "Dialogue on Love" (c. 120 CE), which suggests that at least some cities may have been influenced by northern cultures at a fairly early date. The event took place at Chalcis, an important Ionian city on Euboea. The unique element in the story is that it actually purports to explain how one community changed its negative view of boy love to a positive one. It concerns an engagement in the so-called Lelantine War, which, it is conjectured, began before 700 and did not end until about 650.<sup>19</sup> Here is Plutarch's account:

You know, of course, the story of Cleomachus of Pharsalia [in Thessaly] and the reason for his death in battle . . . Cleomachus came to help the Chalcidians when the Lelantine War against the Eretrians was at its height . . . His allies requested Cleomachus, a man of splendid courage, to be the first to charge the horse. His beloved [*eromenos*] was there and Cleomachus asked him if he was going to witness the battle. The youth said that he was, embraced Cleomachus tenderly, and put on his helmet for him. Filled with ardor, Cleomachus assembled the bravest of the Thessalians about himself, made a fine charge, and fell upon the enemy with such vigour that their

2. Zeus and Ganymede. Painted  
terracotta, c. 470 BCE.

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cavalry was thrown into confusion and was thoroughly routed [so that] the Chalcidians had a decisive victory. It was however, Cleomachus' bad fortune to be killed in the battle. The Chalcidians point out his tomb in the marketplace with the great pillar standing on it to this day. Formerly they had frowned on pederasty, but now they accepted it and honored it more than others did.<sup>20</sup>

The story of Cleomachus has a romantic ring—Plutarch loved a good tale. Aristotle gave a somewhat different version of the episode and cited a popular poem expressive of communal feeling

Ye lads of grace and sprung from worthy stock,  
Grudge not to brave men converse with your beauty:  
In cities of Chalcis, love, looser of limbs,  
Thrives side by side with courage.

The preeminence of Chalcis among Greek cities that honored *paiderastia* is also attested by another authority. Athenaeus' *The Sophists at Dinner* is a rambling discourse, written in Egypt about 200 CE, a generation or two after Plutarch, which covers an enormous range of topics, serious and trivial. Love is one of its important themes, and Athenaeus tells us that the Chalcidians ranked next after the Cretans in their public glorification of boy love, and even claimed that Zeus carried off Ganymede not from Mount Ida near Troy but from a myrtle grove in Chalcis which they called, after this event, the Harpagon.<sup>21</sup> The Athenians saluted this tradition by adding the verb "to chalcidize" to their erotic vocabulary.<sup>22</sup> Though we cannot be sure exactly where or when institutionalized pederasty first originated in archaic Greece, we may conclude that it was particularly associated with Crete and Sparta and reached such Ionian settlements as Chalcis and Athens at a later date.

### • Athletics and the Cult of Beauty •

Besides its presumed incentive to valor, three other aspects of Greek culture also favored male love. These were the Greeks' passion for athletics, their acceptance of male nudity, and their cult of male beauty. From early times the Greeks had exalted athletics, first as useful training for the warrior, then for their own sake. Athletic contests are prominent in the *Iliad*, which has elaborate descriptions of the games held at the funeral of Patroclus. The Greeks dated other events in their history from the first recorded Olympic games, assumed to have begun in 776 BCE. Sparta, especially, encouraged athletics as part of its military regimen.

As for nudity, one doubtful tradition held that it began at the Olympics as early as 720, when a runner from Megara was supposed to have shed—or lost—his loincloth.<sup>23</sup> Thucydides, however, calls the innovation of nudity a recent one. Eventually not only athletics but also communal celebrations were so distinguished: the sixteen-year-old Sophocles, his naked body gleaming with oil, led the victory parade in Athens after the battle of Marathon.

The municipal schools for exercise took their name from this custom—our "gymnasium" derives from the Greek word *gymnos*, naked. These schools served both for physical training and as social centers where men and youths might meet, talk politics, philosophize, and on occasion find lovers. The

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3. Greek wrestlers. Attic red-figure  
vase, c. 525 BCE.

palastras or wrestling schools for youths served a similar function. Some of these buildings were adorned with statues of Eros, as if to suggest that a beautiful physique might inspire a passionate relationship. Several of Plato's dialogues take place in wrestling schools. *Lysis* is set at the palaestra of Miccus; in the *Charmides*, Socrates, who has a keen appreciation of handsome youths, asks Critias who is the outstanding beauty of a palaestra where they have met. When Charmides arrives, the men and boys fall into awed silence and are so entranced that some are inadvertently shoved off their benches as others make room for him. In the modern world one might find a similar fascination with a female movie star at an isolated military base. It would be unthinkable to imagine such a demonstration of enthusiasm for male good looks.

As we have noted, Elis was the community most closely connected with the Olympic games. Plato, Xenophon, and Plutarch all mention Elis as a city whose code of laws encouraged male love affairs. Among its civic festivals was a male beauty contest whose first prize, Theophrastus informs us, was a set of weapons. The occasion had religious as well as aesthetic significance: a solemn procession accompanied the winner to the altar of Athena, where the arms were dedicated to the goddess.<sup>24</sup> A like contest was held at Megara, a Dorian city near Corinth. Once again, celebrations of beauty, love, and valor were combined. The festival, called the Diocleia, commemorated an Athenian warrior named Diocles who had died protecting his Megarian lover in battle. Theocritus describes it charmingly in his twelfth Idyll:

Men of Megarian Nisaea, skilled with the oar,  
May your lives prosper, for beyond all others you  
Honored your Attic guest, Diocles, who gave his life for his love.  
Around his tomb ever at the beginning of springtime  
Crowds of boys gather and vie for the kissing award,  
And he who more sweetly presses lip against lip  
Goes home to his mother proudly laden with garlands.<sup>25</sup>

The beauty of youths was also commemorated in Greek art. Archaic and early classical sculpture found its principal inspiration in young male athletes, gods, or warriors. So did much painting on vases. Decorated vases were often inscribed with a dedication that consisted of a young man's name and the adjective *kalos*—beautiful. Over five hundred of these have come down to us.<sup>26</sup> Scholars have counted over two hundred different names, all male, except for about thirty which designate Athenian *hetairai*, or courtesans. Respectable women, who were secluded within the women's quarters of their houses, could not have been celebrated in this way: such publicity would have insulted and compromised them. But beautiful boys of high social standing were a different matter, and many of the most famous vase painters inscribed their work with the names of boys of rank and repute. Among the

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4. Boy kissing man. Red-figure cup, c. 480 BCE.

names that appear are Miltiades and Alcibiades, Theognis the poet, and Agathon the dramatist. Robinson and Fluck have identified several members of the Socratic circle, a score of generals, and a significant number of Athenian orators and statesmen. The name most often found—it appears over forty times—is Leagros, an Athenian general who died in 465 commanding a fleet in Thrace. Whether depicted as a young man, in middle age, or in old age, he always inspires the epithet *kalos*.<sup>27</sup>

We must inevitably wonder: did these relations remain “platonic,” or did they take on a specifically sexual form? Literary evidence is relatively scarce in the pre-classical period, but again ceramics provide clues. In the late archaic age—from about 570 to 470—painters frequently decorated vases with erotic scenes. Many show heterosexual intercourse, that is, men disporting with courtesans, some of whom submit to vaginal and anal penetration and fellate their partners. But a significant number of scenes are homoerotic. These are less explicitly sexual. Men court boys with love gifts, usually a gar-

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5. Erastes courting an ephebe. Attic black-figure cup, c. 520 BCE.
6. Banquet scene. Fresco from the Tomb of the Diver, Paestum, Italy, fifth century BCE.

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land or a rabbit or a cockerel. Sometimes the boy is absent—on one vase a middle-aged man lies on a couch and sings the words (inscribed on the cup)—“O most beautiful boy” (the beginning of a poem by Theognis), while a gift rabbit crouches beneath.<sup>28</sup> Sometimes the approach is more direct; one man places his hand firmly on the shoulder of a boy who is walking before him in a religious procession.<sup>29</sup> On another vase, a boy raises his head to receive a kiss from a handsomely coifed youth, presumably of the aristocratic warrior caste. A stereotyped motif shows a man reaching to touch a boy’s penis with one hand while with the other he caresses his chin in supplication.<sup>30</sup> Occasionally the boy extends his arm to discourage the advance.<sup>31</sup> Other boys respond eagerly: some leap up to kiss taller men.<sup>32</sup> One striking design shows a seated naked man, with a powerful physique and an erection, titillating the genitals of an athlete who stands between his thighs and throws his arm around his neck. In most cases the artist portrays an older and a younger male. Suitors are not always bearded adults, however. Courtship scenes may also depict adolescent boys with younger ones. A famous vase shows several couples: on one side youths court maidens decorously, on the other three male pairs embrace in poses unmistakably sexual.

Fired ceramics may survive in pristine condition for centuries. Wall paintings are much less durable as colors fade or darken and plaster flakes off. The impressive masterpieces Greek critics extolled have been lost to us, and very few murals of any sort have survived. It was therefore of great interest when, in 1968, a tomb with well-preserved paintings dating from about 470 was discovered at Paestum, an ancient Greek city near Naples. The wall of this Tomb of the Diver, so-called from the design on its under-lid, is decorated with scenes of a festive drinking party. Men recline in pairs on couches in the traditional Greek fashion. Some wave their empty cups at the wine-bearer. But one stares with amusement at the couple who share the couch on the right. They are engaged in a lively flirtation: a handsome bearded young man smiles, fascinated, into the eyes of the youth who lies beside him, pulling him closer for a kiss, which the young man resists. The life-like casualness of the scene suggests how common such behavior must have been at Greek banquets once a little wine had flowed and suggests the matter-of-fact way Greek society looked on this kind of love-play.

### • Sappho •

No reputable Athenian woman of this period would ever have appeared at a social gathering where men were present, even in their own homes. To have done so would have been *prima facie* evidence she was a prostitute. Married at fifteen or sixteen to men twice their age and confined to the house except for religious festivals or visits to relatives, women were so deprived of education and knowledge of the world that there was little they could talk about

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## 7. Sappho and Alcaeus. Attic

vase, c. 480 BCE.

with their husbands. On this account some commentators, like Shelley, have speculated that the low intellectual status of women in classical Athens may have encouraged male homosexuality.<sup>33</sup>

Women appear to have had been less constrained in Homeric times than they were later. The impressive heroines of Athenian tragedy are drawn from this earlier heroic age. This greater freedom for women seems to have lingered in one culture especially, the Aeolian culture of Lesbos, which produced Sappho. In the beauty contests of Mytilene, it was young women, not boys, who competed for the prizes. Sappho's contemporary, the poet Alcaeus,

described an annual public festival “where Lesbian girls in trailing robes go up and down, being judged for their beauty, and about them rings the marvelous holy cry of women in every year.”<sup>34</sup> Apparently some religious cult was associated with this festival.

For Lesbos’ most famous citizen, the worship of beauty was the center of her existence. Our knowledge of Sappho’s life remains fragmentary and problematic. But of this we can be certain: Sappho sings of the beauty of flowers, of gold and sunshine, of shady temple gardens, and, above all, of the beauty of women. Born about 610 into an aristocratic family, she grew up in the city of Mytilene, married, and bore a daughter. Though a revolution exiled her temporarily to Sicily, she soon returned to become the leader of a coterie of women and girls who shared her artistic and erotic tastes. Her lyrics tell of the powerful feelings these women aroused in her:

He seems as fortunate as the gods to me,  
The man who sits opposite you  
And listens nearby to your sweet voice and lovely laughter.  
Truly that sets my heart trembling in my breast.  
For when I look at you for a moment,  
Then it is no longer possible for me to speak:  
My tongue has snapped,  
At once a subtle fire has stolen beneath my flesh,  
I see nothing with my eyes, my ears hum, sweat pours from me,  
A trembling seizes me all over,  
I am greener than grass,  
and it seems to me that I am little short of dying.<sup>35</sup>

Repeatedly, Sappho strikes her characteristic note of intense feeling. “Love shook my heart like a wind falling on oaks on a mountain,” “Once again limb-loosening Love make me tremble, the bitter-sweet irresistible creature,” “You came and I was longing for you; you cooled my heart which was burning with desire.”<sup>36</sup> It is not surprising that Sappho’s favorite goddess was Aphrodite, whom she invokes in a passionate prayer, here translated in an approximation to the so-called “Sapphic” meter she made famous:

Throned in bright colors, deathless Aphrodite,  
Zeus’ most subtle daughter, now I pray you,  
Do not violate my soul with sorrow,  
And pain, O Goddess!

Come to me now as once you came, down swooping,  
Hearing my voice from far, heeding my prayers.  
For once you stepped down from your father’s palace,  
All bright and golden.

Your chariot you harnessed; fair and swiftly  
 Down to the dark earth then your sparrows bore you,  
 Their wings spinning from heaven through the ether,  
 Through the sky's centre.

Suddenly they were here. And you, O blessed,  
 A smile upon your deathless face, asked gently  
 The reason for my sorrow, and the reason  
 Why I had called you.

You asked me then what most of all I wanted  
 In my wild heart, and said: "Whom shall I conquer?  
 What pretty girl must I now lead to love you?  
 Sappho, who harms you?"

"For though she shuns you, soon she will pursue you;  
 Though she rejects your gifts, she'll soon be giving;  
 Though now she loves you not, she soon will love you,  
 Though first unwilling."

Come to me now as then you did! Release me  
 From all my sorrows, speedily fulfilling  
 My heart's desire! Fulfill it! You yourself  
 Fight in my battle!<sup>37</sup>

As a poet, Sappho stood next to Homer in the esteem of many Greeks—the greatest lyric poet as he was the greatest writer of epics. Plato called her "the tenth Muse." Her profile appeared on the coinage of her native Mytilene and other cities; statues and paintings honored her throughout the Mediterranean world. All this occurred despite her avowals of love for women in her poems, avowals that have made the word "lesbian" a synonym for female homosexuality. One ancient commentator, Maximus of Tyre, writing in the second century CE, compared her love for her disciples to the love of Socrates for his, but few readers of her poems can have shared this view, which implied a restraint hardly to be found in her verses.<sup>38</sup> To her own contemporaries their erotic tenor must have been clear: how then, we may wonder, did her contemporaries in the Greek world react to this knowledge?

We have abundant documentation on male affairs in ancient Greece but nothing comparable for lesbian love, perhaps because we have such slight knowledge of the personal lives of women. Later, in Christian times, prejudice reduced Sappho's nine books of poems to the two poems quoted and a handful of fragments. There is evidence, however, that in some states in sixth-century Greece love between women was openly countenanced. Plutarch, after speaking of Spartan boy love, remarks that "this sort of love was so approved among them that even the maidens found lovers in good and noble women."<sup>39</sup>

But any tolerance was lost in classical and late antiquity.<sup>40</sup> The hard-boiled lesbians in Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans* (c. 160 CE) are stereotypically masculine and presented from an unsympathetic point of view. A speaker in a pseudo-Lucianic dialogue dating from a century or so later refers to "tribadism" (lesbianism) as "that word seldom heard, which I am ashamed even to utter."<sup>41</sup> A fragmentary biography of Sappho written about 200 CE on an Egyptian papyrus seems to reflect this negative judgement: "She has been accused by some of being irregular in her ways and a woman-lover."<sup>42</sup> One of our chief sources for Greek biography, the so-called *Suidas* or *Suda*, a Byzantine lexicon compiled about 980, is equally condemnatory and at odds with Maximus: "She had three companions and friends, Atthis, Telesippa and Megara, and she got a bad name from her impure friendship with them."<sup>43</sup> But the *Suidas* often reveals a Byzantine Christian animus.

Sappho's contemporaries did not seem to share this deprecating view. Indeed, one can hardly imagine a writer expressing herself with such direct candor if she thought her poems would bring her obloquy. For two thousand years after her death, social conventions (not to speak of religious sentiment) in the Western tradition made it impossible for women openly to avow passionate love for each other. But Sappho speaks confidently, almost arrogantly, of the fame that will be hers, with no hint that she desires to *épater les bourgeois*.

These paradoxes have sparked a war among commentators. A century ago the famous German scholar Wilamowitz thought Sappho could not possibly have been "lesbian" in the modern sense because she was commissioned to train girls of good families in song and dance for religious festivals and weddings. Denys Page has ridiculed this Victorian de-eroticizing of Sappho and has scoffed at the notion of her being anything so proper as a schoolmistress. But both scholars seem to have missed the point by creating a false dichotomy. Even the *Suidas*, for all its bias, lists her "pupils"—"Anagora of Miletus, Gongyla of Colophon, and Eunica of Salamis," women who must either have gained fame in their own right or, more likely, through being named in her poems. Sappho's reputation as a mentor must have been great to attract girls not only from the Ionian mainland but from as far away as Salamis on the other side of the Aegean. Many of her fragments are loving farewells, such as a doting teacher might have written to young women leaving to return home to be married. An undated papyrus fragment speaks of her teaching the "noblest" girls of Lesbos and Ionia and declares unequivocally that she was "highly esteemed among the citizens" of Mytilene.<sup>44</sup> In our age the discovery of a teacher's lesbianism might still be cause for alarm in a conservative community. But this does not seem to have been the case in Sappho's culture.

In hostile Western societies, Sappho has, through the ages, been a beacon for women writers who have identified themselves as lesbians in the modern sense. Today, little of her work remains, but these remnants have been

enough to inspire women like Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien, Americans who at the beginning of the twentieth century lived openly lesbian lives in Paris, translated Sappho, wrote poems and plays about her, and attempted to live out a Sapphic idyll in a villa on Lesbos. Hilda Doolittle ("H.D.") incorporated her phrases into her own poetry, and Amy Lowell used her images to celebrate her lifelong companion, Ada Russell.<sup>45</sup> In 1895 the novelist Willa Cather published a bold tribute in a Nebraska newspaper:

There is one woman poet whom all the world calls great, though of her work there remains now only a few disconnected fragments and that one wonderful hymn to Aphrodite . . . If of all the lost richness we could have one master restored to us, one of all the philosophers and poets, the choice of the world would be for the lost nine books of Sappho. Those broken fragments have burned themselves into the consciousness of the world like fire . . . Twenty centuries have not cooled the passion in them.<sup>46</sup>

• Alcaeus, Ibycus, Anacreon •

Sappho's lines are the first we have that tell of the love of one woman for another. By a coincidence of literary history it was a fellow Mytilenean who composed the earliest known lyrics expressing love for a boy. Alcaeus knew Sappho and reputedly addressed love poems to her; to one solicitation, Aristotle tells us, she made a tart reply. The fragments of Alcaeus that have survived excoriate tyrants who seized power in Lesbos, especially Pittacus, who was the enemy of Sappho's family. But Cicero, who admired Alcaeus' courage but disapproved of his erotic verse, complained that he was extravagant in writing of the "the love of youths."<sup>47</sup> Horace is more explicit and identifies one of his favorites by name. He praised Alcaeus, "Who, though brave in war, / Still amid the fighting or when he had moored his storm-tossed ship on a wet shore, / Sang of Dionysius and the Muses and Venus . . . / And of Lycus with his dark eyes and hair of ebony."<sup>48</sup>

Alcaeus was a man embittered by political reverses. But not all poets who sang of male love lived dour lives. Ibycus and Anacreon, contemporaries in the latter half of the sixth century, were revelers who extolled the pleasures of wine and love. Ibycus, who was born at Rhegium, the modern Reggio di Calabria, wandered through mainland Greece, then settled at the luxurious court of the tyrant Polycrates on the island of Samos off the coast of Asia Minor. In antiquity Ibycus won fame for his seven books of poetry and his amorous nature. Cicero, who had the texts we know now only from sparse fragments, described Ibycus as even more erotic than Alcaeus and Anacreon. An epitaph for his grave at Rhegium has come down to us in the Greek Anthology: it calls him a "lover of the lyre" and a "lover of lads."<sup>49</sup> Only a few lines remain of the poems that led Alexandrian critics to rank him as one of the

Nine Lyric Poets of Greece. In one excerpt he laments that, though spring has come, love still shakes his heart like a blustering, winter tempest. In another he trembles at the approach of love, like an old racehorse forced to compete once again. A third celebrates a boy whom he loved—"Euryalus, scion of the delicious Graces . . . darling of the lovely-tressed Muses . . . the nursling of Cypris [Aphrodite] and tender-eyed Persuasion."<sup>50</sup>

Polycrates established a small empire in the Aegean centered on beautiful Samos with its splendid temples and made it a center of learning and the arts. Besides Ibycus, he also entertained Anacreon, a native of Teos on the Ionian coast. In later days Anacreon's fame eclipsed the older poet's, and he became for classical Greece and Renaissance Europe the archetypal celebrant of wine, women, and song—and, since he was Greek, of boys. (Few patriotic Americans, negotiating the demanding cadences of "The Star-Spangled Banner," realize that the music derives from an old English drinking tune, "To Anacreon in Heaven.") Like Sappho and Ibycus, he invokes a powerful image to describe the force of love: love is a smith who has beaten him with a hammer and plunged him in cold water like tempered steel. His fragments speak of women he has yearned for, but more often of boys. A complimentary poem in the Palatine Anthology addressed him as a *philopaides*. Maximus of Tyre names three of his loves: Smerdies, Bathyllus, and Cleobolus, the first two also favorites of Polycrates, who had a statue of Bathyllus set up in the great temple of Hera at Samos. Anacreon's attachment to Smerdies seems to have run deeper than his usual flirtations. Aelian says he loved him "for his soul, not his body."<sup>51</sup> Jealous, Polycrates cut off Smerdies' hair. Anacreon rebuked Smerdies in verse, as if the boy had done the deed himself. For this he has been praised for his tact and damned for his cowardice. To a boy whose name we do not know he wrote lines that parallel Plato's conceit of the charioteer in the *Phaedrus*:

O boy with maiden eyes,  
I seek you and you do not listen,  
Little knowing that you hold the reins to my soul.<sup>52</sup>

Eventually Polycrates was lured into a trap set by the Persians who captured and crucified him. Anacreon's good fortune, however, did not desert him. This was an age of brilliant tyrants, and Anacreon immediately found a congenial home in Athens with Hippias and Hipparchus, sons of Peisistratus. Hippias inherited his father's political power in 527, but his younger brother Hipparchus was devoted less to politics than to love and the arts, and in his role as minister of culture sent a fifty-oared galley to Samos to conduct Anacreon to Athens. There the poet lived in the house of his *eromenos*, Critias, who reversed the prescribed roles by writing poems in praise of the older man. The Athenians, in later democratic times, raised a statue to Anacreon, wine cup in hand, next to one of Pericles.

[To view this image, refer to  
the print version of this title.]

8. Man and young athlete. Red-figure  
drinking cup, c. 480 BCE.

9. Kissing competition. Attic red-figure  
vase, c. 500 BCE.

[To view this image, refer to  
the print version of this title.]

• Theognis of Megara •

The most substantial writing on homosexual love to survive from the sixth century was not, however, of Athenian origin. These poems, of uncertain authorship, have been traditionally ascribed to Theognis, a citizen either of Megara in Boeotia or of its colony in Sicily. (Possibly he was born in the one city and spent his exile in the other.) A Dorian settlement, Sicilian Megara, like so many Greek communities of this age, was wracked by class strife. The staunchly conservative Theognis sided with the nobility, who were overthrown in a revolution that made Theognis an embittered wanderer dependent on others. Yet, despite their pessimism, the *Elegies* collected under his name were admired for their moral teachings and exemplary wisdom. Popular pedagogic texts, they were forceful in expression and conservative in sentiment: “Keep away from rascals”; “It’s better to be poor and good than rich and crooked”; “All real gentlemen obey the rules.”<sup>53</sup>

Theognis’ dates have been much disputed, but ancient authorities thought he wrote about 540 BCE. His poems have come down to us in two books, the shorter second book consisting of forty-six brief poems, nearly all on the love of boys. Some lines addressed to his favorite Kurnos foreshadow Shakespeare’s promise of immortality in his sonnets two thousand years later:

I give you wings. You’ll soon be lifted up  
Across the land, across the boundless crests  
Of ocean where men dine and pass the cup,  
You’ll light there, on the lips of all the guests . . .  
At length, my boy, you’ll enter Hades’ dwelling,  
That black hole where departed spirits moan,  
But even there your glory shall not cease,  
Your well-loved name will stay alive, unworn . . .  
As long as light exists and earth endures.<sup>54</sup>

But all did not go smoothly in this affair, and the sudden turn in feeling at the end of this eulogy is also Shakespearean:

I give you this, for what? to be reviled,—  
To be betrayed and lied to, like a child.

The poems of Book II alternate between admonition, complaints (you are fickle and ungrateful), pleas (don’t torture me, someday you’ll want a boy to favor you), and a small ration of praise (you are lovable and handsome). Some poems express placid content: “Happy the lover who exercises, then / Goes home to sleep all day with a handsome boy.”<sup>55</sup> But others are anguished. At one moment boys are commended as more loyal than women, at another derided as faithless and cruel. Finally, the poet decides the fascination lies in the contradictions:

The love of boys is fine to have, and fine  
 To leave—it is much easier to find  
 Than satisfy. Ten thousand evils come  
 From it also ten thousand benefits  
 But even this gives it a certain charm.<sup>56</sup>

These songs were composed to be sung at symposia, or drinking parties, in aristocratic circles. They give us not a philosophy of life but the stuff of a thousand arias and a hundred thousand popular songs, the joyous outpourings and the concomitant “blues” of Greece’s ancient homoerotic culture.

### • Athens’ Rulers •

Sappho and Alcaeus belonged to the same generation that produced Solon, who was born about 640. But where they won renown as poets, Solon’s fame was a statesman’s. For the skill he showed in governing the Greeks he was ranked among the Seven Sages of antiquity. A successful merchant with an aristocratic background, he assumed power when the city was on the verge of a civil war between rich and poor, a disaster he averted by softening Draco’s harsh penal laws, canceling the debts of the poor, and laying the groundwork for Athens’ democratic constitution.

But in his younger days Solon also wrote poems. One verse speaks of a youth loving a boy, “desiring his thighs and his delicious mouth.”<sup>57</sup> His most significant pronouncement on the love of males, however, appears among the gnomic verses that became a standard part of an Athenian literary education and found their way into the collection known as the *Theognidea*: “He’s lucky who has boyfriends and smooth-hoovèd / Horses and hunting dogs and foreign friends.”<sup>58</sup> Male love was not simply a source of pleasure. According to Plutarch’s biography of Solon, it played an important role in Athens’ political life:

Solon’s mother . . . was a cousin of the mother of [the tyrant] Peisistratus. And the two men were at first great friends, largely because of their kinship and the youthful beauty of Peisistratus, with whom, as some say, Solon was passionately in love. And this may be the reason why, in later years, when they were at variance about matters of state, their enmity did not bring with it any harsh or savage feelings, but the former amenities lingered in their spirits . . . And that Solon was not proof against beauty in a youth, and made not so bold with Love as “to confront him like a boxer, hand to hand,” may be inferred from his poems. He also wrote a law forbidding a slave to practise [nude] gymnastics or have a boy lover, thus putting the matter in the category of honorable and dignified practices, and in a way inciting the worthy to that which he forbade the unworthy. And it said that Peisistratus also had a boy lover, Charmus, and that he dedicated the

statue of Love in the Academy, where the runners in the sacred torch race light their torches.<sup>59</sup>

Aristotle, in his *Constitution of Athens*, had argued that Solon and Peisistratus could hardly have been lovers, since Solon was the elder by thirty-five or forty years.<sup>60</sup> Whatever the nature of their relationship, Plutarch and his contemporary Aelian chose to ignore Aristotle's skepticism.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps they simply liked a reasonable amount of romance in their history. But as a Greek, Plutarch would also have felt that an amorous affiliation was the right apprenticeship for politics in ancient Athens. Even if those relations did not exist, Greek historians thought they should have.

Plutarch, indeed, added a further link in a kind of erotic genealogy. He makes Peisistratus the *erastes* of Charmus, who endowed the Athenian cult of love with an emblem in the shape of a statue of Eros. Elsewhere we learn that Charmus became the lover of another ruler of Athens, Peisistratus' son Hippias, whose brother was to be fatefully enamoured of Harmodius. In fifth-century Athens the roster of *erastoi* included Themistocles (who led the Athenian navy to victory at Salamis), Aristides (his rival in politics and for the love of Stesilaus, "in beauty of person the most brilliant of youths"), Critias (one of the Thirty Tyrants imposed on Athens by the Spartans), and Pericles' stepson Callias.<sup>62</sup>

Pausanias, who wrote a comprehensive guide to Greece in the second century CE, took note of Charmus' Eros, then still standing. He also gives the history of another monument of unspecified date but with a striking provenance. This was the altar of Anteros, or "love avenged." So great was the prestige of love in the city that even resident aliens, who had no rights as citizens and whose status was often precarious, did not fear to build a cenotaph to heartlessness, though it implied a reproach to their hosts. According to Pausanias: "The Athenian Meles, spurning the love of Timagoras, a resident alien, bade him ascend to the highest point of the [Acropolis] and cast himself down. Now Timagoras took no account of his life, and was ready to gratify the youth in any of his requests, so he went and cast himself down. When Meles saw that Timagoras was dead, he suffered such pangs of remorse that he threw himself from the same rock and so died. From this time the resident aliens worshiped as Anteros the avenging spirit of Timagoras."<sup>63</sup> In Athens at the end of the sixth century, another drama of love and vengeance would end the Peisistratid tyranny and provide the city with its most renowned couple, the tyrannicides Aristogeiton and Harmodius.

### • The Tyrannicides •

The crucial events took place in 514. Harmodius, "being then in the flower of his youthful beauty," was beloved by Aristogeiton.<sup>64</sup> When Hipparchus

tried to seduce Harmodius, Aristogeiton, fearing that he might try to achieve his ends by force, organized a conspiracy to overthrow him and his brother, the tyrant Hippias. A new provocation came when Harmodius rejected Hipparchus a second time and Hipparchus retaliated by insulting Harmodius' sister at a public ceremony. Incensed by pride and jealousy, the two men plotted to act at the Great Panathenaea—the festival immortalized on the Parthenon frieze, the one occasion when citizens were allowed to carry arms. But when the day arrived, they were alarmed to see one of their co-conspirators talking familiarly to Hippias. Fearing that they had been betrayed, they rushed to the agora and killed Hipparchus, who was organizing the procession. Harmodius himself was immediately struck down by Hipparchus' followers. Aristogeiton died after prolonged torture, ended only when his repeated taunts goaded Hippias into dispatching him. (Aristotle, in his *Athenian Constitution* [18:1–6], gives a slightly different version of these events, making Thetallus, Hipparchus's half-brother, the wooer and insulter of Harmodius.)

The tyranny of Peisistratus and his sons had not hitherto been harsh. Indeed, the city had made its first great cultural advance under their rule. Peisistratus had built the city's first great public buildings, had the Homeric epics written down, and inaugurated the performance of tragedies at the festival of Dionysus. But after his brother's assassination, Hipparchus' rule turned harsher; so many were killed or exiled that the city turned against him. Four years later he was overthrown, democracy was restored, and Athens entered on the days of her glory.

Aristogeiton and Harmodius were hailed as the sponsors of this new freedom. The cult of the "heroes," as they came to be called, evolved into a pervasive feature of Athens' political and social life. Before this, the city had honored only the gods, not men, with statues. Now a dramatic representation of the lovers about to strike Hipparchus was erected in the agora not far from the spot where the drama had been acted out in real life. These bronze figures became the main secular emblem of Athens, as closely associated with the city as the Statue of Liberty is with New York. The image was endlessly reproduced on coins, in paintings, and finally in marble copies in Athenian residences and Roman villas. For many years the statue's position in the center of the marketplace was so sacrosanct that no other statues could be raised nearby. An annual festival commemorated the deaths of the lovers, and an edict of Pericles decreed that their eldest descendants should be supported at public expense at the prytaneum, Athens' ancient city hall.

The tyrannicides were celebrated not only by public monuments and ceremonies but also at private gatherings in citizens' homes. A popular *skolion*, or drinking-song, praised their achievement. Aristophanes mentions it in the *Wasps* and *Lysistrata*, and Athenaeus's savants recited its simple verses at their

dinner-party in the Greek city of Naucratis in Egypt seven hundred years after the deed it honored took place:

In a myrtle branch I will carry my sword,  
As did Harmodius and Aristogeiton  
When at the Feast of Athena  
They slew the tyrant Hipparchus.  
Ever shall your fame live in the earth  
Dearest Harmodius and Aristogeiton,  
For that you slew the tyrant  
And made Athens a city of equal rights.<sup>65</sup>

The song so strongly influenced the popular imagination that historians protested that it was a gross simplification of Athenian history. Herodotus was at pains to explain that the assassination had not, in fact, freed Athens and that it was the exiled Alcmeonid clan who through their manipulation of the Delphic oracle finally persuaded a Spartan army to attack the city and depose Hippias some four years later.<sup>66</sup> And Thucydides, to whom we are indebted for the details of the love affair and Hipparchus' ill-advised interference, corrected two points the popular song misrepresented, noting that Hippias, not Hipparchus, was the principal tyrant-ruler of Athens and that the primary motive for the assassination was personal and not political.<sup>67</sup>

But the facts of history faded before a myth with such potent appeal, and the cult of the lovers continued to flourish as an essential part of the Athenian civic consciousness. Miltiades, to spur on his troops, saluted the lovers before the battle of Marathon as Athens' greatest heroes.<sup>68</sup> Despite Aristotle's own detachment from the popular enthusiasm that beglamored the tyrannicides, his nephew Callisthenes, when asked who were the men most honored by the Athenians, unhesitatingly replied: "Harmodius and Aristogeiton, because they slew one of the two tyrants and destroyed the tyranny."<sup>69</sup> Demosthenes, in his oration *On the False Legation*, called them "the men to whom, in requital of their glorious deed, you have allotted by statute a share of your libations and drink-offerings in every temple and at every public service, whom in hymns and in worship, you treat as the equal of gods and demi-gods."<sup>70</sup>

As a symbol of democracy, their statues, commemorating courage, martyrdom, and devoted love, had an attraction hardly to be matched by any portrayal of intriguing exiles, a corrupt oracle, or a Spartan general. Indeed, these civic tokens shared the fortunes of the city in a dramatic way. The Roman historian Pliny tells us that the first monument, cast in bronze by Antenor, was set up in 509, a year after Hippias fell, though this date is uncertain.<sup>71</sup> But in 480, when Xerxes' Persian troops sacked and burned Athens, they carried off the statues to the Persian capital, Susa, as trophies of war.

[To view this image, refer to  
the print version of this title.]

10. Aristogeiton and Harmodius. Roman marble, after bronze by Kritios and Nesiotes, 477 BCE.

There Alexander found them when, one hundred and fifty years later, he conquered the Persians. The statues were then returned. But the Athenians had, in the meantime, commissioned two other famous sculptors, Kritios and Nesiotes, to cast a new pair of figures, which were set in place in 477. It was this work that was copied on coins and in paintings over the centuries. On their retrieval, Antenor's originals were re-erected side by side with the new statues, and they stood together until the destruction of the city by the barbarian Heruli in 267 CE.

Their modern recovery took place in slow stages. During the Renaissance, mutilated copies of the Aristogeiton figure stood unidentified in the loggias of wealthy connoisseurs in Rome. Then, in 1859, the German scholar Karl Friedrichs realized that two marble figures of athletes in the Naples Museum labeled simply "gladiators" in fact belonged together and were copies of the tyrannicides. The head of Harmodius had, however, been replaced by a Hellenistic head far different in style from the late archaic body. Finally, in 1922 a head hidden away in the Vatican collection was found to fit, and a replica provided for the Naples pair. Using vase paintings, it has been possible to correct the arm positions that the Naples Museum had misrestored. The reconstructed pair now shows Harmodius striding forward with his sword raised to strike, while Aristogeiton holds his cloak over one arm to protect his young lover.<sup>72</sup> For the first time since antiquity it has been possible to realize one of the best known images of ancient Greece, familiar to Athenians and visitors to their city for seven centuries.

Male love had been held in high regard in Athens before the demise of the tyranny. Now its esteem increased still more, as the cult of the heroes took root. In the eyes of the Athenians, *paiderastia* assumed an added meaning. In Crete, Sparta, and Megara, boy love had been the means by which a military aristocracy initiated young males into its traditions; now it was seen as a bulwark of popular liberty against tyranny. In Plato's *Symposium* Pausanias' paenegyric on love emphasized its political importance:

In Ionia [then, in 385, under Persian domination] and other places, and generally in countries which are subject to the barbarians, [male love] is held to be dishonorable; because of their despotic governments, loves of youths share the evil repute in which philosophy and gymnastics are held, because they are inimical to tyranny; for the interest of rulers require, I suppose, that their subjects should be poor in spirit and that there should be no strong bond of friendship or society among them, which love, above all other motives, is likely to inspire, as our Athenian tyrants learned by experience . . . And, therefore, the ill-repute into which these attachments have fallen [in Ionia] is ascribed to . . . the self-seeking of the governors and the cowardice of the governed.<sup>73</sup>

Polycrates the tyrant of Samos did indeed close the gymnasia, seeing them as places where dissent might germinate.

The idea that love between men was a threat to tyrants persisted as a rhetorical commonplace for centuries. In the dialogue on love that Plutarch wrote in Roman imperial times, he speaks admiringly of the Athenian tyrannicides and two other couples. "You know the tales of Aristogeiton of Athens and Antileon of Metapontum and Melanippus of Agrigentum: they had at first no quarrels with their tyrants, though they saw that these were acting like drunkards and disfiguring the state; but when the tyrants tried to seduce their beloveds, they spared not even their own lives in defending their loves, holy as it were and inviolable shrines."<sup>74</sup>

If the story of Aristogeiton and Harmodius rests on well-attested facts, the stories of Antileon and Melanippus may be in part romantic fables. But popular inventions are perhaps even more significant than facts in revealing underlying cultural attitudes. For if facts pertain to real events, fables—whether amorous or heroic—are reflections of what a people wishes to believe. They tell us what kinds of behavior appeal to its imagination and stir its heart. From this point of view it is worth looking at the details of Plutarch's two examples.

The story of Melanippus is told by Heracleides of Pontus, a pupil of Plato's, who wrote a lost book, *On Love Affairs*. Melanippus lived in Agrigentum in Sicily, whose tyrant Phalaris (r. 570–554) was notorious for his cruelty. Among his enormities was a bull of brass in which he roasted victims so that their cries imitated the bellowing of the animal. Appalled by these atrocities, Melanippus plotted with his lover Chariton to overthrow the dictator. The attempt failed, but Phalaris was reputedly so moved by the lovers' bravery under torture that he freed them with praise. As a result, so the legend goes, Apollo postponed Phalaris' death, and his oracle at Delphi praised the lovers with a couplet "Happy were Chariton and Melanippus, / Guides for mortals in divine loving."<sup>75</sup>

Antileon's story was recorded by Phanias of Eresus, a pupil of Aristotle's, less than a century after the events purportedly took place. According to Phanias, Antileon was scorned by a handsome young nobleman, Hipparinos, until he performed a seemingly impossible task: he stole the alarm bell from the fortress of the tyrant at Herculea Lucania, a small Greek colony in southern Italy near Metapontum. When the tyrant himself became enamoured of Hipparinos, Antileon killed his rival, only to be captured when he was entangled in a flock of sheep. After its liberation, the town, we are told, imitated Athens by setting up statues to the lovers—and made it illegal to tie sheep together.<sup>76</sup>

It is worth noting that the heroes of these anecdotes are by no means all men of noble birth. Romantic love, reborn in southern France in the eleventh century, was to be preeminently a cult of aristocrats, not merchants or

peasants; but in the wide expanse of the Greek world, men of any class were deemed capable of heroic self-sacrifice. Thucydides identifies Aristogeiton as a citizen of middle rank, that is, a businessman or artisan. Xenophon in his *Anabasis* tells of a common soldier who offered his life to save a boy from Chalcidian Olynthus.<sup>77</sup> Athenaeus, in his plenitude, gives an account of a formidable leader of a slave revolt on the Greek island of Chios off the coast of Asia Minor who, grown old, begged his young lover to kill him so he could pay for his education: "I have loved you more than anyone else in the world; you are my favorite, my son, everything that I have. But I have lived long enough, whereas you are young and in the flower of life. What, then, remains? You must become a good and noble man. Since now the Chian state offers a large sum to the man who kills me, and promises him freedom, you must cut off my head and carry it to Chios."<sup>78</sup> If this story is true, it demonstrates tellingly how every level of Greek society was inspired by the ideal of *paiderastia*; if it is an invention, as the skeptical reader may suspect, it shows how the Greeks could imagine even a desperado harboring exalted sentiments and acting heroically under the influence of male love.

What must strike the dispassionate observer is the extent to which the post-classical West moved in the opposite direction of vilification, associating homosexuality with sin, crime, and sickness and, in the political sphere, with weakness and treason. In the modern world the expression "homosexual hero" would strike most people as an oxymoron. Far from being an honorable relation, love between men or between women became a secret to be hidden at all costs. What brought about this reversal? To understand the change we must leave the clarity and ample records of the classical world to examine a society in which the facts bearing on the subject are definitive but few and the social environment obscure.