

STONEHENGE TO STONEWALL

Or Gay History In A Nutshell

BY CHARLES EMOND

In ancient Sparta, a soldier in training was fined if he did not have an older male lover as his mentor. He was even fined if said older lover was not a reputable sort, perhaps a coward or a slut. That was Sparta for you — they were serious overachievers. Spartan women were single-mindedly dedicated to producing fierce soldiers. They called out to their sons as they marched off to battle, "Come back carrying your shields or dead!"

As un-nurturing as that might sound, one commonly accepted belief throughout Greece was that to be near women was to catch their softness. Softness might be fine for a nurse, but it was certainly not a desirable attribute for a soldier in those days of hand-to-hand combat.

The *Iliad* of Homer presents some of the most highly admired soldiers in all history as lovers. Achilles had a lad named Patroclus as his "squire." The story of how Patroclus borrowed Achilles' armor and was killed in his stead is touching; Achilles, the greatest hero of the Trojan War wept bitterly for his dead lover. Meanwhile, Hercules, that courageous, muscle-bound he-man glorified throughout history and most recently in the Disney cartoon, is documented as having

gone through 14 lovers. I do not believe any of them made it into the cartoon.

Related to all this same-sex activity was another belief held by the ancient Greeks: the only real and lasting love is the love between two men. Today, this is often referred to as male bonding. They didn't address the same phenomenon in women, but women's natures seem more attuned to expressing and living deep emotional attachments.

Of course, any passionate friendship can be non-sexual or Platonic in nature. Curiously, the original meaning of "Platonic" in characterizing a relationship is that the relationship is so powerful that it is actually above and beyond sex.

Comrades in Each Other's Arms

Plato makes the case in his *Dialogues* that the best army of all would be made up of pairs of male lovers who "...when fighting at each other's side, although a mere handful, they would overcome the world." The theory here is that they would fight to the death to protect each other and look good in front of their boyfriends. This makes sense to me.

Plato's advice was actually put into practice by the Thebans. It is delightful to contemplate our military's ridiculous "don't ask, don't tell" policy being reversed in Thebes. (Recruiter: "Is this guy REALLY your boyfriend or are you just faking it to get in?") Maybe their recruiting campaign included a drawing of Zeus pointing and saying, "I want you...and him!"

However they went about it, they managed to form an elite battalion of 300 men, all lovers, which came to be called the Sacred Band of Thebes. They fought one of the most famous battles in history at Charonea in 338 BC against Philip of Macedon — and against overwhelming odds.

It makes me very proud to think about these gay brothers of ancient Greece marching out to battle side by side, but I'm sorry to report that they lost the battle. True to their training and Plato's prediction, every single one of them died fighting. Philip of Macedon said, upon viewing their bodies, "May those who suppose that these men did or suffered anything dishonorable perish wretchedly." He was so

impressed by their bravery that he erected a monument over their mass grave and crowned it with the statue of a lion. This is not the sort of thing usually done for enemy soldiers in any era.

Someday My Prince

Will Come

Philip's son, Alexander the Great, delighted in thinking of himself as a sort of reincarnation of the great Achilles. He actually carried a copy of the *Iliad* on his campaigns for bedside reading. He even thought of his lover, Hephaestion, as a second Patroclus.

These two met when Hephaestion, a young prince from the highlands, came to be trained at the courts of Philip of Macedon. It is true that Alexander and all his men had multiple wives, as was the custom back then, but he also had a handsome Persian eunuch named Bagoas as a bedmate. Somewhere he had an official wife named Roxane — about whom we know very little.

He and Hephaestion were inseparable; when Alexander became king at the age of 20, he showered Hephaestion with titles and honors. All the way to India

on that legendary trek to the Indus River, they were side by side. However, Alexander couldn't protect him from picking up some kind of bug. Hephaestion became very sick upon their return and died of a fever.

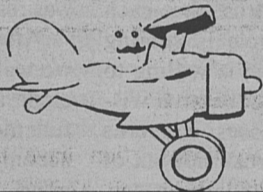
After his death, Alexander refused food for three days, ordered official mourning throughout his empire, lay on the dead body day and night, had the doctors hanged, and staged a spectacular funeral. He also had his hair cut and ordered that the tails and manes of all his horses also be cut. This is Greek drama at its finest. It's a good thing, though, that funerals like this are rare — especially for doctors.

Next time: Julius Caesar -- Every man's wife and every woman's husband!

For more on gays in the US military, Randy Shiels' *Conduct Unbecoming* is a powerful and extensive document. It is rather a depressing read, but enlightening, especially if you have not been in the military.

Charlie Emond has a bachelor's degree from Queen's College and masters degrees from both Dartmouth and Keene State. He teaches college history courses in Springfield, including a course he developed -- *Hidden History: Homosexuality in Western Civilization*. ▼

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