

STONEHENGE TO STONEWALL

Or Gay History In A Nutshell

Rome Wasn't Built Without Gays

BY CHARLES EMOND

The list of gay Roman emperors is extensive. The famous historian Edward Gibbon observed that among the first 15 emperors, the only one with the "correct" taste in love was Claudius. (Gibbon was obviously not a fan of the pink team.) But then, as another historian observed, "Claudius was a moron!"

The fact is that many emperors, both good and bad, had male lovers. Boswell makes the case that several actually gained power by submitting sexually to the previous ruler — Augustus to Julius Caesar, Otho to Nero, Hadrian to Trajan, for example. What an interesting concept for our times...

Well, perhaps we had better not follow that too far. Still, we could borrow much from the Romans. We've already copied their monuments to make Washington, DC, look like an overblown Forum. Why not their mores? After all, they did have some things so very right.

Foreign relations

Like the Greeks, the Romans admired macho soldiers who had lovers. Rumor had it that Julius Caesar, on one of his campaigns, was "used" by Nicomedes, King of Bithynia. Evidently someone

was watching, as his Roman legions marched along later, they chanted, "Caesar conquered Gaul and Nicomedes, Caesar." He was even referred to in one edict as "the Queen of Bithynia." It was Curio the Elder who called Julius Caesar, "Every man's wife and every woman's husband" — a sort of bisexual Bill Clinton, if you will, but unaffected politically by this publicity.

Although love was supposed to come after marriage, amicable divorce was common. Only married women were expected to be faithful to the marriage vows, and Roman citizens were free to conduct their sex lives as they saw fit. But there was a sense among them that a passive sexual role was not proper for a citizen. Being on the receiving end of things, except perhaps in the excitement and ignorance of youth, had demeaning implications — hence, Julius Caesar's ribbing by his men.

Male prostitutes in Rome paid taxes on their earnings and had a special public holiday. That might not be something we want to lobby for here. But certainly the fact that same-sex marriages were actually legal in Rome until 342 AD is worth noting. Perhaps America's third century will see a similar law passed.

Taking the Bad with the Good

The most famous gay emperor, and one of the best emperors by all accounts (naturally!), was Hadrian. He ruled for more than 20 years, and managed to retire from office. This itself was quite a feat when you consider that in the year 69, Rome went through four emperors. Hadrian had an official wife he never saw and actually might have had poisoned. He fell in love with Antinous, a young Greek, and lived openly with him.

When Antinous drowned in the Nile in 130 AD, Hadrian is said to have "wept like a woman." In his grief, he had Antinous declared a god and spent the rest of his reign naming cities, roads, and public buildings after him! He commissioned statues, coins, and paintings, and created memorials to him everywhere. (Hey, we did the same kind of thing with George Washington in the early years of our republic.)

Nero, possibly the worst emperor, had many affairs with men and married two publicly — separately, I believe — with one receiving the honors due an empress. At one of his weddings, an onlooker commented, "If Nero's father had married this sort of wife, the world would be a happier place today!"

Matters of the heart

Great writers of the time, including Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and Tibullius, speak of erotic love between men as the most natural of things. Stoic philosopher Zeno proclaimed that the object of a man's love could be male or female and Epictetus wrote that both were of the same quality. Petronius, Juvenal, Martial, and Plutarch described the love of men for men and women for women in every class. There are several lesbian couples in the romantic literature of the day, especially in Iamblicus' *Babyloniaca*, but since the famous writers were men, their attentions were elsewhere and the pickings are slim.

Republican virtues?

Did homosexuality cause the fall of Rome? Despite what Trent Lott might have you believe, there was no link. Historical evidence shows that it was strong throughout the early years and the golden age of the Empire. You might just as easily use homosexuality to explain Rome's rise and success! And long before the Romans, the Etruscans showed the same degree of comfort as the Romans with homosexuality at all levels.

Here in the United States, we have only been at this "republic" thing for about two centuries; we have at least six to go to catch up with the Romans. I propose that we look a little more closely at how they lived, and not just at the glory that was their architecture!

Next time: Who was that naked man in the garden?

Further reading: a movie this time — Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane* (1976) which shows a Roman centurion banished with his soldiers to a desert outpost and lusting after a beautiful Christian soldier. This movie is poetic and mysterious — and the nudity is nice — but it is the only movie I've ever seen with Latin dialogue! It does have English sub-titles; rent it and you will agree that it's a good thing Latin is dead.

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, and will be teaching a course he developed — *Hidden History: Homosexuality in Western Civilization* — at CCV in White River Junction this fall.

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* In a 1997 VT Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) comparison between students reporting same sex activity and students reporting opposite sex activity.

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