

Student Podcast Transcript

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Podcast Transcription: Pederasty in Ancient Greece and Rome

[MUSIC]

RS: Have you ever thought about sexuality in ancient societies? If so, then the sexualities in ancient Greece and Rome are some of the most interesting and would be right up your alley.

Hello, and welcome to Pederasty in Ancient Greece and Rome

My name is Ryan Shelton, and I am in my last semester at Cal State Northridge, I am as History Major and Queer Studies Minor.

This podcast aims to tell you about the concept of pederasty,

I would like to walk you through the history of the term pederasty.

This podcast will describe what exactly pederasty is and where it came from.

So, let us get started with a definition of pederasty.

Pederasty is defined by Oxford Languages Dictionary under Oxford University Press as sexual activity involving a man and a boy or youth.

But there is so much more to pederasty than just that definition.

Pederasty is something that was present in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome.

Now that I have some basic introduction and definition of pederasty I am going to jump into the history of the term and what is meant during that time.

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The place that pederasty was most prevalent would have to be in Ancient Greece. Most scholars that have studied Greek and Roman sexuality claim that pederasty was one more prevalent in Greece, namely Athens. This is told in the books, *Greek Sexuality* by Kenneth James Dover and *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* by Marilyn B. Skinner

According to Kenneth Dover in *Greek Sexuality* “Pederasty designates the social custom whereby adult male Greeks courted citizen youths, as sexual objects but also, at least notionally, as protégés; in fact, technical terms used by the ancient Greeks themselves: *erastês* (“lover”) for the adult male and *erômenos* (“beloved”) for the youth.”

So how did pederasty work in Ancient Greece you might ask?

Well let me tell you, this concept was one that involved two males, one of adult age and one of a younger age, the age of the younger one varied but they were never under the age of 12 since that was deemed unacceptable, this was stated in the article by Katie Serena called “Three Revered Historical Civilizations That Embraced Pederasty

This relationship that was formed between these two was often a sexual relationship but in some cases did not include sexual relations at all.

Dover describes this relationship in *Greek Sexualities*, this relationship was one that was used to prepare the younger male for Greek society as well as provide him with a better standing within the community. These Greek men would share their vast knowledge with the younger boy for

them to learn and prepare for their life as an adult, this teaching was often repaid with sexual interactions between the two.

In an article written by Emma Mason called “What was pederasty in ancient Greece?” she speaks to a Professor Paul Cartledge from the University of Cambridge who explains frequency of pederasty in Ancient Greece; “It is difficult to generalize about the frequency of pederasty in the ancient Greek world,” says Cartledge. “The evidence suggests that, although it was really quite widespread and, in that sense, ‘normal’, on the other hand different Greek societies operated with different kinds of social tolerances. At Athens, for example, where elaborate courtship rituals and protocols were in place, it was probably a practice mostly confined to the socially elite, the wealthier classes. In other cities – and Sparta, I would argue, was one, it was a rite of passage for all males, it was part of transitioning from adolescence to full civic adulthood.”

This relationship was one that was normalized during this time, it was one that a good number of males took part in and one that was not criticized by the masses of people in Ancient Greece.

It is remarkably interesting that a relationship like this would be normalized so long ago. This really shows that societies all over the world went through cycles when it came to same-sex relationships. There were different times when some relationships like pederasty were accepted like in ancient Greece and then they were immediately done away with and same-sex relationships were hidden and even outlawed in some countries over time.

Now Rome at this time had a different approach when it came to the concept of pederasty.

Rome did not view this relationship as one that was beneficial to both parties and that passing down knowledge in this type of relationship was acceptable.

The Roman practice of pederasty was one that was solely driven by sexual desire. This is told in Skinner's *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*; Skinner discusses the differences that the two had when it came to sexuality as well as pederasty.

According to Serena in her article, Romans did not approve of a relationship between men or sexual practice between men, so this led to men giving into their desires with other men if that man was a slave.

The Romans saw this relationship as one of power. The Roman man was asserting his dominance over the slave in a sexual way. These thoughts that Serena shares in her article are also echoed by Jenna Ross in her article "Pedophilia in Ancient Greece and Rome."

Ross and Serena both claim that this was the only way that men being with men or younger boys was accepted, if there was a power dynamic involved and the man receiving was a slave.

The Romans did not want to be like their Greek counterparts in this aspect, they did not approve of the Greeks' use of pederasty. In Skinner's novel, this sentiment is present throughout. Romans did not want to be the same as their Greek counterparts, even if they used certain Greek aspects in their society.

All together pederasty was done away with when Christianity was brought into the culture, or at least it was completely frowned upon at that point.

This difference between the Greeks and Romans is one that was interesting to me. I believe that the way these two societies viewed pederasty and sexuality as whole match up to the usual thought when it comes to these societies. In my experience as a student of history, Greeks were viewed as gentler, and knowledge focused while Romans were viewed as the more aggressive people. This perception lines up to the view of pederasty where Greeks were more focused on

knowledge once again and Romans were more focused on the releasing their sexual aggression with men they viewed as under them.

The ancient Romans were ones that participated in what we would consider hegemonic masculinity. The Romans seemed to view themselves as more masculine men and any sort of penetration was not accepted like it was in Greece. The way that these Romans would dominate the “lesser men” or the slaves definitely lines up with what we consider hegemonic masculinity.

In an article on hegemonic masculinity Francesco Maria Morettini states; “A popular definition of the concept has been ‘an idealized, dominant, heterosexual masculinity, constructed in relation to women and to subordinated masculinities, and closely connected to the institution of marriage’ Any man that aspires to embody this masculinity must display aggressive and violent behavior whilst restraining the flow of vulnerable emotions. He should also exhibit strength and toughness and be competitive and successful. Finally, and most notably, the dominant man should be heterosexual.”

To get more information on the topic as well as to get the perspective of someone who has studied this topic for years, I interviewed Elizabeth Calzada a third year PhD student in the history department at University of Minnesota. Calzada is a graduate of CSUN and has studied gender and sexuality in Ancient Greece and Rome.

[MUSIC]

RS: My first question was to ask her to describe the term pederasty:

EC: OK, so generally we go by the Greek way, which would be a relationship between two men, one considerably younger, but both of the same class standing. And then during the ancient Greek times.

RS: This definition matches up to the information presented up to this point. The Greek way is the way that is most widely thought of when discussing the concept of pederasty. This definition also sets the tone for the rest of the interview with the addition of class standing. The class standing of the men was especially important in this relationship as echoed by Calzada.

My next question was about how society viewed the men in these relationships:

EC: Well, they were all elite citizens, so they would not necessarily be viewed in any way besides them being elite male citizens with rights. So, the relationships that they would have were in themselves very elite and restricted. So generally, they would be accepted because the people who were doing it were also just out of the upper echelons of society, also like the relationships, which now we would see is quite weird would be between people who are considered to be men, not children, so I don't think they were particularly viewed in a negative light at all just something that they would do.

RS: Calzada adds that these men were elite men with power. The men involved in these relationships are not viewed any different because it was such a common thing for men of elite status to do. Plus, the elite men were the ones who were in power so there was no room for people under them to think any differently of them. Calzada echoes the studies of Dover, Serena and Skinner by saying that these men were not treated any differently for their pederastic relationships if anything they were the ones to set the view of society and made pederasty something that was accepted.

My next question involved the teaching that the older men would present to the younger men:

EC: So, a lot of it was social. So, to kind of get within social standings with others, so what they would teach you about is very much like a bros club, like fraternities, but not in the modern

sense. So, but it is like a bro's bro's, like you're with other men and so it's part of like a homosocial culture which definitely dealt with teaching young men just about life, but also getting them into a better places in society and giving them gifts. Yeah, it's hard to tell sometimes you don't really have the sources for it. But generally, it was more just teaching them to kind of be in a better place in society.

RS: Calzada suggests that these relationships were about men being with other men, teaching each other about life and getting them into better places in society. Mason also talks about this in her article on pederasty in ancient Greece, saying that these relationships were very social and beneficial for the younger men. This sentiment is present throughout most of my research, most scholars claimed that pederasty in ancient Greece taught the younger man how-to live-in society and helped them gain a better standing and status in the community.

My next question involved the benefit for the younger men:

EC: Yeah, and it wasn't like it was just one relationship, they would normally be benefited by having several. So, it was never just like a sometimes it was, but it was mainly like a it was known that like the more suitors you had, the more opportunities you have and then that's why, like fathers, would be in charge of proving who like you would be suited by all in the purpose of right for a better social standing.

RS: Calazda brings in an interesting topic with this answer. That would be the concept of suitors and father picking said suitors. This is a topic that is not as discussed in the research I have conducted. The article by Mason where she talks to a professor about pederasty is one that has a mention of courtship and suitors but does not outright compare it to the suitors that were also looking for female companions. The fact that father pick the men that their sons will be with is a

remarkably interesting point. This suggests that these relationships are similar to older relationships between men and women when the men would send gifts to the family in order to marry the woman with the father's permission.

Next, I asked Calzada about the Greek pederasty and the Roman pederasty:

EC: So I think they're very different I wouldn't even compare the two I'd be really uncomfortable comparing the two, because what is going on in Greece is very much between consenting adults of a certain age. There are laws about it. Like I think there's also just a general strife If you are under a certain age, you are considered a pedophile. So, like so there's a stark difference. And also, like the relationships were happening at the same time that girls would be married off as well. So, the age difference is different. And just like the age of consent, there is very different to what we know now and it's between two men of the same status. So, in Rome, that wouldn't happen, so it would be very different just based on the relationship, and who the relationships are between if they're relationships at all. And so basically in Rome, there's the Greek custom, which is what they would call what sleeping with men in general would be called like what the Greeks do. And so. Basically because of just Roman custom and there's a lot of focus on virtue of men as well, and so you could not be penetrated in any way and you wouldn't want to penetrate another Roman citizen because that would be seen as you taking away their virtue and so that's why those relationships that happen with slaves, because you generally couldn't do it without being shamed in a way, with another Roman man. So, a lot of the slaves would be like exoticized and made to be more Greek, given Greek names, things like that. But I think the way that we think about it is very different than you do with the Greeks. The Greeks had a just a different mindset when it came to the Romans. Basically, there's like tiers of penetration and. Who could get penetrated and like adopt that submissive, passive, feminine role, which is why they

generally like with women, didn't really care, but with men like it was very strictly like you could only penetrate and not be penetrated.

RS: This question brings about the most interesting conversation of the interview when discussing the Greek and Roman forms of pederasty. Calzada mentions the stark difference between the two societies and just how different their forms of pederasty are. Once again status is brought up and is quite possibly the most important take away from this interview. Status plays a huge part in pederasty and that is made clear by comparing the Greeks and Romans. In Greece, the high-class men with a lot of power were the ones who participated in these relationships, there were laws surrounding these relationships and they were accepted by society. Rome on the other hand was completely different, the men only had these relations with lower class men who were often slaves. This relationship was not a consenting relationship between two adults, but it was one of domination and releasing sexual tension. This sentiment is one that we talked about earlier when discussed the articles by Ross and Serena. These two scholars talked about the big difference between these two societies that Calzada echoed in our interview. The term pederasty is one that means two completely different things in ancient Greece compared and into ancient Rome.

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RS: In the article "AGE, SEX AND POWER: A CRITIQUE OF HOMONORMATIVITY IN CROSS-GENERATIONAL QUEER RELATIONSHIPS" by Jenna D'Aurizio, she discusses the way society depicts the relationship between older men and younger men.

D'Aurizio argues that older men are depicted as more masculine and younger men are depicted as more feminine. This is present in cross-generational queer relationships to push these

relationships into a homonormative one and fill the roles of traditional male and female relationships.

D'Aurizio also argues that society believes that relationships between older men and younger men include a wealth difference. The older man having more money and the younger struggling to survive. These further pushes homonormativity onto this relationship in an attempt to fill the stereotypes of the male breadwinner and female homemaker or one being supported.

These roles further connect to pederasty is the sense that the older man in the relationship is always seen as the more masculine one while the younger is always seen as more feminine.

These roles further connect to pederasty in the sense that the way people interpret remnants of pederasty as shown on artifacts from Ancient times such as pottery, is that the older man in the relationship is always seen as the more masculine one while the younger is always seen as more feminine.

This also connects to the class difference that the Romans had in their pederastic relationships, this being that the younger boy was a slave and therefore under him and in need of support from the more masculine one in the relationship.

This further connects to most of the pederastic relationships discussed, the older man is the one who is bringing the knowledge or helping the younger one in some way. This making the older man the masculine one in the relationship and the younger one is the one in need of support, making them more feminine. This pushes these relationships into a homonormative structure of what a relationship should be, even playing on sexist tropes that the figure with more knowledge would be the masculine figure.

These relationships are put into boxes by society in hopes of filing gender roles in order to fit into what they view as normal for them. This being the classic male/female relationship. Society largely wants queer relationships to fit into these roles but that is not something that can always be done, and queer studies argues that it should not be done.

The concept of pederasty is one that can be looked at under a homonormative lens, but this was not one that was thought of in ancient times. The people of ancient Greece were most likely not trying to fit these relationships into their normative view of a traditional relationship. These pederastic relationships were ones that were separate from the normal relationships at the time.

When discussing queer historiography, Henry Abelove in his article “The Queering of Lesbian/Gay History” he discusses certain things that are present in queer history and the study of it. These concepts include marginalization of queer people and some aspect of identity. These aspects cannot be pinned onto Greek or Roman pederasty with the current historiography that we have. From what we know, Greek men involved in pederasty are the higher ruling class and not marginalized. The younger men are also not in these relationships in order to find an identity or a place they belong, they are there so that they can move forward with their life and become a successful adult.

Based on this research and interview there are some connections to today’s form of same-sex relationship and queerness but there is not enough to full place these men or the action of pederasty in a complexly queer box and clearly define it with today’s terms.

The Greeks and Romans did not have the same identity formations and terms that we have today, and they are not ones that we can fully assign to the actions of these men. The actions of these

men do mirror a lot of the behaviors of queer men today, but identity is not something that can be fully placed.

This can also be because of the historiography of queer history and how far it dates back and what it exactly defines as queer. The action of pederasty and some aspects of the relationship fit aspects of today's same-sex relationship but these relationships take place for different reasons and different times. There are different societal norms and expectations as well different expectations for men, as well as just having the term queer and what that brings. The men in these ancient societies did not have the connotations or expectations that the term queer brings today.

Pederasty is not a subject that is widely discussed in history classes or rather at least not the ones that I have been a part of. This could be because of the queer aspects that these relationships have, or it could be because of the taboo nature of the relationship that we see today. Either way sexuality in history has always been something that piqued my interest. As a queer man and history major, I was always looking for figures or subjects that I could relate too in the subject of history that I have always enjoyed. With the addition of queer studies into my learning and thus learning more about queer aspects in history, as well as my general interest in the Greek and Roman times, these things together have led me to the subject of pederasty and general sexuality in this time period as well as sexuality across history. Therefore, I chose pederasty as my topic today and I hope you all enjoyed and learned something new. Thank you all so much for listening.

[END OF TRANSCRIPTION]