

to document intellectuals and others of the past, it is important to be attentive to friendship patterns; the "birds of a feather" principle will often lead to unexpected liaisons.

*General Features.* Undoubtedly there are countless circles and cliques that have been lost from sight, having produced no creative figures worthy of remembrance. Indeed the pattern of the clique surrounding one or more "queens" (den-mother figures) was an almost ubiquitous feature of homosexual life before 1969. In the view of hostile outsiders, such groupings were stereotyped as "rings" on the pattern of criminal gangs. This idea need not be negative, however, as shown by the Swiss society (and magazine) *Der Kreis/Le Cercle* (1932–67), the name of which conjures up the metaphor of a ring. And when the American homophile movement emerged in the 1950s, most local groups were initially formed of people who had come to know each other through gay social cliques. This type of bonding also has its downside, and newcomers to activist groups, even today, may sometimes be dismayed by the invisible wall around the clique that controls the group.

Up to this point, groups have been discussed mainly in terms of interaction in single localities, cities in fact. Yet another type of linkage has existed in which individuals communicate over large distances, originally by mail, now also by telephone and computer modem. Such a pattern has often been the case in gay scholarship. In the nineteenth century the independent scholar K. H. Ulrichs (1825–1895) had a circle of correspondents, most of whose names remain unknown to us because of the caution that they felt obliged to observe. More public and institutional was the group formed by the Berlin **Scientific-Humanitarian Committee** (1897–1933), which had collaborators not only through much of Germany, but also in Austria, The Netherlands, Scandinavia, and the English-speaking countries. Today many gay and lesbian scholars, unable

to obtain academic posts, work as private individuals from their homes, relying on contacts with like-minded individuals to assist in developing and diffusing their discoveries and writings.

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### CIRCUMCISION

Male circumcision, or the cutting away of the foreskin of the penis, has been practiced by numerous peoples from remotest antiquity as a religious custom, while to some modern homosexuals it has an aesthetic and erotic significance. It has been speculated that the custom originated somewhere in Africa where water was scarce and the ability to wash was limited. Thus the Western Semites (Israelites, Canaanites, Phoenicians, Arabs, Edomites, Syrians), who lived in an area where water was never really plentiful, also observed the custom, while the Eastern Semites (Assyrians and Babylonians), in an area where water was more abundant, did not circumcise. This is true also of the Greeks and other Aegean peoples who always lived near the water.

In the fifth century B.C. the Greek historian Herodotus provided the following information about the ancient Egyptians: "They practice circumcision, while men of other nations—except those who have learnt from Egypt—leave their private parts as nature made them. . . . They circumcise themselves for cleanliness' sake, preferring to be clean rather than comely." (*Histories*, Bk. II). There is also some evidence that the Israelites learned it in Egypt (Exodus 4:24–26; Joshua 5:2–9). However, they may simply have adopted

circumcision from their neighbors up to the time of their Babylonian Exile, for all those who lived around them until this time were also circumcised except for the coastal-dwelling Philistines, a people of Aegean origin who are often mentioned on the pages of the **Old Testament** quite distinctly as "the uncircumcised" or "the unclean" (Judges 14:2; I Samuel 14:6). Around 1000 B.C. the Israelite king Saul demanded of David as a bride-price for his daughter Michal one hundred Philistine foreskins (I Samuel 18:25), alluding to the practice of stripping the foreskin off a slain foe.

Jesus never mentioned circumcision, though the Jewish rite was [Luke 2:21] performed upon him on his eighth day as it was with all other males of his community of faith—hence the designation of the calendar in which the first day of the year is January 1 as "circumcision style." In the early church the party of Paul of Tarsus which opposed circumcision was victorious, and uncircumcised Greeks and Romans poured into the new faith, so that to this day the majority of European men have retained their foreskins. With the coming of the faith of Islam, however, in the seventh century the Middle East and North Africa became a stronghold of the practice of circumcision. Hindus and Buddhists avoid it, hence East Asians—and Amerindians—retain their foreskins.

Among Americans in general circumcision was relatively rare until Victorian times when it was thought to be a deterrent to the practice of masturbation. But it was not until World War II that it came into widespread use, supposedly to overcome soldiers' occasional infections associated with poor hygiene. Circumcision of male infants became popular in the United States, but was believed unnecessary in most of Europe.

In the late twentieth century the trend is being reversed in America as more and more medical articles—and some books—have argued that the operation in most cases is needless. In July 1986 Blue

Shield of Philadelphia announced that it will no longer pay for routine infant circumcision as a part of its childbirth insurance coverage, defining the operation as cosmetic and not essential to the health of the child. Recently Rosemary Romberg has gone so far as to argue that there may be numerous negative effects of routine infant circumcision and that the practice, in general, ought to be dropped. She cites remarkable cases in which a number of American Jews—or at least those who were born into the Jewish faith—have elected to do so.

Some male homosexuals have a decided preference for an uncircumcised ("uncut" or "unsliced") or circumcised partner, as the case may be. There are even groups of men who have retained their foreskins (and others who admire them); these individuals with generous or pronounced "curtains" are in demand. In a few rare cases the overhang of the foreskin suffices partially to sheath the partner's penis during sex. A few uncut men neglect personal hygiene to the point of allowing smegma ("cock cheese") to accumulate beneath the prepuce in a manner that tends to repel the partner, but this is easily remedied.

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## CLASS

Although class is one of the most commonly used political and sociological terms today, it is not easy to define. A degree of consensus obtains that a class system is hierarchical, allocating power according to rank order. A class structure in which all classes were equal would be a