Socrates (469–399 B.C.)

Athenian philosopher. The son of a well-to-do sculptor or stonemason, he was later reduced to poverty. Late in life he married Xantippe, who became proverbial in subsequent ages for her bad temper and shrewishness, though the stories about her may have been exaggerated. In early life he was interested in the scientific philosophy of his time and is said to have associated with Archelaus the physicist, but in the period best known to posterity he had abandoned these interests and was concerned solely with the right conduct of life, a quest which he conducted by the so-called “Socratic” method of cross-examin-


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SOCRATES

loved good and noble boys with a passion that he asked only to be requited, but he was never given to a coarse and purely sensual pederasty, if the beauty of the young Alcibiades made an intense and lasting impression on him, he never forgot his duty as a teacher to guide his youthful pupils toward perfection. He was capable of self-willed abstinence and held this power up to others as an ideal; to have sought to impose it on all others was foreign to the Greek mentality. As a bisexual Hellene Socrates was always responsive to the beauty of the male adolescent and craved the companionship of young men; as a philosopher he practiced and taught the virtues of moderation and self-control. He endures as one of the outstanding examples in antiquity of a teacher for whom eros was an inspiration and a guide.

Because Socrates is a major figure in Western tradition, his sexual nature posed a continual problem. From Ficino to Johann Matthias Gesner (1691-1761) scholars sought to address the question discreetly. The Marquis de Sade was bolder, using socratiser as a verb meaning "to sodomize." Even today, however, many classicists choose to evade the problem.


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SODOM AND GOMORRAH

These legendary cities have been traditionally located in the vicinity of the Dead Sea, where they constituted two members of a pentapolis, the Cities of the Plain. According to the Old Testament account in Genesis 14, 18, and 19, God overthrew four of the five cities in a rain of brimstone and fire. The names of Sodom and Gomorrah, especially the former, have become proverbial. Echoes of the episode recur in the Bible and in the Koran, as well as in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic exegetical and homiletic writings. From the first city, Jewish Hellenistic Greek formed the derivative sodomites, from which medieval Latin obtained the noun of agent sodomita; as a result the connection with male homosexuality is for many axiomatic. However the matter is more complex.

A number of main constituents of the Sodom legend emerge from the central passages and fragmentary allusions in the Old Testament and the intertestamental literature, together with the midrashic writings of later centuries:

[1] the geographical legend that sought to explain the peculiarly barren terrain around the shores of the Dead Sea. The ancient world’s rudimentary science of geology correctly related this barrenness to the circumstance that the water level of the Dead Sea had in prehistoric times been far higher; the sinking of the water level had exposed the previously inundated, now strikingly arid and sterile region to the gaze of the traveler.

[2] the theme of sterility by which the ancient mind sought to explain the origins of this condition; to the Bedouin living east and south of the Dead Sea it suggested the etiological inference that at one time the area surrounding this salinized body of water had been a fruitful garden belt. Yet the inhabitants of the cities of the plain had even in the midst of their abundance and prosperity denied hospitality to the poverty-stricken and the wayfarer, while the luxury in which they wallowed led them inevitably into effeminacy and vice (the parallel in the Hellenistic world was the city of Sybaris, whose proverbial self-indulgence gave the English language the word sybaritic). For this reason they were punished by the destruction of their cities and the conversion of the whole area into a lifeless desert.

[3] a Bedouin folk tale on the perils of city life, of which Lot is the hero who