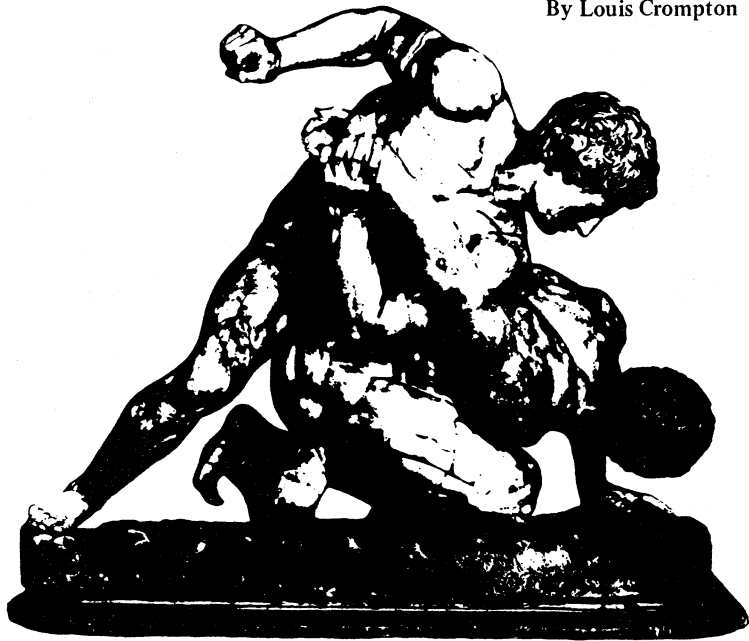


What Do You Say to Someone Who Claims That Homosexuality Caused the Fall of Greece and Rome?

By Louis Crompton



The theory that a permissive attitude toward homosexuality caused the fall of ancient civilizations frequently passes for a truism in modern America. University administrators give voice to it. So do United States senators and Mormon churchwomen. The idea turns up repeatedly on television and radio and pads out the perorations of letters to the editor, usually with the implication that our own civilization will perish like those of Greece and Rome if lesbians and gay men are accepted on an equal basis with heterosexuals. This is certainly a powerful rhetorical weapon. Yet, strangely, no one on either side of the argument seems to have taken any pains either to substantiate or to challenge the idea on which it rests. Homophobes make the charge with conviction but offer no evidence to support it. More surprisingly, writers who might be expected to debunk anti-gay myths have scarcely ever looked at the notion critically.

So serious an allegation—that gay people were responsible for the destruction of the ancient world's two greatest civilizations—is surely worth some rational consideration. To begin with, what exactly does it mean? The "fall of Rome" is a more or less determinable event, which historians place either in 410 A.D., when the city first fell to the Goths, or in 476 when invaders deposed the last Roman emperor of the West. But the fall of Greece? If we consider the civilizations most people have in mind when they speak of ancient Greece—namely, the classical culture that reached its height under Pericles and the Hellenistic culture that followed it—it's unclear in what sense they can be said to have "fallen" at all, let alone to what extent their passing can be ascribed to the effects of homosexuality.

Both scholarly historians and popular writers have differed in assessing the role of homo-

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sexuality in the so-called classical age of Greece. But most agree that the speakers in Plato's dialogues show an attitude toward love between men that is radically different from ours, and Socrates himself, even when he deprecates giving such love sexual expression, assumes that it is of paramount value in his society and that it does, in fact, often take a physical form. The lives and writings of Solon (Athens' lawgiver), Aristides (called "the Just"), Themistocles, Agesilaus, Xenophon, Theognis, and Pindar (perhaps the greatest male Greek lyric poet) attest to its popular acceptance, as does our knowledge of Athenian drama and orations before the Athenian populace. On the whole, the common assumption that Greece was *par excellence* the civilization that did most to glorify male relations with other men seems justified. And love between women was by no means condemned. It was not the ancient Greeks who burned Sappho's works; in her own age she was revered throughout Hellas as "the tenth Muse."

If there is anything that might qualify as the "fall" of this stage of Greek civilization, it could only be the military conquest of the Peloponnesian city-states by the armies of Macedonia at the battle of Chaeronea in 338 B.C. Of course, the Macedonians who fought under Philip II and Alexander were themselves Greeks, if somewhat barbaric ones, from the periphery of the classical world. The battle of Chaeronea, however, marked in many respects the end of the Golden Age of Greek art, literature, and philosophy. Looked at in terms of the role of homosexuality in Greek life it was a doubly poignant defeat, for it was there that the so-called "Sacred Band" of thebes (a regiment made up of 150 pairs of male lovers that was organized by Gorgidas and Pelopidas a generation or so earlier) fought its last battle. This famous army was at the time the prime fighting force in southern Greece, having

defeated the Spartans not once but twice, at the battle of Tegyrae in 375 and then again at Leuctra in 371 B.C. At the time of Alexander it must have looked like the chief hope of Greece against the Macedonia phalanxes. At Chaeronea it was annihilated, proving, unfortunately, that an army of lovers *can* lose.

It is hard, though, to see the triumph of Philip and Alexander as a triumph of anti-homosexuality. Philip and Alexander were themselves bisexual; Plutarch tells us that when Philip inquired about the corpses on the field and was informed that they were the renowned Theban Band, dead to the last man, he burst into tears. The two hundred homoerotic poems of Book XII (the "*Musa Paidaika*") of the *Greek Anthology* belong chiefly to the Hellenistic age that Alexander inaugurated. So do the philosophical dialogues on love ascribed to Plutarch and Lucian, in which love between men is still regarded as superior to love between men and women (Lucian) or as a kind of ideal to which conjugal love should aspire (Plutarch). The ideals of Socrates' Athens thus persisted, at least in serious works of literature, until the end of the Hellenistic period.

As a cultural phenomenon, the Hellenistic era lasted about six hundred years, being superseded by the Christian Byzantine Empire in the fourth century A.D. Hellenistic political independence ended earlier, however, with the fall of Macedonia and Greece to the Romans about 200 B.C. We do not have a great deal of information about the role of homosexuality in Roman life at this time. The Romans were then mainly warriors and administrators, not poets, philosophers, or historians like the Greeks. The Silver Age of Latin literature, from which most of our knowledge of Roman manners is drawn, did not begin until a

century later. But in the poetry of Lucretius, Catullus, Horace, Tibullus, Virgil, Juvenal, and Martial bisexuality is taken for granted, and even Ovid thinks it necessary to explain, in *The Art of Love*, why he is *not* attracted to boys. The difference seems to have been that where the Greeks idealized love and rhapsodized about it, the Romans tended to treat it cynically, with what has been aptly called a "tabloid mentality," or at best regarded it as a theme for sentimental poetry. In Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*, homosexual liaisons count as scandals, but Plutarch, writing his biographies at almost the same time, often regards love affairs between males as creditable attachments that enhance the reputations of his heroes.

What was the situation when Rome fell almost four hundred years later? We must remember that the city that surrendered to Odoacer in 476 had been ruled by Christian emperors for more than a century. It was not pagan Rome that fell, but a Rome that threatened pagan worshippers with death or exile, forbade their sacrifices, and encouraged the destruction of their temples. Though pagan beliefs persisted in many classes, Christianity had long enjoyed an overwhelming political and legal triumph. Laws against homosexuality were introduced five years after the death of Constantine, along with laws against pagan rites and magic. Firmicus Maternus, a Christian senator Gibbon describes as "piously inhuman," praised both kinds of legislation in his essay "The Error of Pagan Religions." The Emperor Theodosius I, who waged an energetic campaign against non-Christians some fifty years later, issued an edict condemning homosexuals to be burnt at the stake, thus beginning a tradition that was to last for fourteen hundred years in Europe and the Americas. Roman policy, in other words, had been officially homophobic for three or four

generations at the time of the fall of the city.

How, then, did the popular myth that "Rome fell because of homosexuality" arise? The belief rests on so little evidence that it is impossible to account for it on grounds other than gross ignorance and prejudice. What may be called "the Hollywood view" of Roman manners, the view that has always appealed most strongly to Christian apologists past and present, seems to be based on Roman life at the time of Nero and Petronius. But this age was not the age of Rome's fall. Indeed, the century after Nero's—the century of Trajan, Hadrian, and the Antonine emperors—was the one Gibbon calls the happiest in human history because of its peace, prosperity, and good government. The society of Christian Rome, the society that witnessed its fall, has been not inappropriately compared by social historians to English society under George III—that is, a society neither markedly prudish nor remarkably free in sexual matters.

The detailed pictures of Roman life in the late Empire to be found in the writings of such pagan notables as Symmachus and Macrobius or such Christians as Ausonius or Bishop Sidonius are in no sense lurid. The lifestyles described by the former two might almost be called Victorian rather than Georgian. It is true that St. Jerome and Salvian energetically castigated their age for sexual "viciousness." But both were enthusiasts of asceticism who, one feels, would be vehement in any age. Jerome, in fact, did not attack the morals of the pagans so much as those of the Christian clergy in his passionate crusade to exalt celibacy. (Marriage, he thought, was a bearable institution only because without it there could be no virgins.) Yet even Jerome and Salvian, in condemning sexual sins, did not place any great emphasis on homosexuality, which they mention only incidentally and devote far

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"she's bodacious!"



less attention to than, say, such Greek Christian churchmen as Clement of Alexandria or St. John Chrysostom.

Speculations as to why Roman civilization collapsed have filled many volumes. Rome's decay has been ascribed to political problems, economic problems, epidemics, and ecological problems. The most famous book on the subject, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, identifies Christianity as a major cause of the catastrophe. Gibbon thought that the bitter struggle between Christians and pagans

weakened Roman patriotism and that Christian otherworldliness drew men away from their social, military, and family duties. Certainly the harshness of Christian legislation on homosexuality must have alienated not just the empire's exclusively gay minority, but also the substantial number of citizens who defined themselves as bisexual. It must have occurred to both groups that if the new Christian laws threatened them with burning, Rome's barbarian enemies could hardly do worse. One recalls how Puritan manner and legislation eroded support for Cromwell's Common-

wealth in seventeenth-century England.

When we consider the history of the Eastern, or Byzantine, Empire, which survived a thousand years longer than Rome itself, the thesis that homosexuality has caused civilizations to collapse takes on a peculiarly ironic aspect. We do not know to what extent the anti-homosexual edict of Theodosius was enforced in the West. But there is no doubt as to the policy of Byzantium's most influential law-giver, the Emperor Justinian. His *Novella* of 538 A.D., drawn up in a period of panic following a series of earthquakes and plagues, implied that homosexuals were to blame for these catastrophes. The historians Procopius and Theophanes report that Justinian and his Empress, Theodora, instituted a kind of reign of terror among their subjects who were homosexual—or suspected of such inclinations. Thereafter, as Vern Bullough demonstrates in his

comprehensive chapter on Byzantine culture in *Sexual Variance in Society and History* (New York: Wiley Interscience, 1976), there are remarkably few records of overt homosexual behavior in the Eastern Empire. The nemesis of the Byzantines was, of course, the Ottoman Turks. After a struggle lasting several centuries

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Constantinople fell to Sultan Mohammed II in 1453. For the next four hundred years, the gay minorities of Greece and the Balkans enjoyed relative toleration under Mahometan rule, while their brothers and sisters living under Christian law were systematically burned, hanged, beheaded, or, on occasion, executed by dismemberment, drowning, or

starvation.

This third, and final, "fall" of Greece was for the native populations of eastern Europe a sentence to degrading political slavery. But for Turkey's new gay subjects it was a kind of deliverance. The disasters in which naive piety finds simple homophobic lessons were, indeed, fraught with tragedy, irony, and blessings. Alexander's conquests deprived Athens of its freedom, but spread Greek art and thought to Egypt, Palestine, and Persia, and even as far as Afghanistan and India. Rome's subjugation of Greece expedited Rome's own Hellenization. The scholars who fled from Constantinople to escape the Turks helped foster the budding Renaissance in Italy. In so doing they were also instrumental in conveying to fifteenth-century Rome and Florence those forgotten classical texts that revealed to the West what the attitude toward homosexuality in ancient Greece had in fact been. ■