

## Special article Ειδικό άρθρο

# Homosexuality according to ancient Greek physicians

K. Laios,<sup>1</sup> M.M. Moschos,<sup>2</sup> E. Koukaki,<sup>1</sup> M.-I. Kontaxaki,<sup>1,3</sup> G. Androutsos<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*History of Medicine Department, Medical School, University of Athens,*

<sup>2</sup>*1st Department of Ophthalmology, Medical School, University of Athens,*

<sup>3</sup>*1st Department of Psychiatry, University of Athens, Eginition Hospital, Athens*

<sup>4</sup>*Biomedical Research Foundation, Academy of Athens, Athens, Greece*

Psychiatriki 2017, 28:60–66

**H**omosexuality and pedophilia in ancient Greece greatly concerned many researchers who were mainly interested in highlighting the social aspect of this phenomenon in ancient Greek society. An important source on the subject was the paintings of a man and his lover in attic black and red figured pottery, up to the end of the 5th century BC. Another main source was the information that derived from the texts of ancient Greek literature, especially poetry. Homosexuality was not only referring to relationships between males, but it was also manifested in lesbian love. It is believed that in the Homeric world homosexuality was not favored. In Greek society of the archaic period, the restriction of women at home, the satisfaction of sexual needs with courtesans, the marriage for the purpose of maintaining and managing the property, put women aside, marginalizing them in terms of social life, impeding the cultivation of emotional relationships between sexes. At the same time, in the society of those times, the aristocratic ideal, the constant communication of men during military training and the war, the male nudity in sports and the promotion of beauty and bravery in athletic contests, as well as the gatherings and the entertainment of men at the symposia, created a suitable substrate in which male homosexuality could develop. In this context, pedophile relationships were developed mainly during the archaic period, as recorded on vase paintings, where a mature man developed a special relationship with a teenager of the same social class. The mature man had the role of mentor for the juvenile, he would look after him and cover his living expenses and education cost. In this relationship, exhibiting predominantly the social dimension of an initiation process and introduction to adult life, the erotic homosexual intercourse could find a place to flourish. The above-mentioned relationship could not last forever, given that this would later transform into an emotional connection of friendship and trust. Besides, the constant homosexual relationships and male prostitution were considered to be reprehensible behaviors. Regarding the lesbian love, the main example was Sappho and her poems that praised love between women. Nevertheless, the relationship with the girls in the poems is considered to be similar to that Socrates had with his students, an intense personal relationship which would not involve sexual love and could probably be a platonic love. Ancient Greek physicians used their meth-

odological tools in order to interpret homosexuality as a mental disease, but ancient medical dogmas such as the theory of humors, stereopathology and their variations could not offer an explanation for homosexuality.

**Key words:** Homosexuality, Caelius Aurelianus, Soranus of Ephesus, Aristotle.

## Introduction

Homosexuality<sup>1</sup> and pedophilia<sup>2</sup> in ancient Greece greatly concerned many researchers, who were mainly interested in highlighting the social aspect of this phenomenon in ancient Greek society.<sup>3</sup> An important source on the subject, up to the end of the 5th century BC., was the paintings of a man and his lover in attic black and red figured pottery.<sup>4,5</sup> Another main source was the information that derived from the texts of ancient Greek literature, and especially poetry.<sup>6,7</sup> Homosexuality was not only referring to relationships between males, but it was also manifested through lesbian love.<sup>8</sup>

## Material

It is believed that in the Homeric world homosexuality was not favored. In Greek society of the archaic period, the restriction of women at home, the satisfaction of sexual needs with courtesans, the marriage for the purpose of maintaining and managing the property, put women aside, marginalizing them in terms of social life, impeding the cultivation of emotional relationships between sexes.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, in the society of those times, the aristocratic ideal, the constant communication of men during military training and the war, the male nudity in sports and the promotion of beauty and bravery through athletic contests, as well as the gatherings and the entertainment of men at the symposia, created a suitable substrate in which male homosexuality could develop. In this context, pedophile relationships were developed mainly during the archaic period, as recorded on vase paintings, where a mature man developed a special relationship with a teenager of the same social class. The mature man had the role of men-

tor for the juvenile, he would look after him and cover his living expenses and education costs. In this relationship, exhibiting predominantly the social dimension of an initiation process and introduction to adult life, the erotic homosexual intercourse could find a place to flourish. The above relationship would not last forever, given that this would later transform into an emotional connection of friendship and trust.<sup>9</sup> Besides, the constant homosexual relationships and male prostitution were considered to be reprehensible behaviors. Regarding the lesbian love, the main example was Sappho and her poems, which praised love between women.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the relationship with the girls in the poems is considered to be similar to that Socrates had with his students, an intense personal relationship which would not involve sexual love and could probably be described as a platonic love.<sup>11</sup>

According to the above, it seems that research outlined homosexuality primarily as a result of social situations in which this was tolerated, but it was not accepted as a long-term and consistent behavior. In the above context, pedophilia was not viewed as a psychopathological condition but as an accessory to a relationship with educational elements, of an adult man with a teenage boy.<sup>3</sup> In the present study, it is the medical approach of ancient Greek doctors towards homosexuality that will concern us.

It should be noted that the only complete ancient medical approach of homosexuality that has been saved until nowadays is that of Soranus of Ephesus (1st–2nd c. AD) in the translation of his work by Caelius Aurelianus (5th c. AD). In this text, it is evident that along with Soranus of Ephesus, there were also earlier physicians' works incorporated in this issue. Besides the historical data

outlined above, this work reveals that in ancient Greece there were gay men or women who maintained this sexual behavior as their permanent sexual choice.<sup>12</sup>

Analyzing this special section of the work of Caelius Aurelianus<sup>13</sup> in the introduction, it is made clear that people found it hard to believe that there are effeminate men, or “soft”—as they were characterized in Greek, noting that although the acts of these people were contrary to their nature, their lust to satisfy their passion overcame their shame, so they posed themselves in a shameful use of their bodies (Aurelianus *On Acute Diseases and on Chronic Diseases* p. 901, 131.1–8). In this first report, one can acknowledge a contradiction, as there is evidence of the denial of people about an existing phenomenon, and then this phenomenon is further analyzed. One probable explanation of this contradiction would be that the society of the time would especially disapprove the mention of homosexuality, particularly referring to males. It should also be noted that the remark of effeminacy may refer to the fact that men had a passive role in the sexual act, and not being truly effeminate. Nonetheless, at the end of the section on homosexuality, the author indicates that some homosexuals even wore women's clothes, talked like women and exhibited female behavior in general, and this description indicates true effeminacy (Caelius Aurelianus *On Acute Diseases and on Chronic Diseases* p. 900, 131.6–7).

Closing the introduction, the author raised his medical concerns on the issue, underlining that this situation was not a disease, as it was generally perceived to be a disease at that time, but rather a disturbance of the mind, a view also expressed by Soranus of Ephesus. Soranus of Ephesus notes that bisexual women, (Greek: τριβάδες) were more lesbian than bisexual (Caelius Aurelianus *On Acute Diseases and on Chronic Diseases* p. 900–902, 131.7–133.2).

These two medical positions, that homosexuality was a mental disorder and that it had no features, as was the case with other diseases, were the focus of this medical debate in Greek antiq-

uity. Distinguishing that homosexual behavior deviates from the common sexual orientation, and based on the fact that desire and erotic feeling is a mental operation, it is obvious—according to the views of ancient Greek medicine—that for this deviated erotic choice to occur, a disturbance in mental function would have had a role. But although this would be a reasonable conclusion, there is the adversity that there were no evidence of paranoid behavior, common in other mental diseases, and the text emphasizes that homosexuals did have the perception of reality. Moreover, conflicting with the rules of ancient Greek medicine, there were no physical signs that would help to support the argument for the disease, nor any ancient treatment to cure it, as it is clearly stated in the text of Caelius Aurelianus (Caelius Aurelianus *On Acute Diseases and on Chronic Diseases* p. 901, 133.5–6). According to the above, it was impossible for ancient physicians to assume a pathophysiological mechanism, as they did for other mental disorders, such as mania, melancholy and phrenitis,<sup>14</sup> following the dogmas of the various medical sects in antiquity.<sup>15</sup> As a result, ancient Greek physicians tried to identify the nature of the problem as being a mental disorder, but without being able to support this belief with medical arguments. Furthermore, we should emphasize that the concept of mental problem was absent from the ancient Greek medical thought as we perceive it today. That is to say, as a disorder that only affected the psychic world without necessarily involving body's mechanisms, as it was believed in ancient Greek medicine.

On the other hand, the author reported the view of the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides, who considered homosexuality as the result of circumstances at the beginning of human life, when there was a poor mix of dynamic principles that existed in the sperm of each parent, resulting in a desire for two types of love in the offspring (Caelius Aurelianus *On Acute Diseases and on Chronic Diseases* p. 902–904, 134.3–135.8).

Additionally, it is stated by the author that many leaders of the various medical sects felt that homosexuality was a hereditary disease, which was

passed from generation to generation through the sperm, without the cause being attributed to nature, but rather to the human race. It is also stated that the incurable defects were maintained in subsequent generations, since they did not leave any kind of renewal and did not give a chance for a new beginning (Caelius Aurelianus *On Acute Diseases* and on *Chronic Diseases* p. 904, 135.9–136.4). The writer expresses his opposition to this claim, arguing that hereditary diseases weaken as the person is getting older, while homosexuality becomes even stronger as the years pass by (Caelius Aurelianus *On Acute Diseases* and on *Chronic Diseases* p. 904, 136.5–137.1).

Both theories about the cause of homosexuality show that it would be impossible to explain how this situation is created, following the concrete laws of ancient Greek medicine, as is the case with the rest corporal and mental diseases. This is the reason why there was a turn to embryology, aiming to show a defect at birth, explaining in that way the absence of clinical clues in homosexuality that could explain this phenomenon using solely strict medical arguments.

The embryological interpretation could be in accordance with the views of the philosopher Parmenides, relying on an ontological approach which is common in the philosophical type of thinking of ancient times, but on the other hand, such an interpretation indicates an exception for the work of the predominant physicians of that time and their theories on causes of diseases. Thus, we consider that this conception reveals the difficulty faced in explaining the phenomenon of homosexuality. We would recognize this difficulty in Parmenides' work, despite its philosophical nature, because in his time the causes of diseases' theory was initiated, but it appears that the nature of homosexuality turned him to that kind of speculation.

Concluding the analysis of the chapter on homosexuality by Caelius Aurelianus, two observations about the behavior of homosexuals should be mentioned, which we could say that are also observed sometimes in the behavior of these people today.

The first observation is that often entrained by their passion and not indifferent to the people around them, they suddenly change their behavior and for a while they attempt to demonstrate their masculinity, without realizing their limitations, in an agonizing effort for recognition, becoming victims of exaggeration, they get involved in worse actions (Caelius Aurelianus *On Acute Diseases* and on *Chronic Diseases* p. 900, 132.1–6). Despite the generality of the reference, we could infer that homosexuals suffered social condemnation, resulting in their effort to prove their masculine nature. In order to do so, they indulged in excessive sexual activities with the opposite sex in a manner not common in usual sexual life, and through this exaggeration they were often converted to graphical figures without achieving their purpose, but instead confirming that they had lost their male sexual orientation.

The second observation is that the homosexual male passion aggravated in the older age (Caelius Aurelianus *On Acute Diseases* and on *Chronic Diseases* p. 900, 137.1–9). The author will attribute this characteristic to the fact that while one is young with strong body that can fulfill the sexual function, sexual desire is a dual entity, in which the soul is stimulated sometimes in an active and sometimes in a passive role. However, in the elderly –who have lost their masculine forces– sexual desire is reversed in the opposite direction and therefore there is a stronger desire for a female role in sex. The author will also emphasize the argument that the young people who show homosexual behavior may lack the masculine forces and therefore the feminine elements may predominate, as it is the case with the loss of male forces in old age (Caelius Aurelianus *On Acute Diseases* and on *Chronic Diseases* p. 900, 137.9–12). These reports set out the fact that male homosexuality becomes stronger in old age. But for the ancient physician this is of particular value because it offers the opportunity to explain the phenomenon involving the body, highlighting the ambivalent status of the man, using the medical principles generally applied in ancient Greek medicine and in which psychic phenomena in one way or another was the

result of disturbances to the body. This is an interpretation which extends to the young homosexuals, relating also to the effeminate teenagers, as the absence of male forces and features would be even more visible in them.

Another plausible explanation of male homosexuality in ancient times is presented in Aristotelian Problems (Aristoteles Phil. et Co. *Problemata* 879a.36–880a.5). In this work, there is a discussion about the reason why other people find pleasure during the sexual act when they have the active role, and others the passive one. This difference was attributed to the physiological processes of sexual activity. The site of the genitals is the place of collection and discharge of semen, but also the spirit (air) which will be raised there by sexual desire which in turn will be satisfied with the expulsion and evacuation of them from the body. The presence or absence of the above process defines the man's active role and the woman's passive one.

Based on this principle, the author attempted to explain why effeminate men prefer the passive role in intercourse. He considered that the semen is collected in the rectum –due to some kind of abnormality– and therefore homosexual men seek for anal intercourses. At the same time, it is highlighted that there are those who want both the active and the passive role, which the author attributed to the fact that the semen is concentrated simultaneously in the anus and the genitals, indicating that the preference for the one or the other part of the body depends on where more sperm will be collected each time. Finishing, he added another reason for the passive role of men in sexual intercourse. He interpreted this as a result of a habit for those men that will turn to homosexuality from puberty and not earlier. According to him, at that time, their memory will function decisively for the fact which leads to pleasure, stressing that habit becomes second nature through repetition that establishes the habit of the collection and elimination of the sperm in the anus.

We observe that in this particular Aristotelian Problem there is no effort to analyze homosexuality well-round, as we saw it in Caelius Aurelianus'

work, but rather the presentation of one probable explanation for the passive role of some men in sexual functioning.

Due to the fact that Aristotle was not a physician but rather a philosopher and a naturalist, he did not demonstrate a full medical examination of the issue of homosexuality. However, we find that in his work there is also an effort to attribute homosexuality to a disorder. In Aristotle's work, homosexuality is presented predominantly as a body disorder, focusing on the concentrating area of the sperm which is not the genitals but the anus. We observe that this interpretation not only matches the author's interest on biology and anatomy/physiology, but also through the ambiguity which distinguishes it, reflects the difficulty faced by ancient physicians to clearly define the pathogenetic mechanism of homosexuality. This is evident, since the shifting of the sperm concentration spot is not thoroughly explained.

With regards to the opinion that the selection of the passive role is the result of habit that starts in teenage life, we would mention that this claim does not connect homosexuality to a mental disorder, since there is no reference to some paranoid behavior as it would be expected according to ancient Greek medicine principles, in order to incorporate this behavior into the mental disorders' spectrum. Instead, this behavior is incorporated into the social life sphere and it emerges as a social phenomenon, an issue suitable for study by a philosopher. Here, it should be clarified that it may be appropriate to link the social interpretation approach to the social phenomenon of pedophilia in ancient times, but there is not a relevant reference in the text, and there is also evidence that in Aristotle's time this phenomenon has been declining.

In conclusion, the medical examination of the homosexual phenomenon in both sexes, by ancient Greek physicians, focuses in the agonizing and controversial effort to demonstrate the pathological status of the phenomenon, which nonetheless cease to become an accurate medical interpretation, as it would be required according to the principles of ancient Greek medicine.

# Η ομοφυλοφιλία σύμφωνα με τους αρχαίους Έλληνες ιατρούς

Κ. Λάιος,<sup>1</sup> Μ.Μ. Μόσχος,<sup>2</sup> Ε. Κουκάκη,<sup>1</sup> Μ.-Ε. Κονταξάκη,<sup>1,3</sup> Γ. Ανδρούτσος<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Εργαστήριο Ιστορίας της Ιατρικής, Ιατρική Σχολή, Αθήνα,

<sup>2</sup>Οφθαλμολογική Κλινική, Ιατρική Σχολή, Αθήνα,

<sup>3</sup>1η Ψυχιατρική Κλινική Πανεπιστημίου Αθηνών, Αιγινήτειο Νοσοκομείο, Αθήνα,

<sup>4</sup>Ίδρυμα Βιοϊατρικών Ερευνών, Ακαδημία Αθηνών, Αθήνα

Ψυχιατρική 2017, 28:60–66

Η ομοφυλοφιλία και η παιδεραστία στην αρχαία Ελλάδα είναι ένα θέμα που απασχόλησε τους ερευνητές, οι οποίοι έδωσαν κυρίως έμφαση στην κοινωνική διάσταση που είχε το φαινόμενο αυτό στην αρχαία ελληνική κοινωνία και στα χαρακτηριστικά που είχε σε κάθε εποχή και σε κάθε πολιτικό σύστημα. Σημαντική πηγή για το θέμα αποτέλεσαν οι παραστάσεις εραστή και ερωμένου στην αγγειογραφία (μελανόμορφη και ερυθρόμορφη), κυρίως μέχρι το τέλος του 5ου π.Χ. αι., οπότε και περιορίζονται αυτές οι παραστάσεις, ενώ εξίσου κύρια πηγή ήταν οι πληροφορίες από τα κείμενα της αρχαίας ελληνικής λογοτεχνίας, κυρίως της ποίησης. Η ομοφυλοφιλία δεν περιορίστηκε μόνο στις ανδρικές σχέσεις, αλλά και στον λεσβιακό έρωτα. Θεωρείται γενικότερα ότι στον ομηρικό κόσμο δεν ευνοείτο η ομοφυλοφιλία. Κατά την ελληνική κοινωνία των αρχαίων χρόνων, ο περιορισμός της γυναίκας στο σπίτι, η ικανοποίηση της σεξουαλικής ανάγκης με εταίρες, ο γάμος με σκοπό τη διατήρηση και τη διαχείριση της περιουσίας, έθεταν τη γυναίκα στο περιθώριο της κοινωνικής ζωής και δεν ευνοούσαν την καλλιέργεια συναισθηματικών σχέσεων στα δύο φύλα. Ταυτόχρονα στην κοινωνία εκείνων των χρόνων το αριστοκρατικό ιδεώδες, η συνεχής επικοινωνία των ανδρών στην πολεμική εκπαίδευση αλλά και στον πόλεμο, η ανδρική γυμνότητα στον αθλητισμό και η ανάδειξη του ωραίου και του γενναίου στους αθλητικούς αγώνες, όπως και οι συγκεντρώσεις ανδρών στα συμπόσια, στις διασκεδάσεις και στις κοινωνικές συναντήσεις, δημιουργούσαν ένα κατάλληλο υπόστρωμα στο οποίο μπορούσε να αναπτυχθεί η ανδρική ομοφυλοφιλία. Σε αυτό το πλαίσιο αναπτύχθηκαν κυρίως στους αρχαίους χρόνους και οι σχέσεις παιδεραστίας, εραστή και ερωμένου. Αυτό διαπιστώνεται στις παραστάσεις της αγγειογραφίας κατά τις οποίες ένας ώριμος άνδρας, ο εραστής, θα αναπτύξει ιδιαίτερη σχέση με έναν έφηβο, τον ερωμένο, της ίδιας κοινωνικής τάξης. Ο ώριμος άνδρας, έχοντας τον ρόλο του μέντορα, θα αποτελέσει το πρότυπο και τον καθοδηγητή του εφήβου, του οποίου και θα φροντίσει την καθημερινή του συντήρηση, αλλά και τη μόρφωση και εκπαίδευση. Στη σχέση αυτή, που θα έχει κοινωνική διάσταση και κυρίως χαρακτήρα εισαγωγής και «μύησης» στην ενήλικη ζωή, θα βρει χώρο και η ερωτική ομοφυλοφιλική συνεύρεση, η οποία ωστόσο δεν θα διαρκέσει για πάντα, καθώς η σχέση θα εξελιχθεί διαχρονικά σε σχέση φιλίας και εμπιστοσύνης. Άλλωστε οι διαρκείς ομοφυλοφιλικές σχέσεις και η ανδρική πορνεία ήταν κατακριτέες. Όσον αφορά στον λεσβιακό έρωτα, κύριο παράδειγμά του αποτελεί η περίπτωση της Σαπφούς. Με τα ποιήματά της εξυμνούσε τον έρωτα μεταξύ των γυναικών, αν και εκφράζεται η άποψη ότι η σχέση με τα κορίτσια ήταν ανάλογη με εκείνη που είχε ο Σωκράτης με τους μαθητές του. Δηλαδή ήταν μεν πολύ έντονη, αλλά χωρίς σωματική ερωτική επαφή. Επιπλέον αμφισβητείται αν συνέβαινε σωματική σχέση και με τη περίπτωση της ίδιας της Σαπφούς, αφού πιθανολογείται ότι οι σχέσεις της παρέμεναν σε πλατωνικό επίπεδο. Σε αυτό το κοινωνικό πλαίσιο οι αρχαίοι Έλληνες ιατροί επιχείρησαν να ερμηνεύσουν το φαινόμενο της ομοφυλοφιλίας κλείνοντας περισσότερο στο να αναζητήσουν την ύπαρξη μιας κάποιας ψυχικής διαταραχής στα άτομα αυτά. Αυτό αφορούσε κυρίως στους θηλυπρεπείς άνδρες. Όμως, χρησιμοποιώντας τα μεθοδολογικά εργαλεία των διαφόρων σχολών ιατρικής σκέψης της αρχαιότητας προσέκρουαν στο εμπόδιο ότι ούτε η θεωρία των χυμών ούτε η θεωρία της στερεοπαθολογίας ούτε οι παραλλαγές τους μπορούσαν να προσφέρουν μια ικανοποιητική ερμηνεία ώστε να καταταχθεί η ομοφυλοφιλία στις ψυχικές διαταραχές.

**Λέξεις ευρητηρίου:** Ομοφυλοφιλία, Κέλιος Αυρηλιανός, Σωρανός ο Εφέσιος, Αριστοτέλης.

## References

1. Dover KJ. *Greek Homosexuality*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1978. ISBN 0-674-36261-6 ISBN 0-674-36270-5 (pbk.)
2. Buffière F. *La pédérastie dans la Grèce antique*. Belles Lettres, Paris, 1980
3. Ludwig PW. *Eros and polis: desire and community in Greek political theory*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, New York, 2002
4. Koch-Harnack G. *Knabenliebe und Tiergeschenke: ihre Bedeutung im päderastischen Erziehungssystem Athens*. Gebr. Mann, Berlin, 1983. ISBN: 9783786113898
5. Lear A, Cantarella E. *Images of Ancient Greek Pederasty*. Routledge, London, New York, 2008. ISBN: 9780415223676 0415223679 9780203866276 0203866274 9780415223683 0415223687
6. Hubbard TK (ed). *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2003
7. Boehringer S, Tin L-G. *Homosexualité. Aimer en Grèce et à Rome*. Belles Lettres, Paris, 2010
8. Boehringer S. *L'homosexualité féminine dans l'antiquité grecque et romaine*. Belles Lettres, Paris, 2007. URL : <http://genrehistoire.revues.org/307>
9. Percy WA. *Pederasty and Pedagogy in Archaic Greece*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1996
10. Pastre G. *Athènes et "le péril saphique": homosexualité féminine en Grèce ancienne*. Libr. "Les Mots à la bouche", Paris, 1987
11. Brooten BJ. *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996
12. Schrijvers PH. *Eine Medizinische Erklärung der Männlicher Homosexualität aus der Antike*. BR. Gröner, Amsterdam, 1985
13. Drabkin IE (ed and Trans.) *Caelius Aurelianus. On Acute Diseases and On Chronic Diseases*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1950
14. Simon B. Mind and Madness in Ancient Greece. *The Classical Roots of Modern Psychiatry*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1978
15. Nutton V. *Ancient Medicine*. Routledge, London, New York, 2004. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X14000316>

---

Corresponding author: K. Laios, Athinodorou 1, GR-118 53 Kato Petralona, Athens, Greece  
e-mail: [konstlaios@gmail.com](mailto:konstlaios@gmail.com)