Alexander the Great and Hephaestion: 
Censorship and Bisexual Erasure in Post-Macedonian Society

Same-sex relations were common in ancient Greece and having both male and female physical relationships was a cultural norm. However, Alexander the Great is almost always portrayed in modern depictions as heterosexual, and the disappearance of his life-partner Hephaestion is all but complete in ancient literature. Five full primary source biographies of Alexander have survived from antiquity, making it possible to observe the way scholars, popular writers and filmmakers from the Victorian era forward have interpreted this evidence. This research borrows an approach from gender studies, using the phenomenon of bisexual erasure to contribute a new understanding for missing information regarding the relationship between Alexander and his life-partner Hephaestion. In Greek and Macedonian society, pederasty was the norm, and boys and men did not have relations with others of the same age because there was almost always a financial and power difference. Hephaestion was taller and more handsome than Alexander, so it might have appeared that he held the power in their relationship. The hypothesis put forward here suggests that writers have erased the sexual partnership between Alexander and Hephaestion because their relationship did not fit the norm of acceptable pederasty as practiced in Greek and Macedonian culture or was no longer socially acceptable in the Roman contexts of the ancient historians. Ancient biographers may have conducted censorship to conceal any implication of femininity or submissiveness in this relationship. As a result, subsequent writers would have hidden the relationship, too. Bisexual erasure is not just a modern phenomenon of 19th and 20th century sensibilities, but extends back to antiquity. Even in a culture that accepted sexual fluidity, their relationship was an outlier and thus treated differently. The same-sex relationship of Hephaestion and Alexander was erased, censored, and altered to fit norms of subsequent cultures.

Keywords: Alexander the Great, Macedonia, bisexuality, LGBT+ rights, censorship

Introduction

In ancient temples all over Egypt, walls once filled with beautiful painted reliefs and hieroglyphs are now mutilated by scrapings and graffiti that exposes the way that subsequent cultures have attempted to manipulate the public’s perception of their history. This is particularly true when it comes to historical information relating to all LGBT+ topics, and even more so in the narrative of gender non-conforming people. This is because social activism and the movements within identity politics that drive change, draw strength from a group’s collective historical narrative. Throughout history, oppressive, homophobic social forces have created environments which have allowed and even encouraged attempts to destroy evidence of bisexuality, to dictate a false narrative of what type of person is qualified for leadership and greatness. One such narrative that may have fallen victim to this censorship is the relationship
between Alexander the Great and his chiliarch¹ Hephaestion, which has been contested since antiquity. Like Alexander’s desecrated shrine in Egypt’s Luxor Temple, Alexander’s relationship with Hephaestion was scrubbed out almost as soon as Alexander died.

Hephaestion was “by far the dearest of all the king’s friends; he had been brought up with Alexander and shared all his secrets.”² Throughout their adulthood, Hephaestion remained Alexander’s best friend and lifelong companion. While there is no direct evidence to suggest that they shared a sexual or romantic relationship, there is also no sociocultural evidence that would suggest they did not. However, there are important social factors in the cultures following the Macedonians which would suggest a deliberate censorship of the more intimate aspects of their relationship, if they existed.

Many explanations have been given for the absence of direct evidence of their relationship. Their type of homosexual partnership, unusual even by contemporary norms might have left some ancient authors fearful that Alexander would be viewed as too feminine if they talked about it, and other writers may have been unwilling to say anything unfavorable about Alexander at all. Perhaps it was omitted not because it did not happen, but because of historical LGBT+ erasure as a result of the Roman and Byzantine Christian powers that followed the fall of the Macedonian hegemony. It is very strange that Alexander’s second in command, closest friend, and confidant would not have more recorded information about him. Current scholars are left with a remarkably incomplete picture of Alexander’s relationship with his childhood friend. This leads us to conclude that there has been a deliberate erasure of Hephaestion’s story.

In more modern times, the term “bisexuality” was first coined by anatomist Robert Bently Todd in 1859 to describe creatures of any species which had physical characteristics of both males and females³. However, its modern usage refers to people who feel sexual attraction toward both males and females. MacDowall explains that this shift in the meaning of the term “bisexuality” occurred during the late 20th century, likely in the 1970s and 1980s in response to cultural shifts in acceptance of homosexuality and development of sex and gender studies.⁴ Soon after the concept of “bisexuality” as it is understood today came into the public psyche, the concept of “bisexual erasure” entered the discourse in sex and gender theory to understand where “bisexuality” had been in the thousands of years before the concept gained societal popularity.

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¹ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 8.48.4–5. Diodorus described the role of chiliarch to have the meaning “second in authority.” He explained, “the position and rank of chiliarch had first been brought to fame and honour by the Persian kings, and afterwards under Alexander it gained great power and glory at the time when he became an admirer of this and all other Persian customs.”

² Quintus Curtius Rufus, *Historiae Alexandri Magni* 3.12.16.


The term “bisexual erasure” is now used to describe the phenomenon of hiding bisexual experiences in heteronormative literature, film, and popular culture, particularly attempting to reinforce the previously understood binary between “heterosexuals” and “homosexuals.” Since this concept came into modern discourse, case studies have mostly focused on contemporary instances. A compelling ancient case study is the reception of the emotional, romantic, and sexual relationship between Alexander and Hephaestion, even as Alexander had two children by different women and married three. This can be viewed within the instances of Alexander’s narrative where, as his second-in-command, Hephaestion should be referenced and is not; the instances where ancient historians hint at the nature of their relationship veiled behind vague verbiage only to be noticed by the most educated of ancient audiences. Bisexual erasure can now be extended back more than 2300 years further with my research, along with its implications in the larger focus of LGBT+ censorship throughout history.

From Boyhood to Kingship

Scholars currently have very little knowledge about Alexander’s childhood, and even less about Hephaestion’s. The pair most likely began their friendship during their adolescence, while Hephaestion was employed as Royal Page to Philip II. This would imply that Hephaestion was of noble descent and his father, Amyntor, would have been among Philip II’s hetairoi, the inner circle called “the Companions,” although beyond this there is little information about Hephaestion’s parentage. Hephaestion was one of the boys Philip II selected to send to Mieza, a remote site west of Pella, to study under Aristotle with Alexander in 343 BCE when Alexander was thirteen. Selecting Hephaestion to go to Mieza shows that the young men had a close friendship that Philip II would have not only recognized, but encouraged. At Mieza, the boys may have been influenced by Aristotle’s Athenian sexual norms. Aristotle supported the social tradition of pederasty, and claimed in the second book of his Politics that the Cretan lawgivers encouraged

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5 Ibid. MacDowall describes bisexual erasure as: “A central theme in contemporary theorisations of bisexuality is bisexual erasure, which refers to the ways in which bisexuality as a mature form of desire is deferred, elided, or made invisible.”


7 Diogenes Laertius, Vitae Philosophorum 5.27.


pederasty as a means of population control. By directing love and sexual desire into non-procreative channels,

“the lawgiver has devised many wise measures to secure the benefit of moderation at table, and the segregation of the women in order that they may not bear many children, for which purpose he instituted association with the male sex.”

Under Aristotle’s tutelage, it is likely both boys were raised with the homopositive sexual norms of both Macedonia and Aristotle’s native Greek culture.

Young Alexander would have been exposed to polygamy throughout his life in both Macedonian royal culture and his own family. Philip II had many lovers, both male and female, and Alexander would have been raised to believe this was the common practice, especially for a Macedonian king. Alexander’s mother, Olympias, was Philip II’s fourth wife of seven. Furthermore, Olympias, while married to Philip, maintained a lasting friendship with Philip’s mistress Nicesipolis, and raised her daughter Thessalonice after Nicesipolis died. This stands as evidence that sexual jealousy was much less a part of royal marriages in ancient Macedonia than it would be in modern times.

Additionally, Philip II’s most infamous male lover was his assassin Pausanias, who murdered Philip partially out of jealousy for Philip II’s other lover with the same name. This provides evidence of the social visibility and acceptance of homosexual relationships within ancient Macedonian aristocracy and Alexander’s family, and exemplifies Philip II’s lack of concern regarding Pausanias’ discontent. While Alexander may not have been involved with

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14 Animosity among Philip II’s wives may be viewed as political jealousy rather than sexual jealousy, i.e. protection of the legitimacy of their children’s rights as royal heirs. Because Nicesipolis was a mistress, rather than a legitimate queen, in addition to the fact that Nicesipolis’ child with Philip II was female, Olympias would not have seen herself in competition with Nicesipolis in the way she viewed Philip II’s seventh wife Cleopatra.
15 Diodorus Siculus, *Historical Library* 16.93.3-4. It appears as though Pausanias’ jealousy refers to that of the other Pausanias, whom Philip II began to favor over him, but not toward Philip II’s wives.
16 Justin, *Epitome of Pompeius Trogus' Philippic Histories* 9.6.4-8. Roman historian Justin argues that Pausanias’ actions stemmed from feeling slighted by Philip II’s lack of action in regards to the incident described by Justin. “Pausanias, in the early part of his youth, had suffered gross violence at the hands of Attalus, to the indignity of which was added this further affront, that Attalus had exposed him, after bringing him to a banquet and making him drunk, not only to insults from himself, but also to those of the company, as if he had been a common object for ill-treatment, and rendered him the laughing-stock of those of his own age. Being impatient under this ignominy, Pausanias had often made complaints to Philippus, but being put off with various excuses, not unattended with ridicule, and seeing his adversary also honoured with a general’s commission, he turned his rage against Philippus himself, and
Philip II’s death, it appears clear that Philip’s relationships with men and women outside of marriage were visible and influential on Alexander in his youth.

Throughout his life as a young prince in Pella, there is also some evidence that Alexander had little interest in sexual relationships with women.\[^{17}\]

According to Athenaeus 435a:

> “Olympias actually sent the outstandingly beautiful Thessalian courtesan Callixeina to bed with him, and Philip abettied her in this, for they were concerned lest/taking precautions lest he might/should be a gynnis. Olympias frequently begged her to have sex with Alexander.”\[^{18}\]

Peter Green analyzed this material, stating,

> “Both [Philip II] and Olympias...were worried by...the boy’s lack of heterosexual interests. They feared he might be turning out a girlish invert (gynnis), and...frequently begged [Alexander] to have intercourse with this woman -- which did not suggest great enthusiasm on his part.”\[^{19}\]

It could be argued that from an early age, Alexander may have been fulfilled emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually by his close companion Hephaestion, resulting in a lessened interest in heterosexual relationships.\[^{20}\]

While hints of his gynophobia show through, the ancient writers are exhibiting erasure and avoidance, perhaps out of a reluctance to portray Alexander as effeminate or sexually submissive to the more traditionally masculine Hephaestion.

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\[^{17}\] The principal ancient sources for Alexander’s sexuality include Athenaeus, The Deipnosophists 13.603a-b; Plutarch, Alexander 67.4; Quintus Curtius Rufus, 6.5.23; 7.9.19; 10.1.25-26.

\[^{18}\] Ogden, *Alexander the Great*, 174: referencing Hieronymus’ letter which states that Theophrastus originally made this claim.

\[^{19}\] Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 66.

\[^{20}\] It is tempting to speculate that Alexander also would have been acutely aware of the animosities that occur from political jealousy over royal children and he may not have wanted to leave an illegitimate child in Pella before leaving for his Asian campaign.
connection to the mythic hero Achilles. *Pothos* is the Greek word for desire, a special character trait which from time to time would arouse in Alexander a need to visit a place or solve a puzzle, even if it meant endangering his troops or delaying a conquest.\(^1\)

“Both Roman and Greek authors have used this scene to provide hints of the depth of Alexander and Hephaestion’s relationship. This is one of the few instances in which historians of antiquity suggest or imply that Alexander and Hephaestion shared a homosexual relationship. Alexander’s persistent personal goal was to emulate or surpass his idol Achilles in fame and heroism. Alexander may have seen a similarity between his own sexual relationship with Hephaestion and the one Achilles shared with Patroclus in the *Iliad*. Furthermore, although there is no certain evidence that Alexander and Hephaestion were sexual partners, their closeness has been noted undeniably by ancient historians.\(^2\) Roman historian Claudius Aelianus (“Aelian”) described in a chapter he titled “Of Alexander and Hephaestion” the scene in which “Alexander Crowned the Tomb of Achilles, and Hephaestion that of Patroclus; signifying that he was as dear to Alexander as Patroclus to Achilles.”\(^3\) -- Aelian, *Various Histories* 12.7

Peter Green interpreted Aelian’s description to mean:

> “Alexander and his inseparable companion Hephaestion laid wreaths on the tombs of Achilles and Patroclus respectively (which Aelian took to mean that they enjoyed a similar relationship) and then ran a race around them, naked and anointed with oil, in the traditional fashion. How fortunate Achilles was, the young king exclaimed, to have so faithful a friend all his life.”\(^4\)

However, Aeschines described the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus as romantic, and explains that even ancient poets would use language that heavily implied homosexual behavior to their more educated audience, but did not explicitly state the behavior to protect their work from censorship.

> “For since they undertake to cite wise men, and to take refuge in sentiments expressed in poetic measures, look, fellow citizens into the works of those who are confessedly good and helpful poets, and see how far apart they considered chast men, who love their like, and men who are wonton and overcome by forbidden lusts. I will speak first of Homer, whom we rank

\(^1\) U. Wilcken and E. N. Borza, *Alexander the Great*, 331. This pothos has been defined as “longing for things not yet within reach, for the unknown, far distant unattained” which became Alexander’s motivating force. Our sources use this word to describe other episodes as well, for his expeditions to the Danube River, Gordium, founding Alexandria, visit the Siwah Oasis in Egypt, visit Nysa in the east, capture the rock of Aornus, sail the ocean that surrounded the earth, and explore the Persian Gulf.


\(^3\) Aelian, *Various Histories* 12.7: Note the ambiguous language used to imply a possibly romantic or sexual relationship which was at one time, only visible to the ancient scholars who were also aware of the romantic or sexual nature of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus.

among the oldest and wisest poets. Although he speaks in many places of Patroclus and Achilles, *he hides their love and avoids giving a name to their friendship, thinking that the exceeding greatness of their affection is manifest to such of his hearers as are educated men.*

However, in referencing this statement, it should also be noted that the purpose of this speech made in 346/5 BCE was used to publicly accuse a man named Timarchus of being unfit to involve himself in public life due to misconduct while serving an ambassador to Philip II of Macedon. In doing so, Aeschines aimed to distance the image of the “chaste” Achilles and Patroclus, with the accused Timarchus, whom Aeschines disparaged as “wonton and overcome by forbidden lusts.” These charges included prostitution in the form of sexual relationships with men, in which Timarchus was said to be as the submissive “beloved.” Although Aeschines did not provide proof that Timarchus received payment from any of his supposed lovers, Timarchus was punished with disenfranchisement. This can possibly serve as an example of the specificity of Greek and Macedonian social norms as needing to conform within a well-defined social dynamic centered around the act of sexual penetration.

Because of the subtleties embedded within descriptions of their narrative, specific word choices are important. The word which translates to “lover” (ἐραστής) was traditionally used to refer to the more dominant participant in male-male relationships, whereas the word “beloved” (ἐρωμένος) specified that this partner took on the submissive role. One of the most famous ancient historians to speak on the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus was Plato, whose Symposium has added to the ancient debates about the nature of their relationship. Plato claims,

“Achilles...bravely chose to go and rescue his *lover* Patroclus, avenged him, and sought death not merely in his behalf but in haste to be joined with him whom death had taken. For this the gods so highly admired him that they gave him distinguished honor, since he set so great a value on his *lover*. And Aeschylus talks nonsense when he says that it was Achilles who was in love with Patroclus; for he excelled in beauty not Patroclus alone but assuredly all the other heroes, being still beardless and, moreover, much younger, by Homer's account. For in truth here is no sort of valor more respected by the gods than this which comes of love; yet they are even more admiring and delighted and beneficent when the *beloved* is fond of his *lover* than when the *lover* is fond of his favorite; since a lover, filled as he is with a god, surpasses his favorite in divinity.”

In referring to Patroclus as the “lover,” (τῷ ἐραστῇ Πατρόκλῳ) Plato therefore is claiming that Achilles served as the “beloved” in his relationship with Patroclus. Therefore, if Alexander and Hephaestion identified with Achilles and Patroclus, this provides reason to believe they shared a similarly close partnership with a similar dynamic. Regardless of whether Alexander and

\[26\] Plato *Symposium* 179e–180b.
Hephaestion shared the sexual relationship recognized between Achilles and Patroclus, there is no reason to suggest they would have been averse to it or that ancient historians would have explicitly recorded it.

The Politics of Friendship

Further into the Asian campaign, Alexander employed Hephaestion’s diplomatic abilities after the siege at Tyre. After Alexander had finally taken the crucial coastal city, he invited Hephaestion to nominate any “personal guest-friend” to take over as ruler when they moved on with their campaign. This is clear evidence of the extent to which Alexander trusted Hephaestion, to make decisions that benefited not only Macedonia, but Alexander himself. Moreover, the fact that Hephaestion tested that trust by recommending a poor man, and Alexander accepted his decision without question, is certainly proof of the trust that Alexander placed in Hephaestion’s judgment as a diplomat.

A scene famously treated with skepticism among ancient historians is that of Alexander’s first meeting with the fallen Persian king’s mother, whose empire Alexander had just claimed. Arrian describes the dramatic scene:

“Alexander himself went into the tent, accompanied alone by Hephaestion, one of his Companions. The mother of Darius, being in doubt which of them was the king (for they had both arrayed themselves in the same style of dress), went up to Hephaestion, because he appeared to her the taller of the two, and prostrated herself before him. But when he drew back, and one of her attendants pointed out Alexander, saying he was the king, she was ashamed of her mistake, and was going to retire. But the king told her she had made no mistake, for Hephaestion was also an Alexander. This I record neither being sure of its truth nor thinking it altogether unreliable. If it really occurred, I commend Alexander for his compassionate treatment of the women, and the confidence he felt in his companion, and the honour bestowed on him; but if it merely seems probable to historians that Alexander would have acted and spoken thus, even for this reason I think him worthy of commendation.”

This scene’s importance stands in the ambiguity of its description, with a hint of sexual undertones. Alexander has provided Hephaestion with the means to dress in a similar level of regality to Alexander, which may imply Alexander’s feeling of equality with Hephaestion. Arrian depicts Alexander as noticeably shorter than Hephaestion, whose masculine figure appeared more kinglike to the mother of Darius than Alexander’s shorter, stockier frame. However, instead of getting offended at the mistake, Alexander’s comment that “Hephaestion was also an Alexander” provides further evidence of the closeness of their relationship and the respect that Alexander held for

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28 Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 17.46.3.

Hephaestion. Despite the vivid narrative that this scene creates, Roman author Arrian admits that he decided to present it in his narrative “neither being sure of its truth nor thinking it altogether unreliable.” While it is true that any of the scenes depicted in antiquity could have been fabricated at some point during history, this also appears to be another case in which ancient historians may have attempted to “hide” the truth of their relationship in wording which would only be noticed by educated members of the ancient audience. Even if Arrian believed this scene occurred, he may have felt compelled to dismiss the scene to protect his work from backlash in ancient Roman society.

Darius’s mother, wife, and daughters were of course vulnerable to mistreatment and possibly sexual violence after they were captured. In a letter from Alexander to Parmenio preserved as a fragment in Plutarch’s Life of Alexander, we learn that Alexander had no interest at all in seeing Darius’s wife, the most beautiful woman in the world. Why would our historian choose to include this information unless it were telling to some degree about Alexander’s sexual orientation? One of the deepest subjects of contention between Alexander and the majority of his Macedonian troops throughout their campaign through Asia was the Macedonians’ discomfort with Alexander’s adoption of Asian customs and costumes. A single friend of Alexander consistently supported him in this innovation, and that was Hephaestion. According to Plutarch, “[Alexander] saw that among his chiefest friends Hephaestion approved his course and joined him in changing his mode of life.” While it is unknown whether Hephaestion truly endorsed Alexander’s move toward adopting Persian royal practices or not, this provides evidence that Hephaestion was regarded as the most loyal of all Alexander’s companions. Plutarch expresses this further in stating:

> “while Craterus clung fast to his native ways, he employed [Hephaestion] in his business with the Barbarians, [and Craterus] in that with the Greeks and Macedonians. And in general he showed most affection for Hephaestion, but most esteem for Craterus, thinking, and constantly saying, that Hephaestion was a friend of Alexander, but Craterus a friend of the king.”

The idea that Hephaestion was a friend of “Alexander” and not solely of “the king” like Craterus provides evidence that Alexander and Hephaestion appreciated each other on a personal, emotional level, as opposed to Craterus’s loyalty to the king.

With multiple assassination attempts, mutinies, and murders throughout his Asian campaign, Alexander was understandably paranoid near the end of his life, which led to strong feelings of isolation from his subjects. Green claims, “all absolute autocrats end in spiritual isolation, creating their own

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30 Ibid, 2.12.8a.
31 Plutarch, Alexander 22.
32 Plutarch, Alexander 47.5-6.
33 Ibid.
world, their private version of the truth,” and for Alexander, this isolation eventually excluded all except his closest confidant, Hephaestion. Alexander’s faith in Hephaestion was most likely fortified during events such as the Philotas affair of 330 BCE, when an assassination plot was uncovered and it was not clear whether his top generals or companions were involved. In this instance, Hephaestion was one of the major proponents of using torture as a means of extracting information, and it is believed that Hephaestion actually took a major role in extracting confessions through the acts of torture. While one may suspect that Hephaestion harbored some personal or career resentment toward Philotas, son of Parmenio, this would have been a useful opportunity to resolidify his loyalty to Alexander, by aggressively punishing Philotas for not reporting the assassination plan which allegedly threatened his beloved’s life. 

Furthermore, after Hephaestion was given the role of Chiliarch, he was put in charge of screening Alexander’s mail. Alexander probably set this up out of paranoia toward everyone except Hephaestion, as described by Plutarch, who stated: “Olympias often wrote him [Alexander]...but Alexander kept her writings secret, except once when Hephaestion, as was his wont, read with him a letter which had been opened; the king did not prevent him, but took the ring from his own finger and applied its seal to the lips of Hephaestion.” Because he kept these letters secret from his other high ranking officials, Alexander is clearly represented as having a higher level of trust for Hephaestion. Given that no one else was in the room where it happened, the ancient historians must have been using circulating rumors as their sources.

Elevating Hephaestion to Royalty

The mass weddings at Susa are usually interpreted as a way for Alexander to placate the upset Macedonians after the disastrous expedition through the Gedrosian Desert in 325 BCE. This was also one of Alexander’s most blatant displays of favoritism and companionship toward Hephaestion. During this mass wedding, Alexander married Darius III’s eldest daughter Stateira in order to create kinship ties with the Persian royal family, which was meant to further legitimize his role as Great King. However, Darius had two daughters, and despite the availability of other Macedonians who came from more affluent families or more accomplished soldiers, Hephaestion was selected to marry Darius’ other daughter, Drypetis. This is particularly notable, not only as a sign of respect for Hephaestion by Alexander, but also as a way for the king to elevate Hephaestion and his future heirs’ status from chiliarch to true royalty.

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34 Green, Alexander of Macedon, 324.
35 Plutarch, Alexander 48.11-12.
37 Plutarch, Alexander 39.5.
38 Ibid, 70.2.; Athenaeus, Deipnosophists, 12. 538b-539a.
39 Diodorus Siculus, Historical Library 17.107.6.
According to Arrian, “To Hephaestion [Alexander] gave Drypetis, another daughter of Darius, and his own wife's sister; for he wished Hephaestion's children to be first cousins to his own.” In doing so, this act not only provided Hephaestion with a significant boost in social status, but in turn, legally made Alexander and Hephaestion family. They would have raised their children together, had Hephaestion lived long enough to sire them. It could be argued that this was the closest substitute that two men of their status could have had to marriage.

Seven Months of Suffering

Most scholars would agree that the king’s reaction to the Chiliarch’s death in Ecbatana in 324 BCE is our best measure of Alexander’s love for Hephaestion. Alexander experienced countless deaths of important officials throughout his reign as king of Macedonia, but no mourning came close to the way he honored Hephaestion. Arrian described, with skepticism, the scenes in which Alexander mourned Hephaestion’s death. In character with his previously mentioned association with the hero Achilles, Arrian states:

“Alexander should have cut off his hair in honour of the dead man, I do not think improbable, both for other reasons and especially from a desire to imitate Achilles, whom from his boyhood he had an ambition to rival.”

Remarkably, Arrian chose this moment in his narrative to admit that other historians had different reactions to Alexander’s grief-stricken actions when faced with Hephaestion’s death:

“Different authors have given different accounts of Alexander’s grief on this occasion; but they agree in this, that his grief was great. As to what was done in honour of Hephaestion, they make diverse statements, just as each writer was actuated by good-will or envy towards him, or even towards Alexander himself. Of the authors who have made these reckless statements, some seem to me to have thought that whatever Alexander said or did to show his excessive grief for the man who was the dearest to him in the world, redounds to his own honour; whereas others seem to have thought that it rather tended to his disgrace, as being conduct unbecoming to any king and especially to Alexander.”


None of the other generals or Companions received such extravagant death rituals and honors. This is strong evidence that, despite the paucity of testimonials to the fact, the relationship with Hephaestion went much deeper than that with any other member of Alexander’s court. However, Arrian’s description is not without judgment, stating that Alexander’s extreme reaction was “unbecoming to any king and especially to Alexander.” Justin also adds a

normative stance into the narrative, stating, “Alexander mourned for [Hephaestion] longer than became his dignity as a king.” While Greek historians Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch also provided accounts for Alexander’s behavior after the death of Hephaestion, the normative judgment of his behavior expressed by Arrian and Justin is absent.

Arrian and Justin suggest Alexander’s behavior is shameful and undignified, which may show their bias against believing the deep love that Alexander had for Hephaestion was real, proper, or appropriate. After Hephaestion’s death, Alexander’s mental health deteriorated rapidly and he went on several highly dangerous and violent expeditions, conquering in the name of Hephaestion, which Plutarch called an “offering to the shade of Hephaestion.” Alexander’s behavior grew more and more irrational in the seven months that followed, undoubtedly due to the depression and mental deterioration he experienced after the death of his closest friend and confidant.

Hephaestion's death and Alexander’s subsequent behavior is among the scenes most analyzed by modern scholars who want to understand what type of relationship they shared. Alexander’s deep depression also disallowed him from choosing a replacement for Hephaestion as second in command, which certainly led to the Successor Wars that occurred after Alexander’s death in June of 323 BCE.

Censorship and Bisexual Erasure

Having reviewed this evidence, the question still remains as to why, if homosexual tendencies were accepted and recorded throughout Macedonian culture including in the royal family, would Alexander’s relationship with his closest friend have been suppressed from history? Several explanations have been offered. First, we cannot view the literature we have about Alexander in a vacuum of the fourth century BCE without considering the fact that significant information has been lost, and the clues that remain are undeniably biased and censored based on the cultural norms of his historians living in later centuries. Second, Alexander hired a court historian to tell the story of his expedition, and allowed Callisthenes to record his accomplishments in the best light possible, while the vulgate account based on the soldiers’ stories, which might have included more detail on their relationship, was viewed as unreliable even in

45 R.D. Milns, "Callisthenes on Alexander," *Mediterranean Archaeology* 19/20 (2006): 233. “For Callisthenes, it is often claimed, went with Alexander on the Asian expedition specifically as the king's 'official historian', whose task it was to use all his considerable literary skills to glorify both the king and his achievements; i.e. the historian's principles were to be overridden by those of the professional publicist. Callisthenes, it is said, did his task with great skill—and cynicism, as regards the historian— and depicted Alexander not only as a new Achilles, especially in Asia Minor and the Troad, but also as a person of divine origin and nature, who enjoyed the special favour of the gods.”
antiquity. Third, while ancient Greek social norms allowed for the general
extension of homosexuality, the taboo against homosexual love among
equals among the Greeks would have specifically disallowed the acceptance of
Alexander and Hephaestion’s relationship. Macedonians may have tolerated
the male-male relationships among equals, but they were not the target readers

Attitudes towards homosexuality changed from the fourth century BCE to
the second century CE, when the last of the ancient Alexander historians wrote
their biographies. Dover, among others, described changing cultural views
about sexuality, specifically describing how the Romans and Christians
abhorred homosexual behavior in writing and laws, which explains the
censorship and/or destruction of evidence for homosexuality in the last two
thousand years. According to K. J. Dover,

“\textit{The Christians destroyed a golden age of free, fearless, pagan sexuality. That}
most pagans were in many ways less inhibited than most Christians is undeniable.}
\textit{Not only had they a goddess specially concerned with sexual pleasure; their other}
deities were portrayed in legend as enjoying fornication, adultery and sodomy.}\footnote{K. J. Dover, "Classical Greek Attitudes to Sexual Behaviour," \textit{Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World}, 1973, 115, doi:10.1002/9780470756188.ch1.}

Each narrative of Alexander is therefore skewed by the historians’ feelings
about homosexuality, which would have been shaped by their societies’
constructed norms regarding homosexual behavior.

Dover explains that sexual partners in Ancient Macedonia generally did
not share the physical aspect of their relationship with others, nor would they
expect to be questioned about or have allusions made to the nature of their
relationship in their presence.\footnote{Ibid, 123. “The probable implication is that neither partner would actually say anything
about the physical aspect of their relationship to anyone else, nor would they expect any
question about it to be put to them or any allusion to it made in their presence.” Dover states:
“No doubt an ungentlemanly lover would boast of success, as suggested by Plato, \textit{Phaedrus 232A}.”}

\textit{An explanation for the lack of explicit}
evidence about their sexual relationship may be that under ordinary
circumstances they would not have shared this aspect of their relationship, and
others would not have openly questioned or talked to King Alexander and his
chiliarch Hephaestion about their sexual relationship. Furthermore, Dover
explains that men in ancient Greece were never expected to decide whether
they were “homosexual” or “heterosexual” and would not make distinctions in
choosing either male or female sexual companions.\footnote{Ibid, 121-123.} If they had to label
themselves by modern standards, they would identify as bisexual, but they
would not have recognized any of these terms, and there were no words for this
in ancient Greek. So there is no hard evidence suggesting that Alexander and
Hephaestion shared a sexual relationship, but there is also no evidence to the contrary.

Alexander and Hephaestion’s relationship did not fit the typical description of a pederastic relationship, the acceptable form of homosexuality in Greek and Macedonian culture. A significant age difference was expected for a pederastic relationship based on power and social inequality, Alexander and Hephaestion’s closeness in age disqualified them from this more typical form, which the Greeks described as the lover and his beloved, erastes-eromenos. Furthermore, Alexander’s relationship with Hephaestion created suspicion that there were improprieties in the nature of their sexual intercourse. Ancient and modern historians may not have wanted to portray them as having a sexual relationship because the ancient descriptions portray Alexander as effeminate, while Hephaestion was believed to be taller and more traditionally masculine. In this case historians, especially during the era of ancient Roman dominance, may have been concerned about the perception that the king took a passive role in a sexual relationship with a man, which would have been uncommon if defined by the general perception of pederasty.

Moreover, while their relationship could have been described in more detail in texts from the period, many of those contemporary texts have been lost, possibly with the intention to not portray Alexander in a way that some Roman readers could view as controversial.

Jeanne Reames, in her article “The Cult of Hephaestion,” observed that in modern media depictions, Hephaestion is almost entirely erased from the narratives so that Alexander is only portrayed as heterosexual. When he is included, Hephaestion is stripped of his military accomplishments and used as a romantic plot device to create drama between Alexander’s female lovers. Reames explains, “the primary reason Hephaestion has been overlooked stems from a combination of ancient and modern biases...Such judgments may

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50 Ogden, Alexander the Great, 159. Referencing Letters of Diogenes: “we find a brief note addressed to Alexander: ‘If you want to become a respectable man, throw off the bit of string you have on your head and come to me. But there is no way you can, for you are controlled by Hephaestion’s thighs.’ This is ostensibly a homoerotic reference.”
51 Percy, Reconsiderations About Greek Homosexualities, 44.
52 Dover, Classical Greek Attitudes to Sexual Behaviour, 125. “The ‘passive partner’ in a homosexual act takes on himself the role of a woman, he was open to the suspicion, like the male prostitute, that he abjured his prescribed role as a future soldier and defender of the community. The comic poets, like the orators, ridicule individuals for effeminacy, [and] for participation in homosexual activity.”
53 Paul Mckechnie, “Diodorus Siculus and Hephaestion’s Pyre,” The Classical Quarterly 45, no. 2 (1995): 161–163., doi:10.1017/s0009838800043494. Ancient authors would not have said anything unfavorable about Alexander and would not have allowed any stories that could promote a negative view of Alexander. While bisexuality may not have been considered controversial in Ancient Greece or Macedonia, in the Roman Empire homosexuality was not an accepted part of normal social life, and therefore it makes sense that historians such as Curtius and Justin would have edited the content they found based on the audience of the time. Furthermore, because Julius Caesar and Alexander were often viewed and compared as similarly great leaders Curtius, Plutarch, Arrian, and Justin would not have risked expressing Alexander’s homoeroticism for fear of implying that Julius Caesar also had homosexual tendencies, though this idea is largely speculative.
partially arise from an unconscious adoption of biases found in our primary sources...his career as a logistics and diplomatic officer is overshadowed by the combat talent of his chief rival, Craterus.” While people who care about historical accuracy appreciate the mention of Hephaestion’s character, his intelligence and value to the campaign are all but erased. Bisexual erasure has occurred to an unknowable degree as a result of bias, prejudice, and censorship throughout the last 2,500 years. While we can attempt to interpret the evidence which survives from antiquity, there is little hope of ever truly understanding the full picture of Alexander and Hephaestion’s lifelong friendship.

Conclusions

While the presented evidence can be interpreted in a variety of ways, it is important to be cautious when viewing the actions of Alexander and Hephaestion through a modern lens. Unlike the 2010s, where identity politics gave everyone and everything a label, in ancient Macedonia, men were not expected to choose between male and female lovers. For this reason some historians have argued that even the term “bisexual” should not be used to describe the feelings of people from this era, as it implies a decision about self-identification that Alexander nor Hephaestion would not have been societally required to make nor recognize.

However in modern day, identity politics rely heavily on a shared history and social narrative. Throughout the last 2370 years as different cultures controlled the same lands, governments and predominant cultural groups have attempted to diminish the rights and powers of minorities in order to solidify their political and social control. The bisexual community is one such minority group, and as a result, the bisexual community has a very small pool from which to draw within the historical narrative. So while Alexander may not have been “bisexual” in the way we see it today, he was a male who likely had sexual and romantic relationships with both men and women. Therefore, when Hephaestion is removed from modern depictions of Alexander in literature and the media, because of biphobia held by modern society and the media, it contributes to modern day bisexual erasure.

The fact that ancient Macedonian social norms allowed men such as Alexander to choose lovers freely, and did not require them to make “decisions” about their “sexual identity labels” does not mean that Alexander is not an important figure for the bisexual community. Instead, it actually highlights the deep societal regression that has occurred over the last two thousand three hundred years. The success of the false narrative attempting to dictate what type of person is qualified for leadership and greatness, portrayed for thousands of years by oppressive social forces, is shown by the worldwide lack of openly bisexual public figures in the 2010s. During this period, the concept of the “bisexual identity” has been warped into a phenomenon

associated with criminality, discrimination and shamefulness. As a result, scholars continue to have difficulty viewing the possibility that Alexander and Hephaestion had a romantic relationship without applying their own progressive or conservative ideologies of modern identity politics to their narrative which either dispel or further institutionalize this perception of bisexuality.

Regardless of original intent, every source and analysis we have about Alexander is strongly biased, including my own. Unfortunately, because of the stigmas against homosexuality and bisexuality, especially that against Alexander’s sexual submissiveness to a man, historians may never truly understand the nature of their relationship. It is possible that no one in his court entirely comprehended their connection, hesitating to ask out of respect for their king’s privacy, and so a true understanding died with Alexander in 323 BCE. The information we do have about Hephaestion, however, proves that he was unlike any other for Alexander. From a young age the Macedonians shared a deep connection that lasted well beyond their deaths and cannot truly be defined by modern terms, and despite attempts at erasure, we remember them and wonder.

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