

# 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

1 between Alexander the Great and his *chiliarch*<sup>1</sup> Hephaestion, which has been  
 2 contested since antiquity. Like Alexander's desecrated shrine in Egypt's Luxor  
 3 Temple, Alexander's relationship with Hephaestion was scrubbed out almost as  
 4 soon as Alexander died.

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

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

26 In more modern times, the term "bisexuality" was first coined by  
 27 anatomist Robert Bentley Todd in 1859 to describe creatures of any species  
 28 which had physical characteristics of both males and females<sup>3</sup>. However, its  
 29 modern usage refers to people who feel sexual attraction toward both males  
 30 and females. MacDowall explains that this shift in the meaning of the term  
 31 "bisexuality" occurred during the late 20th century, likely in the 1970s and  
 32 1980s in response to cultural shifts in acceptance of homosexuality and  
 33 development of sex and gender studies.<sup>4</sup> Soon after the concept of  
 34 "bisexuality" as it is understood today came into the public psyche, the concept  
 35 of "bisexual erasure" entered the discourse in sex and gender theory to  
 36 understand where "bisexuality" had been in the thousands of years before the  
 37 concept gained societal popularity.

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<sup>1</sup> 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."

<sup>2</sup> Quintus Curtius Rufus, *Historiae Alexandri Magni* 3.12.16.

<sup>3</sup> J. B. Lyons, "Some Contributions of Robert Bentley Todd," *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 7, no. 1 (1998): doi:10.1076/jhin.7.1.11.13098.

<sup>4</sup> Lachlan MacDowall, "Historicising Contemporary Bisexuality," *Journal of Bisexuality* 9, no. 1 (2009): doi:10.1080/15299710802659989.

1 The term “bisexual erasure” is now used to describe the phenomenon of  
 2 hiding bisexual experiences in heteronormative literature, film, and popular  
 3 culture, particularly attempting to reinforce the previously understood binary  
 4 between “heterosexuals” and “homosexuals.”<sup>5</sup> Since this concept came into  
 5 modern discourse, case studies have mostly focused on contemporary  
 6 instances. A compelling ancient case study is the reception of the emotional,  
 7 romantic, and sexual relationship between Alexander and Hephaestion, even as  
 8 Alexander had two children by different women and married three. This can be  
 9 viewed within the instances of Alexander’s narrative where, as his second-in-  
 10 command, Hephaestion should be referenced and is not; the instances where  
 11 ancient historians hint at the nature of their relationship veiled behind vague  
 12 verbiage only to be noticed by the most educated of ancient audiences.  
 13 Bisexual erasure can now be extended back more than 2300 years further with  
 14 my research, along with its implications in the larger focus of LGBT+  
 15 censorship throughout history.

### 16 17 18 **From Boyhood to Kingship** 19

20 Scholars currently have very little knowledge about Alexander’s  
 21 childhood, and even less about Hephaestion’s.<sup>6</sup> The pair most likely began  
 22 their friendship during their adolescence, while Hephaestion was employed as  
 23 Royal Page to Philip II.<sup>7</sup> This would imply that Hephaestion was of noble  
 24 descent and his father, Amyntor, would have been among Philip II’s *hetairoi*,  
 25 the inner circle called “the Companions,” although beyond this there is little  
 26 information about Hephaestion’s parentage.<sup>8</sup> Hephaestion was one of the boys  
 27 Philip II selected to send to Mieza, a remote site west of Pella, to study under  
 28 Aristotle with Alexander in 343 BCE when Alexander was thirteen.<sup>9</sup> Selecting  
 29 Hephaestion to go to Mieza shows that the young men had a close friendship  
 30 that Philip II would have not only recognized, but encouraged.

31 At Mieza, the boys may have been influenced by Aristotle’s Athenian  
 32 sexual norms. Aristotle supported the social tradition of pederasty, and claimed  
 33 in the second book of his *Politics* that the Cretan lawgivers encouraged

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<sup>5</sup> 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.”

<sup>6</sup> Waldemar Heckel, “The «Boyhood Friends» of Alexander the Great,” *Emerita* 53, no. 2 (1985): doi:10.3989/emerita.1985.v53.i2.675.; and U. Wilcken and E. N. Borza, *Alexander the Great* (New York: Norton Library, 1967), 53-60.

<sup>7</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae Philosophorum* 5.27.

<sup>8</sup> Jeanne Reames, “The Cult of Hephaestion,” ed. Paul Cartledge and Fiona Rose Greenland, *Responses to Oliver Stone’s Alexander: Film, History, and Cultural Studies.*, 2005, Wisconsin Studies in Classics, 190.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Green, *Alexander of Macedon, 356-323 B.C. A Historical Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 55-56: for the reference to the lost treatise by Marsyas of Pella entitled *The Education of Alexander*.

1 pederasty as a means of population control.<sup>10</sup> By directing love and sexual  
2 desire into non-procreative channels,

3  
4 “the lawgiver has devised many wise measures to secure the benefit of  
5 moderation at table, and the segregation of the women in order that they may not  
6 bear many children, for which purpose he instituted association with the male  
7 sex.”

8  
9 Under Aristotle’s tutelage, it is likely both boys were raised with the  
10 homopositive sexual norms of both Macedonia and Aristotle’s native Greek  
11 culture.

12 Young Alexander would have been exposed to polygamy throughout his  
13 life in both Macedonian royal culture and his own family. Philip II had many  
14 lovers, both male and female, and Alexander would have been raised to believe  
15 this was the common practice, especially for a Macedonian king.<sup>11</sup> Alexander’s  
16 mother, Olympias, was Philip II’s fourth wife of seven.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore,  
17 Olympias, while married to Philip, maintained a lasting friendship with Philip’s  
18 mistress Nicesipolis, and raised her daughter Thessalonice after Nicesipolis  
19 died.<sup>13</sup> This stands as evidence that sexual jealousy was much less a part of  
20 royal marriages in ancient Macedonia than it would be in modern times.<sup>14</sup>

21 Additionally, Philip II’s most infamous male lover was his assassin  
22 Pausanias, who murdered Philip partially out of jealousy for Philip II’s other  
23 lover with the same name.<sup>15</sup> This provides evidence of the social visibility and  
24 acceptance of homosexual relationships within ancient Macedonian aristocracy  
25 and Alexander’s family, and exemplifies Philip II’s lack of concern regarding  
26 Pausanias’ discontent.<sup>16</sup> While Alexander may not have been involved with

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<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* 2.1272a.22–24.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Ogden, *Alexander the Great: Myth, Genesis and Sexuality* (University of Exeter Press, 2011), 111.

<sup>12</sup> Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists* 13.557.5.

<sup>13</sup> Plutarch *Moralia* 141b.23; Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 47.

<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> 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

1 Philip II's death, it appears clear that Philip's relationships with men and  
2 women outside of marriage were visible and influential on Alexander in his  
3 youth.

4 Throughout his life as a young prince in Pella, there is also some evidence  
5 that Alexander had little interest in sexual relationships with women.<sup>17</sup>  
6 According to Athenaeus 435a:

7  
8 "Olympias actually sent the outstandingly beautiful Thessalian courtesan  
9 Callixeina to bed with him, and Philip abetted her in this, for they were concerned  
10 lest/taking precautions lest he might/should be a *gynnis*. Olympias frequently  
11 begged her to have sex with Alexander."<sup>18</sup>  
12

13 Peter Green analyzed this material, stating,

14  
15 "Both [Philip II] and Olympias...were worried by...the boy's lack of heterosexual  
16 interests. They feared he might be turning out a girlish invert (*gynnis*),  
17 and...frequently begged [Alexander] to have intercourse with this woman --  
18 which did not suggest great enthusiasm on his part."<sup>19</sup>  
19

20 It could be argued that from an early age, Alexander may have been  
21 fulfilled emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually by his close companion  
22 Hephaestion, resulting in a lessened interest in heterosexual relationships.<sup>20</sup>  
23 While hints of his gynophobia show through, the ancient writers are exhibiting  
24 erasure and avoidance, perhaps out of a reluctance to portray Alexander as  
25 effeminate or sexually submissive to the more traditionally masculine  
26 Hephaestion.  
27

## 28 29 **A King and his Chiliarch**

### 30 31 Achilles and Patroclus Reborn

32  
33 Contemporary historians recorded memorable vignettes of Alexander's  
34 life, and one of the most iconic is the visit to Troy in 334 BCE, shortly after  
35 crossing from Europe into Asia on the northwest corner of Asia Minor. This  
36 side trip to Troy, shortly after crossing into Persian territory, has been viewed  
37 entirely as an act of *pothos* on the part of Alexander, through his deep

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inflicted on him, as an unjust judge, that revenge which he could not inflict on him as an adversary."

<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> Ogden, *Alexander the Great*, 174: referencing Hieronymus' letter which states that Theophrastus originally made this claim.

<sup>19</sup> Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 66.

<sup>20</sup> 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.

1 connection to the mythic hero Achilles. *Pothos* is the Greek word for desire, a  
 2 special character trait which from time to time would arouse in Alexander a  
 3 need to visit a place or solve a puzzle, even if it meant endangering his troops  
 4 or delaying a conquest.<sup>21</sup>

5  
 6 “Both Roman and Greek authors have used this scene to provide hints of the  
 7 depth of Alexander and Hephaestion’s relationship. This is one of the few  
 8 instances in which historians of antiquity suggest or imply that Alexander and  
 9 Hephaestion shared a homosexual relationship. Alexander’s persistent personal  
 10 goal was to emulate or surpass his idol Achilles in fame and heroism. Alexander  
 11 may have seen a similarity between his own sexual relationship with Hephaestion  
 12 and the one Achilles shared with Patroclus in the *Iliad*. Furthermore, although  
 13 there is no certain evidence that Alexander and Hephaestion were sexual partners,  
 14 their closeness has been noted undeniably by ancient historians.<sup>22</sup> Roman  
 15 historian Claudius Aelianus (“Aelian”) described in a chapter he titled “Of  
 16 Alexander and Hephæstion” the scene in which “Alexander Crowned the Tomb  
 17 of Achilles, and Hephæstion that of Patroclus; signifying that he was as dear to  
 18 Alexander as Patroclus to Achilles.”<sup>23</sup> -- Aelian, *Various Histories* 12.7

19  
 20 Peter Green interpreted Aelian’s description to mean:

21  
 22 “Alexander and his inseparable companion Hephaestion laid wreaths on the  
 23 tombs of Achilles and Patroclus respectively (which Aelian took to mean that  
 24 they enjoyed a similar relationship) and then ran a race around them, naked and  
 25 anointed with oil, in the traditional fashion. How fortunate Achilles was, the  
 26 young king exclaimed, to have so faithful a friend all his life.”<sup>24</sup>

27  
 28 However, Aeschines described the relationship between Achilles and  
 29 Patroclus as romantic, and explains that even ancient poets would use language  
 30 that heavily implied homosexual behavior to their more educated audience, but  
 31 did not explicitly state the behavior to protect their work from censorship.

32  
 33 “For since they undertake to cite wise men, and to take refuge in sentiments  
 34 expressed in poetic measures, look, fellow citizens into the works of those  
 35 who are confessedly good and helpful poets, and see how far apart they  
 36 considered chaste men, who love their like, and men who are wonton and  
 37 overcome by forbidden lusts. I will speak first of Homer, whom we rank

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<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> Arrian, *The Anabasis of Alexander* 1.12.1.

<sup>23</sup> 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.

<sup>24</sup> Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 169.

1 among the oldest and wisest poets. Although he speaks in many places of  
 2 Patroclus and Achilles, *he hides their love and avoids giving a name to their*  
 3 *friendship, thinking that the exceeding greatness of their affection is manifest*  
 4 *to such of his hearers as are educated men.*<sup>25</sup>  
 5

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

20 Because of the subtleties embedded within descriptions of their narrative,  
 21 specific word choices are important. The word which translates to “lover”  
 22 (ἐραστής) was traditionally used to refer to the more dominant participant in  
 23 male-male relationships, whereas the word “beloved” (ἐρώμενος) specified that  
 24 this partner took on the submissive role. One of the most famous ancient  
 25 historians to speak on the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus was  
 26 Plato, whose Symposium has added to the ancient debates about the nature of  
 27 their relationship. Plato claims,  
 28

29 “Achilles...bravely chose to go and rescue his *lover* Patroclus, avenged him, and  
 30 sought death not merely in his behalf but in haste to be joined with him whom  
 31 death had taken. For this the gods so highly admired him that they gave him  
 32 distinguished honor, since he set so great a value on his *lover*. And Aeschylus  
 33 talks nonsense when he says that it was Achilles who was in love with Patroclus;  
 34 for he excelled in beauty not Patroclus alone but assuredly all the other heroes,  
 35 being still beardless and, moreover, much younger, by Homer's account. For in  
 36 truth here is no sort of valor more respected by the gods than this which comes of  
 37 love; yet they are even more admiring and delighted and beneficent when the  
 38 *beloved* is fond of his lover than when the lover is fond of his favorite; since a  
 39 lover, filled as he is with a god, surpasses his favorite in divinity.”<sup>26</sup>  
 40

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

<sup>25</sup> Aeschines, *Against Timarchus* 133.141–50.

<sup>26</sup> Plato *Symposium* 179e–180b.

1 Hephaestion shared the sexual relationship recognized between Achilles and  
 2 Patroclus, there is no reason to suggest they would have been averse to it *or*  
 3 that ancient historians would have explicitly recorded it.

#### 5 The Politics of Friendship

7 Further into the Asian campaign, Alexander employed Hephaestion's  
 8 diplomatic abilities after the siege at Tyre.<sup>27</sup> After Alexander had finally taken  
 9 the crucial coastal city, he invited Hephaestion to nominate any "personal  
 10 guest-friend" to take over as ruler when they moved on with their campaign.<sup>28</sup>  
 11 This is clear evidence of the extent to which Alexander trusted Hephaestion, to  
 12 make decisions that benefited not only Macedonia, but Alexander himself.  
 13 Moreover, the fact that Hephaestion tested that trust by recommending a poor  
 14 man, and Alexander accepted his decision without question, is certainly proof  
 15 of the trust that Alexander placed in Hephaestion's judgment as a diplomat.

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

19  
 20 "Alexander himself went into the tent, accompanied alone by Hephaestion, one of  
 21 his Companions. The mother of Darius, being in doubt which of them was the  
 22 king (for they had both arrayed themselves in the same style of dress), went up to  
 23 Hephaestion, because he appeared to her the taller of the two, and prostrated  
 24 herself before him. But when he drew back, and one of her attendants pointed out  
 25 Alexander, saying he was the king, she was ashamed of her mistake, and was  
 26 going to retire. But the king told her she had made no mistake, *for Hephaestion*  
 27 *was also an Alexander*. This I record neither being sure of its truth nor thinking it  
 28 altogether unreliable. If it really occurred, I commend Alexander for his  
 29 compassionate treatment of the women, and the confidence he felt in his  
 30 companion, and the honour bestowed on him; but if it merely seems probable to  
 31 historians that Alexander would have acted and spoken thus, even for this reason  
 32 I think him worthy of commendation."<sup>29</sup>

33  
 34 This scene's importance stands in the ambiguity of its description, with a  
 35 hint of sexual undertones. Alexander has provided Hephaestion with the means  
 36 to dress in a similar level of regality to Alexander, which may imply  
 37 Alexander's feeling of equality with Hephaestion. Arrian depicts Alexander as  
 38 noticeably shorter than Hephaestion, whose masculine figure appeared more  
 39 kinglike to the mother of Darius than Alexander's shorter, stockier frame.  
 40 However, instead of getting offended at the mistake, Alexander's comment that  
 41 "Hephaestion was also an Alexander" provides further evidence of the  
 42 closeness of their relationship and the respect that Alexander held for

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<sup>27</sup> Ancient authors on Alexander's siege of Tyre: Arrian, *The Anabasis of Alexander* 2.16.1-2.24.6; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 17.40.2-17.46.6; Quintus Curtius Rufus, *Historiae Alexandri Magni* 4.2.1-4.4.21.

<sup>28</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 17.46.3.

<sup>29</sup> Arrian, *The Anabasis of Alexander* 2.12.3-8.



1 Hephaestion. Despite the vivid narrative that this scene creates, Roman author  
 2 Arrian admits that he decided to present it in his narrative “neither being sure  
 3 of its truth nor thinking it altogether unreliable.”<sup>30</sup> While it is true that any of  
 4 the scenes depicted in antiquity could have been fabricated at some point  
 5 during history, this also appears to be another case in which ancient historians  
 6 may have attempted to “hide” the truth of their relationship in wording which  
 7 would only be noticed by educated members of the ancient audience. Even if  
 8 Arrian believed this scene occurred, he may have felt compelled to dismiss the  
 9 scene to protect his work from backlash in ancient Roman society.

10 Darius’s mother, wife, and daughters were of course vulnerable to  
 11 mistreatment and possibly sexual violence after they were captured. In a letter  
 12 from Alexander to Parmenio preserved as a fragment in Plutarch’s *Life of*  
 13 *Alexander*, we learn that Alexander had no interest at all in seeing Darius’s  
 14 wife, the most beautiful woman in the world. Why would our historian choose  
 15 to include this information unless it were telling to some degree about  
 16 Alexander’s sexual orientation?<sup>31</sup>

17 One of the deepest subjects of contention between Alexander and the  
 18 majority of his Macedonian troops throughout their campaign through Asia  
 19 was the Macedonians’ discomfort with Alexander’s adoption of Asian customs  
 20 and costumes. A single friend of Alexander consistently supported him in this  
 21 innovation, and that was Hephaestion. According to Plutarch, “[Alexander]  
 22 saw that among his chieftest friends Hephaestion approved his course and  
 23 joined him in changing his mode of life.”<sup>32</sup> While it is unknown whether  
 24 Hephaestion truly endorsed Alexander’s move toward adopting Persian royal  
 25 practices or not, this provides evidence that Hephaestion was regarded as the  
 26 most loyal of all Alexander’s companions. Plutarch expresses this further in  
 27 stating:

28  
 29 “while Craterus clung fast to his native ways, he employed [Hephaestion] in  
 30 his business with the Barbarians, [and Craterus] in that with the Greeks and  
 31 Macedonians. And in general he showed most affection for Hephaestion, but  
 32 most esteem for Craterus, thinking, and constantly saying, that Hephaestion  
 33 was a friend of Alexander, but Craterus a friend of the king.”<sup>33</sup>

34  
 35 The idea that Hephaestion was a friend of “Alexander” and not solely of  
 36 “the king” like Craterus provides evidence that Alexander and Hephaestion  
 37 appreciated each other on a personal, emotional level, as opposed to Craterus’s  
 38 loyalty to the king.

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

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 2.12.8a.

<sup>31</sup> Plutarch, *Alexander* 22.

<sup>32</sup> Plutarch, *Alexander* 47.5-6.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

1 world, their private version of the truth,<sup>34</sup> and for Alexander, this isolation  
 2 eventually excluded all except his closest confidant, Hephaestion. Alexander's  
 3 faith in Hephaestion was most likely fortified during events such as the  
 4 Philotas affair of 330 BCE, when an assassination plot was uncovered and it  
 5 was not clear whether his top generals or companions were involved. In this  
 6 instance, Hephaestion was one of the major proponents of using torture as a  
 7 means of extracting information, and it is believed that Hephaestion actually  
 8 took a major role in extracting confessions through the acts of torture.<sup>35</sup> While  
 9 one may suspect that Hephaestion harbored some personal or career resentment  
 10 toward Philotas, son of Parmenio, this would have been a useful opportunity to  
 11 resolidify his loyalty to Alexander, by aggressively punishing Philotas for not  
 12 reporting the assassination plan which allegedly threatened his beloved's life.<sup>36</sup>

13 Furthermore, after Hephaestion was given the role of Chiliarch, he was put  
 14 in charge of screening Alexander's mail. Alexander probably set this up out of  
 15 paranoia toward everyone except Hephaestion, as described by Plutarch, who  
 16 stated: "Olympias often wrote him [Alexander]...but Alexander kept her  
 17 writings secret, except once when Hephaestion, as was his wont, read with him  
 18 a letter which had been opened; the king did not prevent him, but took the ring  
 19 from his own finger and applied its seal to the lips of Hephaestion."<sup>37</sup> Because  
 20 he kept these letters secret from his other high ranking officials, Alexander is  
 21 clearly represented as having a higher level of trust for Hephaestion. Given that  
 22 no one else was in the room where it happened, the ancient historians must  
 23 have been using circulating rumors as their sources.

24  
 25

#### Elevating Hephaestion to Royalty

26

27 The mass weddings at Susa are usually interpreted as a way for Alexander  
 28 to placate the upset Macedonians after the disastrous expedition through the  
 29 Gedrosian Desert in 325 BCE.<sup>38</sup> This was also one of Alexander's most blatant  
 30 displays of favoritism and companionship toward Hephaestion. During this  
 31 mass wedding, Alexander married Darius III's eldest daughter Stateira in order  
 32 to create kinship ties with the Persian royal family, which was meant to further  
 33 legitimize his role as Great King. However, Darius had two daughters, and  
 34 despite the availability of other Macedonians who came from more affluent  
 35 families or more were accomplished soldiers, Hephaestion was selected to  
 36 marry Darius' other daughter, Drypetis.<sup>39</sup> This is particularly notable, not only  
 37 as a sign of respect for Hephaestion by Alexander, but also as a way for the  
 38 king to elevate Hephaestion and his future heirs' status from chiliarch to true  
 39 royalty.

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<sup>34</sup> Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 324.

<sup>35</sup> Plutarch, *Alexander* 48.11-12.

<sup>36</sup> Ian Worthington, *By the Spear: Philip II, Alexander the Great, and the Rise and Fall of the Macedonian Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 306.

<sup>37</sup> Plutarch, *Alexander* 39.5.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.2.; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, 12. 538b-539a.

<sup>39</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Historical Library* 17.107.6.

1 According to Arrian, “To Hephaestion [Alexander] gave Drypetis, another  
2 daughter of Darius, and his own wife's sister; for he wished Hephaestion's  
3 children to be first cousins to his own.”<sup>40</sup> In doing so, this act not only provided  
4 Hephaestion with a significant boost in social status, but in turn, legally made  
5 Alexander and Hephaestion family. They would have raised their children  
6 together, had Hephaestion lived long enough to sire them. It could be argued  
7 that this was the closest substitute that two men of their status could have had  
8 to marriage.

### 10 Seven Months of Suffering

11  
12 Most scholars would agree that the king's reaction to the Chiliarch's death  
13 in Ecbatana in 324 BCE is our best measure of Alexander's love for  
14 Hephaestion. Alexander experienced countless deaths of important officials  
15 throughout his reign as king of Macedonia, but no mourning came close to the  
16 way he honored Hephaestion. Arrian described, with skepticism, the scenes in  
17 which Alexander mourned Hephaestion's death. In character with his  
18 previously mentioned association with the hero Achilles, Arrian states:

19  
20 “Alexander should have cut off his hair in honour of the dead man, I do not think  
21 improbable, both for other reasons and especially from a desire to imitate  
22 Achilles, whom from his boyhood he had an ambition to rival.”<sup>41</sup>

23  
24 Remarkably, Arrian chose this moment in his narrative to admit that other  
25 historians had different reactions to Alexander's grief-stricken actions when  
26 faced with Hephaestion's death.

27  
28 “Different authors have given different accounts of Alexander's grief on this  
29 occasion; but they agree in this, that his grief was great. As to what was done in  
30 honour of Hephaestion, they make diverse statements, just as each writer was  
31 actuated by good-will or envy towards him, or even towards Alexander himself.  
32 Of the authors who have made these reckless statements, some seem to me to  
33 have thought that whatever Alexander said or did to show his excessive grief for  
34 the man who was the dearest to him in the world, redounds to his own honour;  
35 whereas others seem to have thought that *it rather tended to his disgrace, as*  
36 *being conduct unbecoming to any king and especially to Alexander.*”

37 – Arrian, *The Anabasis of Alexander* 7.14.1-3.

38  
39 None of the other generals or Companions received such extravagant death  
40 rituals and honors. This is strong evidence that, despite the paucity of  
41 testimonials to the fact, the relationship with Hephaestion went much deeper  
42 than that with any other member of Alexander's court. However, Arrian's  
43 description is not without judgment, stating that Alexander's extreme reaction  
44 was “unbecoming to any king and especially to Alexander.” Justin also adds a

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.; Arrian, *The Anabasis of Alexander* 7.4.5.

<sup>41</sup> Arrian, *The Anabasis of Alexander* 7.14.1-3.

1 normative stance into the narrative, stating, “Alexander mourned for  
2 [Hephaestion] longer than became his dignity as a king.”<sup>42</sup> While Greek  
3 historians Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch also provided accounts for  
4 Alexander’s behavior after the death of Hephaestion, the normative judgment  
5 of his behavior expressed by Arrian and Justin is absent.

6 Arrian and Justin suggest Alexander’s behavior is shameful and  
7 undignified, which may show their bias against believing the deep love that  
8 Alexander had for Hephaestion was real, proper, or appropriate.<sup>43</sup> After  
9 Hephaestion’s death, Alexander’s mental health deteriorated rapidly and he  
10 went on several highly dangerous and violent expeditions, conquering in the  
11 name of Hephaestion, which Plutarch called an “offering to the shade of  
12 Hephaestion.”<sup>44</sup> Alexander’s behavior grew more and more irrational in the  
13 seven months that followed, undoubtedly due to the depression and mental  
14 deterioration he experienced after the death of his closest friend and confidant.

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

### 21 22 23 **Censorship and Bisexual Erasure** 24

25 Having reviewed this evidence, the question still remains as to why, if  
26 homosexual tendencies were accepted and recorded throughout Macedonian  
27 culture including in the royal family, would Alexander’s relationship with his  
28 closest friend have been suppressed from history? Several explanations have  
29 been offered. First, we cannot view the literature we have about Alexander in a  
30 vacuum of the fourth century BCE without considering the fact that significant  
31 information has been lost, and the clues that remain are undeniably biased and  
32 censored based on the cultural norms of his historians living in later centuries.  
33 Second, Alexander hired a court historian to tell the story of his expedition, and  
34 allowed Callisthenes to record his accomplishments in the best light possible,<sup>45</sup>  
35 while the vulgate account based on the soldiers' stories, which might have  
36 included more detail on their relationship, was viewed as unreliable even in

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 7.14-7.15.

<sup>43</sup> Justin, *Epitome of Pompeius Trogus' Philippic Histories* 12.12.

<sup>44</sup> Plutarch, *Alexander* 72.4.

<sup>45</sup> 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.”

1 antiquity. Third, while ancient Greek social norms allowed for the general  
2 acceptance of homosexuality, the taboo against homosexual love among  
3 equals among the Greeks would have specifically disallowed the acceptance of  
4 Alexander and Hephaestion's relationship. Macedonians may have tolerated  
5 the male-male relationships among equals, but they were not the target readers  
6 of Alexander historians.<sup>46</sup>

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

14  
15 "The Christians destroyed a golden age of free, fearless, pagan sexuality. That  
16 most pagans were in many ways less inhibited than most Christians is undeniable.  
17 Not only had they a goddess specially concerned with sexual pleasure; their other  
18 deities were portrayed in legend as enjoying fornication, adultery and sodomy."<sup>47</sup>  
19

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

23 Dover explains that sexual partners in Ancient Macedonia generally did  
24 not share the physical aspect of their relationship with others, nor would they  
25 expect to be questioned about or have allusions made to the nature of their  
26 relationship in their presence.<sup>48</sup> An explanation for the lack of explicit  
27 evidence about their sexual relationship may be that under ordinary  
28 circumstances they would not have shared this aspect of their relationship, and  
29 others would not have openly questioned or talked to King Alexander and his  
30 chiliarch Hephaestion about their sexual relationship. Furthermore, Dover  
31 explains that men in ancient Greece were never expected to decide whether  
32 they were "homosexual" or "heterosexual" and would not make distinctions in  
33 choosing either male or female sexual companions.<sup>49</sup> If they had to label  
34 themselves by modern standards, they would identify as bisexual, but they  
35 would not have recognized any of these terms, and there were no words for this  
36 in ancient Greek. So there is no hard evidence suggesting that Alexander and

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<sup>46</sup> William Armstrong Percy, "Reconsiderations About Greek Homosexualities," *Journal of Homosexuality* 49, no. 3-4 (2005): 44, doi:10.1300/j082v49n03\_02.

<sup>47</sup> K. J. Dover, "Classical Greek Attitudes to Sexual Behaviour," *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World*, 1973, 115, doi:10.1002/9780470756188.ch1.

<sup>48</sup> 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, *Phaedrus* 232A."

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 121-123.

1 Hephaestion shared a sexual relationship, but there is also no evidence to the  
2 contrary.

3 Alexander and Hephaestion's relationship did not fit the typical  
4 description of a pederastic relationship, the acceptable form of homosexuality  
5 in Greek and Macedonian culture. A significant age difference was expected  
6 for a pederastic relationship based on power and social inequality, Alexander  
7 and Hephaestion's closeness in age disqualified them from this more typical  
8 form, which the Greeks described as the lover and his beloved, *erastes-*  
9 *eromenos*. Furthermore, Alexander's relationship with Hephaestion created  
10 suspicion that there were improprieties in the nature of their sexual  
11 intercourse.<sup>50</sup> Ancient and modern historians may not have wanted to portray  
12 them as having a sexual relationship because the ancient descriptions portray  
13 Alexander as effeminate, while Hephaestion was believed to be taller and more  
14 traditionally masculine.<sup>51</sup> In this case historians, especially during the era of  
15 ancient Roman dominance, may have been concerned about the perception that  
16 the king took a passive role in a sexual relationship with a man, which would  
17 have been uncommon if defined by the general perception of pederasty.<sup>52</sup>  
18 Moreover, while their relationship could have been described in more detail in  
19 texts from the period, many of those contemporary texts have been lost,  
20 possibly with the intention to not portray Alexander in a way that some Roman  
21 readers could view as controversial.<sup>53</sup>

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

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<sup>50</sup> 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."

<sup>51</sup> Percy, *Reconsiderations About Greek Homosexualities*, 44.

<sup>52</sup> 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."

<sup>53</sup> 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.

1 partially arise from an unconscious adoption of biases found in our primary  
 2 sources...his career as a logistics and diplomatic officer is overshadowed by the  
 3 combat talent of his chief rival, Craterus.”<sup>54</sup> While people who care about  
 4 historical accuracy appreciate the mention of Hephaestion’s character, his  
 5 intelligence and value to the campaign are all but erased. Bisexual erasure has  
 6 occurred to an unknowable degree as a result of bias, prejudice, and censorship  
 7 throughout the last 2,500 years. While we can attempt to interpret the evidence  
 8 which survives from antiquity, there is little hope of ever truly understanding  
 9 the full picture of Alexander and Hephaestion’s lifelong friendship.

## 12 Conclusions

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

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

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

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<sup>54</sup> Reames, *The Cult of Hephaestion*, 201-202.

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

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

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