The Greeks and Greek Love: A Bold New Exploration of the Ancient World
by James Davidson.
Random House, 789 pp., $45.00

Images of Ancient Greek Pederasty: Boys Were Their Gods
by Andrew Lear and Eva Cantarella.
 Routledge, 262 pp., $41.95

From antiquity to the present, nothing has given admirers of the Greeks so much embarrassment and caused so much downright revulsion as the widespread Greek practice of men making love to young boys. We owe the word “pederasty” for this activity to Greek poets for boy and erastis for lover.

Our tolerance for explicit descriptions of sexual acts in the post-Kinsey era has encouraged the growth of a minor industry in the study of Greek homosexuality. The Greeks themselves had no word for homosexuality, and “pederasty” represents only a part of what that modern word covers. But with the ample textual and visual evidence that survives from the ancient world, historians and scholars have set to work with bris in the spirit of pio- neers in a new field. As one scholar put it, “The specific detail is new, the discipline is not.” The study of Greek sexuality, continued in the books on pederasty by Andrew Lear and Eva Cantarella under review, has a long pedigree, going all the way back to the Romans, who absorbed Greek culture into their empire. Cicero and his contemporaries considered pederasty something uniquely Greek, and he mocked philosophers who extolled the supposed virtue that an older lover imparted to his beloved. “Why is it,” he wrote in his Tusculan Disputations, “that no one loves an ugly adolescent or a good-looking older man? It is my impression that this custom started in the gymnasia, where such liaisons were available and allowed.” Cicero called as a witness the early Roman poet Ennius, who wrote that the beginning of such disgraceful conduct was the display of naked bodies among the citizenry (vide infra inter clamat litteras).

The very word “gymnasia” is formed from the Greek for nude (gu-nos). Opportunities for pederasty activity there evidently explain legislation from two Greek cities to control access to the boys undergoing physical training. A Hellenistic inscription from Beroea in Macedonia explicitly forbids younger men between twenty and thirty years of age from approaching the adolescents in the gymnasia or talking to them. Such men would be precisely in the age group of most erotic who would select boys in their teens. A still-unpublished inscription from Amphipolis, also in Macedonia, regulates the training of ephesas (boy between eighteen and twenty) and states:

The trainer [paideuristes], naked, will be in charge and shall train and instruct [teach] the ephesas in exercise. No one else shall exercise with the ephesas except for the ephesarch [the instructor in charge] and the trainer. If anyone instructing the ephesas leads a dissolute and immoderate life and does not properly care for the ephesas’ education but clearly does something that would injure an ephesas or be shameful, the ephesarch shall fine him.

Nudity continued to be traditional in Greek gymnasia and in wrestling schools throughout antiquity, and it was normal at great Panhellenic athletic competitions such as the Olympics. Thucydides, who was as sober and had been practiced there from an early time. Plutarch reports that the legendary Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus mandated a curative practice for all Spartan males on the eve of marriage. The groom had to spend his first night with his bride when she was shaven and dressed up as a boy, as if somehow to ease the transition from homosexual activity to heterosexual. On the island of Crete it appears to have been customary for a youth to stage a mock rape of another boy and then live with him in seclusion for several months before returning to the community. This sort of thing has reasonably implied to many historians some kind of initiation, and it is clear that the Spartan and Cretan customs were closely connected with the bonding of young men to create an effective army.

In the twentieth century, anthropological interpretations, inspired by Margaret Mead or Ruth Benedict, sought to apply the Greek pederasty through initiation rites. But even if this help in understanding the Spartans or the Cretans, it does little to explain the Athenians. For them, as all readers of Plato’s Symposium or Phaedrus know, education or what is now called the mentoring of a younger person by someone more experienced appears to be the principal objective in the love of an older man for a youth. Socrates’ infatuation with the handsome Alcibiades is the most famous example.

Modern discussion of this issue can be traced back to the great work on the Dorians (Die Dorier) by Karl Ostfried Müller in 1824. Both Sparta and Crete were populated by Greeks called Doriens, who were tradition-ally thought to have invaded the region long before, and hence the relevance of pederasty to a study of the Dorians. Through an English translation that Müller himself supervised, the book acquired currency in the Anglophone world, where it came to the attention of Oscar Wilde’s teacher J.P. Mahaffy in Ireland. Mahaffy naturally had a deep interest in what the Greeks were up to, is believed have created the name of Dorian Gray from Müller’s Dorians. Meanwhile Müller’s work was substantially enlarged by a true pioneer in the subject, Moritz Herrmann Eduard Meier, who, as Davidson writes, published an extensive analy- sis of Greek pederasty in a German encyclopedia as early as 1837. Among the few who have read this work it still commands respect.

The Germans continued their leadership in this field when, in 1907, Erich Beeth published a widely noticed arti- cle on Dorian boy-love (“Die dorische Kulturhochzeit” in which the native Greeks were relieved of responsibility for their regrettable sexual proclivities because the Dorians were imagined to have imported them. Despite a few in- substantial contributions in the course of the twentieth century, not much new was added until 1978 when a younger scholar of Oxford published his book Greek Homosexuality. Doron was universally recognized as one of the greatest living Greek scholars and had im- peccable credentials through his previous publications, including a widely re- spected commentary on Aristophanes’ play about Socrates, The Clouds. His laser-like intelligence, together with his deep knowledge of both classical Greek and Greek, transformed the entire subject. Bernard Knox reviewed Greek Homosexuality appraisingly in these pages and saw at once that it would be a classic.

Dover’s book was as clear as it was thorough. He documented the con- ventions of pederasty by appealing to the many vase paintings that depicted courtship and consumption. These had already been recog- nized by the twentieth century’s greatest authority on Greek vase-painting, Sir John Beazley, although that gentle- man had, Davidson writes, presented discoveries with characteristic hesitation and as illustrations to his Life in the Socratic Circle.” It was Beazley who first pointed out that the supposed lover (erastis) to a potential beloved (erome- nos) conventionally involved the older lover holding the boy’s hand with one hand and on the genitals with the other. He also realized that consummation normally took the form of the lover inserting his erect penis between the boy’s thighs. Dover described this...

G.W. Bowersock

The Warren cup, first century, said to be from near Jerusalem. Bought by the collector Edward Perry Warren in Rome in 1917, the silver cup was purchased by the British Museum and first put on public display in 2006.


“The New York Review, January 25, 1979: “The subject was one that needed to be exposed to the light of day; we can be thankful that it has been done by a great scholar and one who treats the subject without prejudice either way.”
kind of intercourse as “intercursal” (from the Latin “cursus” for leg), a word that has now become ubiquitous in works on Greek sexuality.

Intercursal intercourse is obviously the explanation for a notorious, longing for an adolescent thigh. This revelation put an end to earlier attempts to deny the existence of the great man’s words. Dover also dis- cussed at length our one substantial literary text on Greek homosexuality, the speech of the orator Aeschines against Timarchus in the fourth cen- tury BC. Since male prostitutes had no civic rights and were legally forbidden to speak in the assembly, Aeschines re- sponded to a prosecution launched by Timarchus with a demonstration that the man had sold his body as a male prostitute. This speech constitutes a rare and detailed glimpse into a world that is altogether different from ped- erasty, and it provides an inter- esting point of comparison.

Aeschines’ speech leaves no room for doubt that sex between adult males was prac- ticed but not always approved by the Greeks, and that homo- sexual sex for pay was ut- terly unacceptable — although it obviously occurred. On the other hand, the speech shows that the love of a boy was quite another matter. Aeschines declared that the opposition could not possibly impugn his own personal conduct, since it involved no more than consort- ing with boys in the gymnasia, and being the lover of many of them. Dover comments deli- cately that Aeschines‘ admis- sion “may come as a surprise to a modern reader.”

Unpaid, consensual sex be- tween Greek adults raises other questions. Ancient Greece was full of male couples, both legendary and historical, who appear to have bonded for military or heroic purposes. Alongside Harmodius and Aristogeiton were the Homeric Achilles and Patroclus, whose relationship was as puzzling in antiquity as it is now. Were they devoted friends or lovers? If the latter, Achilles seems to have been the initiator of the peder- asty of Sparta and Crete evidently led to bonds that strengthened the loyalty and courage of their soldiery long after the bloom of adolescence had faded. In fourth-century Thebes a famously successful unit of soldiers known as the Sacred Band consisted entirely of pairs of lovers, who fought together side by side and inspired each another. Their ultimate defeat at Chaeronea in 338 BC during the struggle with Philip of Macedon was commemorated by a mass grave. The skeletons of 255 war- riors found in the nineteenth century near Chaeronea are generally thought to be the remains of the Sacred Band, and we know from the traveler Pausa- nias that their memory was honored in later antiquity. So there was clearly space in ancient Greece for unpaid ho- mosexuality between adults.

Dover’s book set the gold standard for the entire subject of Greek ho- mosexuality, although most of it was devoted to pederasty, for which docu- mentation is richest. He included a few pages about lesbianism, but he had in- finitely less material because women were sequestered in Greek society and had no civic rights or obligations. Apart from Sparta, where there is some evidence for female nudity and lesbian attachments, images of women who are not figures from mythology generally show priestesses, slaves, or prostitutes. A single Attic vase depicts one woman masturbating another, but female homo- sexuality remains largely hidden. Lucian alludes to it in his Dialogues of the Physicians, and Herodas writes about it in one of his mimes, but Sappho is the most famous exemplar. For a long time historians discounted the obvious implications of the melting lyrics she addressed to other women until a frag- ment of papyri revealed that she had mentioned a didoi. Despite the exigu- ous evidence for female homosexuality Dover did what he could, but pederasty understandably dominated his work just as it dominated Greek society.

None of the longer books that have been published on Greek homosexu- ality in the thirty years after Dover comes close to his lucid, concise, and scholarly exposition. One of the longest and most diffuse of these later books is James Davidson’s The Greeks and Greek Love. In nearly eight hun- dred self-indulgent and often repetitive pages, Davidson, professor of classics and ancient history at the University of Warwick, England, not only reports much of what we know already about pederasty and other forms of homo- sexuality, including lesbianism, but he tries to move away from what he con- siders an excessive emphasis on sexual penetration to a broader picture of af- fective relationships. By pointing to relationships that go beyond mentoring and intercursal encounters, he tries to diminish Dover’s work. But even if we can agree with his denial that every- thing had “been settled once and for all by Sir Kenneth Dover in AD 1978,” he fails to undermine Dover’s immense authority.

Perhaps if Davidson had had a good editor and been compelled to reduce his sprawling text to a third of its present length, he could have described all too frequent personal asides (such as when he reached puberty), his book might have been more streamlined and better-edited product, and a more accurate one too. The very first illustration in the book, of a scene from Paestum in Italy, is misidentified as coming from beneath the Erech- theum on the Acropolis. The account of the Chaeomera burial of the Sacred Band has been labeled inaccurate in a recent article.7 Nevertheless, Davidson’s recent ac- count of pederasty under the guise of Greek love is undoubtedly timely, because it comes at a moment when Western nations have been profoundly shaken by rev- elations of child abuse. Many cases that do not involve physi- cal brutality have occurred in religious settings when an older man, usually a priest, has taken advantage of his role as a spirit- ual counselor to initiate sexual contact. The understandable shock that such conduct has stirred up here and abroad and the substantial payments that have been offered in mitigation serve to remind us just how far removed our morality is from that of the ancient Greeks.

Most instances of priestly child abuse would readily fall within the parameters of Greek pederasty. Child abuse is the elephant in the room in contemporary accounts of Greek sexual norms. Both the nature and the longevity of pederastic practice in antiq- uity, including its espousal by Romans as diverse as the poet Horace and the emperor Nero, to say nothing of Hadrian and his beloved Antinous, are as inescapable as the enthusiasm with which the Greeks borrowed from the Romans their unpalatable taste for bloody gladiatorial combat.

The short book by Andrew Lear and Eva Cantarella, Images of Ancient Greek Pederasty, could not be more different from Davidson’s massive volume, not only in size but in structure. It is so less well informed but much more lively in its aims by compar- ison with the scholarly splatter of The Greeks and Greek Love. Its abundant illustrations of acts that not long ago would have been considered strictly X- rated show how far we have advanced in canor. Many of the scenes that Beazley had wryly attributed to the Socratic circle now adorn the pages of Lear and Cantarella, with excruciat- ingly detailed verbal descriptions of exactly what is going on. The size and state of everyone’s body matters and unanswerable questions—such as why a boy who is submitting to intercursal intercourse does not have an erection himself—are solemnly addressed.

The real contribution of this volume is the posthumous publication of 7John Ma, “Chairenonia 338: Topography of Commemoration,” Joes of Hellenic Studies, Vol. 128 (2008), p. 70, n. 44.
a comprehensive register of all pedes- 
triotic scenes on Greek pottery that 
had been prepared by the late Keith 
DeVries. It appears as an appendix, 
accordance with permission granted 
by DeVries before his death, and it 
provides cross-references to the stan-
dard Brayley catalogs of Greek vases. 
The presence of the list underscores, 
however, the great weakness of the 
Lear-Cantarella volume, and that is 
its nearly total exclusion of images that 
do not appear on painted Greek pots. 
Although the book is called Images of 
Ancient Greek Pederasty, it contains, 
from the famous sculpture of 
Harmodius and Aristogiton, no im-
ages from sculpture, metalwork, gems, 
cameos, wall painting, or even reliefs 
on unpainted pottery. Since relevant 
painted vases and vase fragments 
come to an end in the fourth century BC, 
Lear and Cantarella provide nothing 
from subsequent periods. 

But the Greeks continued to practice 
pederasty, and, if Lear and Cantarella 
threw trouble to look at nonceramic 
images, they would have been amply 
rewarded. To take just one example, 
an unguent vase in bronze from Her-
stal in Belgium, first published in 
1900, depicts four sober philosophers in 
a bookish environment who repre-
sent in the object’s upper register in 
four vivid scenes of copulation with 
boys.7 Neither Davidson nor Lear and 

"See Corinne Bonnet’s discussion of 
Franz Cumont’s perplexity in publish-
ing this vase in 1940: “L’immortalité 
appartient au sage”. Franz Cumont et 
l’art érotique.” Dialogues d’Histoire An-

Cantarella mention this piece, and, as 
we will see, it is not the only important 
item that they have missed outside the 
pottery. Although the inscriptions at 
Beroea and Amphipolis reveal that 
some Greek communities made serious 
efforts to regulate pederasty, postclassi-
cal literature continues to be full of al-
usions to it. 

In her brief survey of opening of liter-
ary texts, Cantarella tries to provide a 
context for the images of pederasty to 
follow. She naturally cites Solon’s no-
torious poem, as well as the traditions 
about Sparta and Crete. She, like Lear, 
is not much interested in the later his-
tory of the subject, but she does cite the 
Greek poet Strato of Sardis, who wrote 
about a hundred epigrams in praise of 
pederastic love, under the proud title 
Mousa Paidikê (Muse of Boys). Many 
of these poems are as explicit as the 
vase images that Lear discusses. Since 
it is likely that Strato reflected, or per-
haps inspired, the rampant Helenism 
of the Roman imperial court, either 
under Nero or Hadrian (dates are un-
certain), his testimony has some bear-
ing on the efflorescence of pederastic 
literature and activity in that period, 
to say nothing of the Herstal vase. 
The raunchy but stylish Satyricon of 
Petronius, written in the first cen-
tury AD, is a prime exhibit, but equally 
over are the lyric verses of the Latin 
poet Statius in praise of Eaininos, the 
beloved eunuch-boy of the emperor 
Domitian. Hadrian’s infatuation with 
Antinous led to the dissemination of 
this languorous youth’s image through-
out the Roman Empire, as well as to 
his divinization after death and the 
renaming of an Egyptian city as Anti-
nopolis. Hadrian’s Greek contem-
poraries at Plutarch wrote both of the 
devotion to his cult of Antinous on 
love, the Amatorius, in which he 
calmly addressed the competing claims 
of pederastic and conquest love. Al-
though he had no reproach for those 
who preferred boys, his own prefer-
ence, for which he ascribed wrongly, 
was marriage with a woman. No wonder 
the Christians warned to Plutarch. 
The fashionable pederasty of elite 
Romans, who accepted, as Cicero had 
not, the Greeks’ approval of the love of 
boys, had a consciously vivid reprise 
in the late nineteenth and early twentieth 
centuries. The so-called Uranians in 
England tried, under suitable cover, 
to recapture the pederastic atmosphere 
of Plato, and the poet Stefan George did 
something similar in Germany with 
his famous circle that honored his “ex-
perience” with the boy Maximin. Among 
the Uranians was the most im-
portant collector of Greek erotic 
in modern times, a man without whom 
many of the images in Davidson and 
in Lear and Cantarella would be un-
known. This was an expatriate Ameri-
an, Edward Perry Warren, from a 
Boston family whose wealth derived 
from the paper manufacturers S.D. 
Warren & Company and predecessors 
of the present Scott Paper Company. 

Warren set himself up at Lewes in 
Sussex, where he brought together 
both young men and Greek antiquities 
in a refined and opulent atmosphere. 
He and his friend John Marshall col-
lected Greek objects aggressively in 
Rome, principally between 1892 
and 1902 but also later.8 Much of their 
collection went, either by sale or gift, to 
the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The 
erotica lay stored in the dark for 
half a century until it was finally acces-
sioned and catalogued in the 1950s. But 
the pieces had been known to Beazley 
through his personal acquaintance with 
Warren, and when they reappeared in 
the 1960s, accompanied by an article 
by Emily Vermeule on “Some Erotica 
in the Boston Museum,” there was no 
turning back.9 It is astonishing that 
Warren finds no place at all in the 
books under review. 

It is even more astonishing that both 
books omit what are arguably the most 
impressive of all images of ancient 
Greek pederasty, the scenes on the two 
sides of a magnificent silver cup 
Warren bought in Rome in 1911. The 
piece was said to have come from near 
Jerusalem. In the early 1950s it was 
denied entry into the United States, on 
the grounds of immorality, as part of a sale 
from Warren’s estate. But when its exis-
tence finally became publicly known in 
the more liberated 1990s it was recog-
nized for the masterpiece it is, and £1.8 
million were raised for the British Mu-
seum to keep it in Britain. It was first 
put on public display in 2006, accom-
panied by a sixty-four-page booklet by 
the museum’s curator Dytir Williams. 
The failure of Davidson and of 
Cantarella and Lear to take note of this 
important piece reveals their overall 
neglect of postclassical and nonceramic 
art. The Warren cup, through its superb 
craftsmanship, takes us directly into the 
Hellenic world of the Roman Empire in 
the mid-first century AD. Both books 
depict anachronistic intercourse 
together with a man and a boy. In one 
scene the two participants are 
behaving as if they were in love, and the 
passive partner sits astride the other 
while holding on to something resembling 
a subway strap to secure his position. 
In the other the boy is conspicuously 
younger and lies sideways across the 
lap of the older partner (illustrations on 
pages 10 and 12). Since both Davidson 
and Lear-Cantarella have much to say 
about a classical vase in the British 
Museum that shows a boy about to sit 
down upon the erect penis of a seated 
man, it would have obviously been 
helpful to mention the sitting scene on 
the Warren cup, which is likewise in the 
British Museum, not only as a parallel 
but as proof that such a scene could still 
be appreciated on a luxury object after 
many centuries. 

Since 1931, when A. E. Housman pub-
lished in Latin his pathbreaking study of 
ancient sexual behavior in a German 
journal and his conclusions have 
been sensitive to the different at-
titudes of Greeks and Romans toward 
active and passive roles in pederastic 
intercourse. In general a male could 
assume the active role without any dim-
imation of virility, but not in the passive 
role. All this view has necessarily been 
measured by the literature and images of 
Greek pederasty. For a boy under eighteen or 
even an ephie between eighteen and twenty, 
the passive role, if consensual, 
seems to have been part of the process 
of growing up and did not reflect on his 
masculinity. The preference that the 
classical vases suggest for intercurricular 
intercourse look like a way of avoid-
ing more intrusive sexual acts, but of 
course without any direct testimony we 
will never know. To judge from Solon, 
men found male adolescent thighs par-
ticularly seductive, but the intercurricular 
option did not close off others. 

We will also never know how many 
liaisons with boys ripened into lifelong 
attachments. Some clearly did, 
but probably without a sexual component 
as often as with one. Equally, we have 
learned from Aeschines that an erastês 
had no problem in moving from one 
boy to another without any semblance 
of the slightest opprobrium, provided 
that no money changed hands. Yet in 
later centuries, cities can be somewhat 
open to access the gymnasia and 
protecting their youth from anything 
shameful. Then we find the Warren cup 
and the public pederasty of Roman emperors. 

This came at the very time that 
Plu-
tarch, who was friendly with many 
of the leading figures of his day, could 
launch his strong plea for the joys 
of conjugal love even as he offered a sym-
pathetic account of pederastic love. 
The sexual life of the ancient Greeks was 
as variegated and inventive as a contem-
donent culture. Yet it was neither consistent 
nor uniform. To this day it stubbornly 
resists the application of modern 
decides, and yet it had its own principles 
of decency. In sex, as in so much else, 
the ancient Greeks were unique. 

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David Son, Bachelors of Art: Edward Perry Warren and the Lewes House 
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found the material too explicit even in 

The Nine-Month Woman.