

Activity 3. Same-Sex Relationships in the Ancient Mediterranean World

Instructions: You have been invited to be student representatives on your state's Global history curriculum committee. According to the agenda for the first meeting you will attend, there will be a discussion over whether same-sex relationships in Ancient Greece be discussed in the Global history curriculum in high schools. The media and public have already been debating the issue and it will probably be a very heated meeting. To prepare you for the meeting, examine the edited excerpts from the writings of Plato and Plutarch and answer the questions that follow. Be prepared to debate the question: Should the high school global history curriculum include discussion of the importance of same-sex male relationships in ancient Greece?

A. Plato Describes Love between Men

Source: Symposium by Plato Written 360 BC Translated by Benjamin Jowett
<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/symposium.html> (accessed June 4, 2010)

Background: In ancient Greece (1200 to 300 BC), same-sex emotional and sexual relationships between men were not only accepted, but they were honored. Usually the relationships were between adult men and adolescent boys and the older men served as mentors. Greek heroes such as Hercules and Achilles were believed to have male lovers. Plato (428-348 BC), a Greek philosopher, had a character named Phaedrus discuss same-sex relationships between men in the book *The Symposium* (360 BC).

Phaedrus: "For I know not any greater blessing to a young man who is beginning life than a virtuous lover or to the lover than a beloved youth. If there were only some way of contriving that a state or an army should be made up of lovers and their loves, they would be the very best governors of their own city, abstaining from all dishonor, and emulating one another in honor; and when fighting at each other's side, although a mere handful, they would overcome the world. For what lover would not choose rather to be seen by all mankind than by his beloved, either when abandoning his post or throwing away his arms? He would be ready to die a thousand deaths rather than endure this. Or who would desert his beloved or fail him in the hour of danger? The worst coward would become an inspired hero, equal to the bravest, at such a time; Love would inspire him."

Questions

1. How were same-sex relationships between men treated in ancient Greece?
2. Why does Phaedrus believe that male lovers make the best soldiers?

B. The Sacred Band of Thebes

Source: Plutarch, *Life of Pelopidas* translated by John Dryden
<http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/pelopida.html> (accessed June 7, 2010)

Background: The Sacred Band was organized by Gorgidas, the commander of the army of the Greek city-state of Thebes in 378 BC. It was an elite squad made up of 150 male couples. In 375 BC and 371 BC the Sacred Band defeated much larger Spartan armies. Philip of Macedonia defeated the Sacred Band in 338 BC at the Battle of Chaeronea where all of its members were killed. In *Life of Pelopidas*, Plutarch (46-120 AD), an early Greek and Roman historian, wrote about the Sacred Band of Thebes.

"Gorgidas first formed the Sacred Band of three hundred chosen men to be guards for the citadel. It was composed of young men attached to each other by personal affection. For men of the same tribe or family little value one another when dangers press; but a band cemented by friendship grounded upon love is never to be broken, and

invincible; since the lovers, ashamed to be base in sight of their beloved, and the beloved before their lovers, willingly rush into danger for the relief of one another. Nor can that be wondered at since they have more regard for their absent lovers than for others present; as in the instance of the man who, when his enemy was going to kill him, earnestly requested him to run him through the breast, that his lover might not blush to see him wounded in the back. It is stated that it was never beaten till the battle at Chaeronea: and when Philip, after the fight, took a view of the slain, and came to the place where the three hundred that fought his phalanx lay dead together, he wondered, and understanding that it was the band of lovers, he shed tears and said, ‘Perish any man who suspects that these men either did or suffered anything that was base.’”

Questions

1. What was the Sacred Band of Thebes?
2. Why does Philip of Macedonia believe the Sacred Band of Thebes, although defeated, should be honored?