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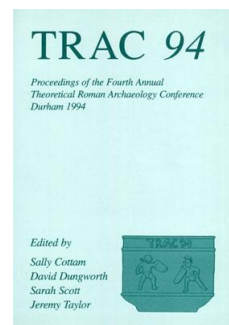
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13. An archaeology of homosexuality? Perspectives from the Classical world¹

by Keith Matthews

This paper will examine the evidence for a past male homosexual behaviour and explore a method of identifying that behaviour by archaeological means. Using Classical literature, particularly Roman, as a case study, it will show that a recognisable gay subculture existed beyond mainstream society which ought to have had its own distinct types of material culture. It will present a theoretical model of male homosexuality as a distinct and oppressed subculture, and will finally examine a number of instances where archaeologists might begin to look for evidence of that behaviour in the material culture of the Roman Empire.

In recent years archaeologists have begun to debate feminist, indigenous and other alternative interpretations of archaeology (Hodder 1991: 156). In particular, so-called post-processual archaeology has sought to distance itself from normative trends, in which societies are presented as homogeneous entities driven by quasi-scientific and deterministic laws (Shanks & Tilley 1987: 45).

This is an entirely healthy trend, since human experiences as individuals within society suggest that they are not driven by forces beyond their control, that personal behaviour choices do exist and that, most importantly, people do not belong to monolithic social groups. All people belong to a multiplicity of what have been termed 'subcultures'; archaeologists, for instance, belong to an archaeological subculture with its own distinct rituals and behaviour patterns. As a white middle-class English house-owning male the author belongs to the dominant subculture of British society — as do most archaeologists — but at the same time, as a gay man, he belongs to an oppressed minority.

This variety of personal experience in which different subcultures vie for dominance within the individual may well be a major driving force in society. Every minute of the day people are forced to make choices which derive from conflicts of interest between the subcultures to which they belong. It is evident that every historic society has had its subcultures and these ought to be identifiable in the archaeological record.

Culture and subculture

As a means of analysing societies, subcultures have been little studied. They are often seen as a modern phenomenon, with emphases on such diverse groups such as teenagers, ethnic minorities or New Age travellers. However, it is immediately clear that these three throwaway examples all use material culture available to all members of society in subtly different ways. In this case they will be archaeologically recognisable. This should encourage archaeologists to examine the possibility of identifying past subcultures through their material remains; the assemblage from every archaeological site, every pit on a site or any structure on a site is distinct from every other. In the past archaeologists have sought to establish similarities and

patterns: this paper claims that the time has now come to look for deviation from patterns which are now very well understood indeed.

Subcultures are an important but little-recognised element in every society, except perhaps the simplest. As soon as human communities exceed the nuclear family group, tensions may arise between separate power-groups; any groups which are not dominant will form embryonic subcultures. Such groups can focus around any feature which gives them self-identification or they can focus around an identity imposed from outside; it is even probable that institutionalised oppression can reinforce subcultural identity. This is how the modern homosexual male defines himself (Freer 1987: 57; Giddens 1993: 198): his sexuality is what enables him to identify with other members of his subculture, and gives that subculture a common 'purpose' or historical trajectory. There is evidence for a distinct homosexual subculture in London as early as the 1720s (Weeks 1991: 202).

The post-processual interest in subcultures and minorities has been criticised as encouraging the proliferation of 'unconstrained multiple readings of the past' (Kohl 1993: 15). Classic sociological interpretations view subcultures as a form of 'deviant' behaviour (Hebidge 1979, 90): however, this seriously undervalues the variety of expression found even within normative, mainstream culture. In any but the simplest societies there are social groups which fall outside the mainstream elite culture, and an interest in these groups will not attempt to rewrite archaeology and history from their viewpoint but will seek to integrate the variety of experience of marginalised subgroups into our understanding of how societies functioned as a whole.

Literary sources from many periods of European history make it clear that distinct male homosexual subcultures formed a well-known component of society, even if they were not always officially tolerated. The same cannot be said for lesbian subcultures: this may be because for most of the historic period literature was produced both by and for men and lesbian subcultures were either invisible to them or of no interest or it may be because lesbians have not networked in the same way as gay men and have therefore not created distinct subcultures. This is clearly a question which deserves further examination, but which cannot be discussed here for reasons of space.

The history of historical research into homosexuality

Early historical research into homosexuality may be said to have begun during the nineteenth century with a tentative examination of Greek 'homosexuality' (Symonds 1883). This pioneering work was effectively suppressed by its author through a limited printing of only ten copies. Early in the twentieth century similar work was carried out by psychologists of sexual 'abnormalities', but their work was often ignored. Indeed, it was not until the rise of the Gay Liberation movement in San Francisco and other American cities in the late 1960s that anyone looked in depth at the history of homosexuality.

Kenneth Dover's *Greek Homosexuality*, published in 1978, was a milestone in historical research: for the first time a scholar outside radical gay politics examined the evidence for homosexual behaviour within a past society in which its existence could not be questioned. Perhaps spurred on by this pioneering work, serious research during the 1980s — often by heterosexual historians — began to examine the evidence for past homosexual behaviour, and indeed of sexuality in general; the work of Michel Foucault (1987, 1990) stands out in this respect. Much of the debate during the 1980s and 1990s has focused on the existence of homosexuality as a universally-shared human experience against its role as a culturally-defined

behaviour pattern. Both extremes acknowledge the reality of homosexual behaviour. The former position regards the behaviour as one which might be genetically or psychologically defined and which has found expression in a variety of forms, depending on the constraints of the society in which it was practised. The second sees the term 'homosexual' as referring to a distinct lifestyle choice, available only after the definition of the term in 1865 and its introduction to the English language by 1892 (Halperin 1989: 38). For the sake of convenience, and in order not to enter into the debate between those who see homosexuality as a genetically- or psychologically-determined sexuality and those who regard it as culturally-defined, the position taken here is that the universality of certain traits of homosexual subcultures through time and across the world is more indicative of a non-cultural and biological explanation for the behaviour. In other words, although individual subcultures are historically situated, homosexual behaviour is essentially ahistorical and universal, a biologically-derived phenomenon (or given).

There is little doubt that most — if not all — societies have witnessed expressions of same-sex behaviour (Giddens 1993: 196). Classical Greece is the best-known, indeed notorious, example of such behaviour ('the unspeakable vice of the Greeks': Forster 1972: 50) although the meaning of this behaviour can be debated, as will be seen. The attitudes of individual societies and subcultures within them towards such behaviours varied enormously (e.g. Mishima 1972: 71; Le Roy Ladurie 1980: 148; Miles 1989: 58), as indeed it still does within modern Western society.

Classical homosexuality

Greek sources celebrate the erotic appeal of male youths to older men. A vast body of poetry celebrates this love, much of it collected by Strato in the second century AD as the *Μουσὴ Παῖδική* and incorporated into the tenth-century anthology of Greek epigrams collected by Kephalaos (Jay 1981: 20). Poets moved easily between pederastic and heterosexual subjects (as, for instance, Asklepiades of Samos, born c 320 BC) and a poem by Alkaios of Messene (fl. 200 BC) makes it clear that a boy was no longer desirable once he had reached maturity (Greek Anthology 12.30 in Jay 1981: 121).

Poetry, rather than the prescriptive texts employed by Foucault (1987: 38), demonstrates the ease with which the subject could be discussed. However, it must be remembered that this poetry was the product of an elite, and that the behaviour it describes may have been confined to that elite. Other sources make it clear that the phenomenon cannot be regarded as true homosexuality, but was rather culturally-sanctioned paedophilia. The youth was expected to remain unaroused by the advances of the older man, and to pity him (Dover 1978: 88); the older man was expected to be fired with passion for the youth's beauty and vigour, to shower him with gifts and to oversee his induction into adult society (Fig 13.1). Seen in these terms, the experience was a rite de passage rather than a wholly sexual behaviour pattern (Keuls 1985: 276). Plutarch even went so far as to declare that the only true love was that between a man and a youth (quoted in Miles 1989: 68). True adult homosexuality did exist, though, and was not regarded at all favourably (Keuls 1985: 291). Passivity in penetrative sexual acts was especially disliked (Foucault 1987: 194), and those found guilty of it could be deprived of their citizen status under Athenian law (Coote 1983: 31).

The Roman world also acknowledged homosexual behaviour, again celebrating the love of older men for youths (e.g. Catullus 1966: poem 99²; Tibullus 1972: poem 1.iv; Petronius



Fig 13.1. Sexually aroused man with affectionate but unaroused child. From an Attic Red Figure Cup of the fifth century BC, now in Oxford (ARV 378, 137).

1977, *Satyricon* 85–6; Foucault 1990: 196). Catullus is often cited as an example of the tolerance shown towards bisexual behaviour, but his Poem 16 contains an elegant disclaimer against his poems being read autobiographically: he states that while a poet's behaviour ought to be decent, what he writes about need not (Quinn 1970: 144). With the Empire, though, toleration of these activities declined; the Spintrian perverts Tiberius is said to have collected around him in Capri and the other youths he is alleged to have seduced (Suetonius 1979: *Tiberius* 43–4) are given by Suetonius as instances of sexual perversion. Whatever the historical truth of these pieces of salacious gossip, Suetonius clearly relates them for their shock value because they were not regarded as proper behaviour in his day. Similarly, the relationship between Hadrian — Suetonius's employer — and Antinous was regarded by the Roman aristocracy with considerable distaste (Historia Augusta 1976, *Hadrian* 14). Foucault (1990: 228) has linked this growing intolerance of homosexual behaviour with the 'invention' of heterosexuality in the Roman world, itself perhaps connected with a growth of ideas about male pre-marital virginity and chastity.

However, there are sources which are explicit about an entirely different form of same-sex behaviour, between two adult men, and most sources express disgust (e.g. Juvenal 1974, *Satire* 9; Suetonius 1979, *Gaius* 36; Suetonius 1979, *Galba* 21; Petronius 1977, *Satyricon* 23). Nero underwent a gay marriage ceremony first with the youth Sporus, whom he castrated, evidently to make him the 'female' partner, and later with the freedman Doryphorus, with the emperor this time assuming the passive role (Suetonius 1979, *Nero* 28–9); Elagabalus also married a man, named Zoticus, the emperor taking the 'female' role (Historia Augusta 1976, *Heliogabalus* 10). Galba was described as *pathicus*, the passive partner in a homosexual relationship (Suetonius 1979, *Galba* 21). The role of the supposed passive partner was thought particularly subversive and horrible (Juvenal 1974, *Satire* 2). Horace's second *Satire* describes an incident of the gay gang-rape of an adulterer (Horatius & Persius 1973: 33). It was not until 533 that the emperor Justinian sought to outlaw homosexual behaviour, though, and his motives appear to have been more political than moral: the law was one of a group aimed at eliminating political rivals and trouble-makers 'to whom no crime could be imputed' (Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, quoted in Coote 1983: 20), and was a source of considerable protest at the time, not least from the church.

Ascetic forms of the Christian religion inherited the growing Roman disgust (together with a general disgust for all matters sexual promulgated by Paul), which was reinforced by its background in Jewish homophobia (Leviticus XIX.22; although, for a dissenting view, see Boswell 1980: 105). The pseudepigraphical Epistle of Barnabas (chapter X) makes the curious claim that eating hare induces paedophilia, whilst eating hyaena is a cause of homosexuality and gender inversion (Staniforth 1968: 207). This sort of irrational prejudice has continued to be a dominant source of popular attitudes towards homosexuality in the West. It is noteworthy, though, that sodomy, *sodomitia*, was not considered a greater sin than 'natural fornication', *fornicatio naturalis*, in the Penitential of Gildas, a sixth-century British monk (Gildas 1978: 146). Islam shares similar roots with Christianity, and has continued the tradition of intolerance to adult homosexuality, although it has also inherited the eastern tradition of paedophilia.

The difficulty with Classical historical sources is that they are the productions of an elite. The audience of Strato, for instance, was composed of the liberal aristocratic litterati of the cosmopolitan society of Imperial Rome. They may well have enjoyed the wit and elegance of his collection without taking them seriously as autobiographical statements of sexuality. Poems

12.17 and 12.245 of the Greek Anthology (translated as *Heterosexual Poem* and *Vive la Différence* by Teddy Hogge in Jay 1981: 272 and 276) suggest a humour and irony in Strato's treatment not immediately apparent in the remainder of his work.

On the other hand, there are hints of men living what would today be recognised as a *gay* lifestyle. Juvenal's second Satire includes descriptions of men who would be at home in the clubs and bars of any late twentieth-century European or American city. These are the men who enjoy the company not of pubescent boys but of other men, who occasionally cross-dress, who are sometimes 'camp'. They are not the producers or the audience of poetry like Strato's nor, indeed, its subjects. Juvenal's account is not a sympathetic one, and he concludes with an appeal to ancient virtues to end this decadence, the last recourse of the moral bigots of every age.

The clues provided by Roman authors suggest that the homosexual males of Classical Rome were part of a well-known subculture. Some of them practised cross-dressing, presumably in private. The scandals of Nero's and Elagabalus's cross-dressing (Suetonius 1979, *Nero* 21; *Historia Augusta* 1976, *Heliogabalus* 26) are well-known because they were public figures who did not restrict their sexual behaviours to their private lives. Public figures in the twentieth century have been no more immune to revelations of this kind: the similarity between Nero or Elagabalus and J Edgar Hoover springs instantly to mind. The public's appetite for lurid details about the sex lives of the famous is well-known, as the controversy surrounding the death of the English MP Steven Milligan in February 1994 demonstrates.

A model of homosexual behaviour

A theoretical model of homosexual behaviour in a society which does not sanction it may be constructed using the experiences of *gay* men in the first three quarters of the twentieth century. This period is useful because, for most of the world, male homosexuality was then a crime and because there have been a number of recent studies by historians of the period which frequently employ oral evidence and can thus be regarded as much as anthropological case-studies as historical (Heger 1980; Chauncey 1991; Haeberle 1991; Weeks 1991; Shilts 1993).

The main recurring feature of such studies is the essentially furtive nature of most homosexual behaviour (Weinberg & Williams 1974: 83). In only a few instances is it open, and even then it is the subject of scorn, fear or downright hatred by outsiders (Haeberle 1991: 374; Steakley 1991: 255). Because of official condemnation, *gay* men have needed to disguise their behaviour, and also generally their orientation (Weinberg & Williams 1974: 198). The secret nature of homosexual liaisons has led to the linking of the subculture with the criminal underworld; this has been celebrated most forcefully by Jean Genet (1976; 1977). There have also been a few societies where love between two men has been praised, but this is generally contrasted with the disgusting sexual behaviour.

Gay men have resorted to a number of devices to make themselves mutually recognisable whilst remaining hidden from the rest of the world. This can take the form of dress codes involving clothing, jewellery, hairstyles, make-up and tattoos, although such codes may need to be relatively fluid, subtle or ambiguous, otherwise they become readable by heterosexuals; in some cases, where the *gay* man wishes to identify himself as such publicly, his dress code can be upfront and over-the-top, as with the comedian Julian Clary. These codes usually need to be relatively complex and sophisticated, though: coloured handkerchiefs, the position of the belt loop from which keys are hung, and the number and positions of earrings have all been used to indicate the precise sexual preferences of *gay* men.

Many gay men have adopted highly feminised behaviour patterns in private, and occasionally also in public (Sanderson 1986: 13). This is most commonly found among the submissive partners (the 'passive' partners in penetrative sex), but can extend to the 'active' partner. For instance, it has been common for gay men to adopt female names, refer to each other as 'she' (Genet 1976: 78; Lahr 1986: 111) and, on occasion, dress as women (Chauncey 1991: 297). Where this occurs it is not true transvestism or transsexuality (Sanderson 1986: 14): the gay man does not seek to make himself female, or even to appear female, but rather adopts and exaggerates the female role to distinguish himself as different from the heterosexual male. Sometimes the gay man adopts an exaggeratedly male form of dress and behaviour (Genet 1977: 239; Greig 1987: 134); a recent expression of this has been the 'clone', who has cropped hair, a thick moustache, wears a lumberjack shirt, tight jeans and sometimes — when visiting a bar or club — a hard hat. Both these behaviour types are probably a response to the lack of independent and positive homosexual role models (Weinberg & Williams 1974: 83).

These behaviour-types can find expression in the material culture of the homosexual. There is often a propensity for wearing jewellery, especially that not worn by heterosexual males, such as earrings or bracelets. Many gay men are more fastidious about their appearance than heterosexual men, and consequently may dress more stylishly (Rechy 1971: 90); this is easier if they have never married and do not have a family to support, and thus have more disposable income for expensive and fashionable clothes than heterosexuals.

Another means of aiding contact between gay men has been to adopt recognised meeting-places (known today as 'cruising-grounds'), such as public parks (Rechy 1971: 114), heathland and sand dunes, particularly at times when these places are not frequented by others. There can be bars or cafes where gay men meet (Silverstein & White 1977: 134); occasionally they provide back-rooms for casual sexual encounters (Hamilton 1994: 20). Public toilets ('cottages' in England, 'tea rooms' in the USA) (Lahr 1986: 105; Sanderson 1986: 38; White 1988: 143) and saunas (Rechy 1971: 263) are notorious locations for furtive gay sex. There can be little doubt that the secretive nature of most sexual encounters would add a thrill of danger, reinforcing the wish to repeat the experience.

A further feature which recurs in homosexual behaviour is the relative rarity of long-term relationships (although there have been well-known exceptions, such as Sir Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, whose relationship spanned over fifty years). Because such relationships are forbidden, they need to be hidden from society in general and must be carefully disguised. The deception involved may make relationships stressful to the point where they are not worth considering. A recent readership survey of *Gay Times* revealed that only 28% of its readers was involved in a live-in relationship, a low figure which surprised the editorial staff (Smith 1994: 24).

This lack of opportunity to undertake successful long-term commitments to a single partner means that the gay man is perceived as highly promiscuous (Sanderson 1986: 45). This is a source of further condemnation from mainstream society, where marriage and the rearing of children are presented as the true meaning of human existence, and the family as the basic unit of society.

There are other aspects of gay behaviour which also might be detectable in material culture. Decoration in the home, for instance, may include objects and paintings with an overtly or covertly sexual homoerotic content: the paintings of Caravaggio are an excellent example of barely covert homoerotic art (see, for instance, his *Victorious Love* (Gash 1988: 77)). Such

artefacts need to be sufficiently ambiguous if they are to be inoffensive whilst remaining 'readable' by those in the know (e.g. Shilts 1993: 50).

The final point to be made is that gay subcultures are an essentially urban phenomenon (Le Roy Ladurie 1980: 147; Smith 1994: 24). Many gay men have migrated to large towns and cities from rural communities and small towns in order to meet other gay men (Sanderson 1986: 41). In addition, the relative anonymity of the individual in a large town helps to keep his sexuality a secret from colleagues and, more importantly, neighbours.

Archaeological evidence for homosexual activity

There is little concrete and indisputable archaeological evidence for homosexual activity. The earliest potential evidence comes from a scene incised on rock at Addaura (Sicily), which dates



Fig 13.2. Epipalaeolithic scene from Addaura, Sicily. It appears to show a ritual involving sodomy and masked dancing figures (after Collins 1976).

from c. 12,000 bp and appears to depict two male figures surrounded by a group of dancers (Fig 13.2). The men are prone and both have erect penises; the uppermost seems to be sodomising the lower. Interpretation of this scene from the Upper Palaeolithic has rarely been undertaken. It has been suggested, for instance, that the two men are bound, perhaps undergoing a circumcision ritual, and that the penis of the lower is in fact a wooden stake (Collins 1976: 158). Such an interpretation is not necessary. The ritual nature of the scene is clear enough, and it may be suggested that the two men are engaged in a ritual sex act, regardless of their own personal sexual identities. Shamanism in modern hunter-gatherer communities is frequently associated with gender inversion, bisexuality and homosexuality (Sjöo & Mor 1987: 67), so its identification in an extinct community ought to occasion no surprise.

Greek vases show clear evidence for homosexual activity but, as already explained, this is generally not true adult male homosexuality but a ritualised form of socially-sanctioned paedophilia. The existence of adult male couples is, however, occasionally hinted at on vases (Fig 13.3), and is well-attested in literature (Foucault 1987: 194). It is noteworthy that the couple shown in Fig 13.3, although of roughly the same ages, are beardless young adults. It is also clear that, despite official condemnation, many pederastic relationships continued well into the maturity of the younger partner because both partners found a great deal of satisfaction — both emotional and sexual — in their relationship. Similarly, the literary evidence for Roman homosexuality has already been discussed, and suggests that here we might find archaeological evidence of its existence.

Beyond representations in art (Cooper 1986: 1ff), though, there is little unequivocal archaeological evidence for homosexual behaviour. This is clearly not because such behaviour and associated subcultures did not exist — the literary sources for the Roman world demonstrate that they certainly did — but because most archaeologists have not looked for them. The subculture of archaeologists has been dominated by men who, for better or for worse, have tended to be macho (even if they are not always necessarily heterosexual). Much as we may laugh at the crass depiction of an archaeologist provided by Indiana Jones as a romantic, swashbuckling adventurer, we do not have to look far to see similar, if less exaggerated, behaviour among our colleagues.

Few archaeologists can have questioned the sexual behaviours of the societies they seek to reconstruct because they have had no need to question their own. For homosexuals, though, the teenage years are an even more difficult time than for heterosexuals, when hormones compete with heterosexual culture for dominance; some follow their biochemical instincts, but others doom themselves to a life of miserable conformity with normative society.

Gay material culture in the Roman world

The model of repressed gay subcultures presented above has outlined three basic areas where evidence for their material culture might be sought in the archaeological record: clothing (including personal adornment), meeting-places and homoerotic artefacts. It is clear that it will be impossible to demonstrate that the archaeological material is proof of the existence of a gay subculture, but a demonstration that the evidence can support such an interpretation should encourage us to look at it in greater depth.

The identification of clothing on archaeological sites is rarely possible, except in waterlogged conditions; even then, it is difficult to ascertain the precise ownership and function of the clothes. Only with burials is it easy to link an individual with specific artefacts (and even



Fig 13.3. An affectionate couple: both are young adult and both sexually aroused. This is quite contrary to the rules of Greek paedophilia and demonstrates that the phenomenon was rather more complex than is usually assumed. From a Symposium Cup (Kylix) of the fifth century BC by Peithinos, now in Berlin (ARV 115, 2).

then there is the problem that it is the living who choose the objects to accompany the dead into the grave). However, such objects might show some evidence, for instance, of 'female' grave-goods accompanying a small number of male skeletons, although the definition of what constitutes 'female' objects must be subject to rigorous scrutiny. Local practice must be taken into consideration, as personal adornment may have been used quite differently in different parts of the Empire, and we know that different ethnic groups showed considerable variation in patterns of jewellery use. Syrian and certain north African males, for example, are known to have used earrings, a practice which Italian Romans found 'effeminate'. We should be particularly cautious in projecting characteristics of gay subculture derived from Roman literature onto areas distant from the core of the core of the Empire, such as Britain.

One clear example from Britain of what does appear to be a Romano-British practice is the use of bracelets as a feminine jewellery-type. The large sample of burials from the Lankhills cemetery, Winchester, indicates that, where the skeletons can be sexed, bracelets only ever accompany female burials (Clarke 1979: 152). In most Romano-British cemeteries where grave-goods are found, this observation holds true, as at Dunstable (Matthews et al. 1981), which suggests that variation from this pattern will not be regionally-influenced. However, there is a case from a cemetery at Cirencester in which a male in his late forties or early fifties was accompanied by a bracelet, inhumation 179 (McWhirr et al. 1982: 129). The evidence of Lankhills further suggests that only women would usually wear necklaces made from beads; however, male burial 203, aged 23–25, from Trentholme Drive, York, was associated with a necklace composed of five red glass beads (Warwick 1968: 138). Does this mean that those responsible for burying these individuals perceived them as highly-feminised? This is still a long way from identifying them as gay, of course. On the other hand, is the identification of the skeletons as 'male' an error? Is this a grey area of palaeopathology in which the sexing of skeletal material becomes little more than a dubious pastime?

A recent controlled experiment, using skeletons from named coffins from the crypt at Spitalfields church, London, suggests that the sexing of skeletons using the usual criteria is generally reliable (Molleson & Cox 1993: 21). So, if burials 179 from Cirencester and 203 from Trentholme Drive were male, and it is likely that they were, does their apparent possession of feminine jewellery actually set them apart from other males in their respective cemeteries?

Archaeologists are accustomed to identifying structures and other elements of urban landscapes, so the recognition of meeting-places might be possible. Gymnasia were well-known places where a man might expect to meet youths; there they were naked, and their bodies could be admired without shame. Strato's poetry includes a number of epigrams on themes which revolve around the gymnasium. Juvenal also makes it clear that private houses and taverns were places for meeting, pairing and coupling.

The possibilities of identifying such places on purely archaeological grounds are limited. Without graffiti, frescoes or other 'documentary' evidence public places are not susceptible to this kind of analysis. However, archaeologists ought not to forget the secondary uses to which public buildings can be put. In the twentieth century parts of the walls of the Roman fortress at Chester have been a well-known cruising area after dark; when the tradition arose cannot be established, and the possibility that its roots go back to the Roman period on the walls of towns throughout the Empire should not be overlooked.

However, the private dwelling is much more easily examined in this way. This paper has already drawn attention to the possibility of artefacts which may be homoerotically ambiguous:

objects which are sufficiently innocuous to outsiders but which, nevertheless, offer clues to those able to read them.

One particular class of object which might strike the modern gay man as possibly significant is the phallus. Associated with the god Priapus, these objects were relatively common in the Roman world, being found as *tintinabula*, lamps and simply as decoration on other objects. They have often been 'read' by archaeologists as no more than that, although Percival Turnbull (1978) has claimed that in Britain some examples demonstrate the existence of a number of phallic cults without discussing among which social groups these cults might have been popular. It is possible that their presence — combined with other less tangible clues — could signify that the owner was part of the gay community. A tufa phallus from Pompeii (dell'Orto & Varone 1992: 144) seems to have been placed on the facade of a house, and there are parallels from the city placed at the entrances to shops. While the traditional explanation of the phallus as a good luck talisman may be correct, it may have had other potential meanings to those who used it. A recent discussion on the 'meaning' of material culture (Shanks & Tilley 1987: 92) has pointed out that the primary function of an object is not the only potential function, and that archaeologists should recognise the many different possible 'readings' of their data which can exist.

Conclusion

Without the literary evidence for a thriving gay subculture in Rome in the first century AD it would be hard to characterise it from its archaeological remains, if it were recognisable at all. It is only by extrapolating details from recent gay subcultures to produce a generalised model that we can begin to search for archaeological evidence of the Roman subculture. This will entail far more research into poorly-published sites using a literature written in virtually every European language than can be attempted for a short paper.

However, it has been shown that there are means of looking at the data which raise questions about the sexual attitudes of past societies. Detailed research into burial practices will undoubtedly reveal more examples of curious discrepancies between the gender of the body and the objects associated with it: this is without doubt the best means of identifying individuals who were perceived as belonging to a gender which was not their biological sex, although the precise meaning of this phenomenon need not always be related to homosexual behaviour in life. Graffiti may be found which give an insight into the secondary functions of certain public and semi-public places. Finally, there is the possibility of identifying a distinct material culture of homoerotic objects; the associations of such objects might then allow us to characterise the material culture of past homosexual subcultures.

It is unlikely, though, that we will ever achieve such a thing as an 'archaeology of homosexuality' because of the difficulty of recognising the individual actor in history sought by R.G. Collingwood and more recently by Ian Hodder (1991: 6). The personalities and sexual habits of the dead do not reveal themselves to the trowel, and we are dependent on theoretical approaches to unravel what we can of such intangibles. The best hopes lie with the recognition and characterisation of the material cultures of past subcultures.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Stephen Player for drawing Figures 13.1 and 13.3; and Steve Harrison, Catherine Johns, Mike Morris and Stephen Player for their helpful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of the paper.
- 2 I have cited ancient authors as I would modern authors whose works have been translated from a foreign language. The common practice of citing the editors and translators is pernicious and merely adds to the distance between the modern reader and the ancient writer, reinforcing the unnecessary mystique accorded these writers.

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