

# Alexander the Great and Hephæstion:

## Censorship and Bisexual Erasure in Post-Macedonian Society

Athena Richardson (Elliot School of International Affairs)

### ABSTRACT

Same-sex relations were common in ancient Greece, and while having both male and female relations in one's life was the norm, Alexander the Great is almost always portrayed in modern depictions as heterosexual. This study contributes a new perspective on the greater problem of understanding bisexual erasure throughout history and modern day media. Initially submitted as a 24-page research paper for Dr. Diane Cline's seminar on Alexander the Great, the research is about **bisexual erasure**, looking for what information is missing about the relationship between Alexander and his life-partner Hephæstion. A full 18 years ago, bisexual erasure entered the discourse in sex and gender theory, describing **the phenomenon of hiding bisexual experiences in heteronormative literature, film, and popular culture**. Since then, case studies have focused on contemporary instances. A compelling case study is the reception of **the emotional, romantic, and sexual relationship between Alexander and Hephæstion**, even as Alexander had two children by different women and married three. Bisexual erasure now extends back 2300 years with my research, along with its **implications in the larger focus of LGBT censorship** throughout history.

Even though **bisexuality was a social norm in Greek culture**, the disappearance of Hephæstion is all but complete in ancient literature. I have examined **five full primary source biographies of Alexander** from antiquity, and observed the way scholars, popular writers and filmmakers from the Victorian era forward have treated their relationship. I have also been reading the current theoretical literature on bisexual erasure, a term first coined in 2000. My study of Alexander and Hephæstion suggests that their relationship did not fit the norm of pederasty. **Normally boys and men did have relations with each other**, but generally they were not of the same age and there was almost always a financial and power difference. Hephæstion was taller and more handsome, so it might have appeared that he held the power in their relationship. Ancient biographers may have conducted censorship to conceal any implication of femininity or submissiveness in Alexander that this relationship dynamic might suggest. As a result, subsequent cultures would have hidden the relationship too. **My work suggests that bisexual erasure is not just a modern phenomenon of 19th and 20th century sensibilities, but extends back through antiquity**. Even in a culture that accepted bisexuality, Alexander and Hephæstion's relationship was an outlier and thus treated differently. **My research shows how this same-sex relationship was erased, censored, and altered to fit norms of subsequent cultures**.

### ROLES ALEXANDER ENTRUSTED TO HEPHÆSTION:

- Choosing the new King of Sidon
- Activities showcasing strong diplomatic, mathematical and organizational abilities
- Organizing logistical projects: building walls, fortifying cities, finding water/food sources
- Position of Chiliarch (second-in-command) with the role of *hazarpatish* and supported *proskynesis*
  - Chose who could visit with Alexander
  - Screened his mail
  - Kept up with world events
  - Was in charge of Alexander's calendar and schedule

### CONCLUSIONS:

#### WHY ISN'T HEPHÆSTION PROPERLY DOCUMENTED?

- He died before the Successor Wars
- Logistics are not as exciting as warrior roles
- Cover up of romantic relations with Alexander for political purposes

#### HOW WOULD WE DEFINE THEIR RELATIONSHIP?

**Q: What is pederasty?**

A: Pederasty is generally defined as sexual relationships between older, masculine men of higher social status and younger, more feminine men of lower social status for the purpose of social mobility and mentorship practiced in ancient Greece and Macedonia.

**Q: Did Alexander and Hephæstion have a relationship that was pederastic in nature?**

A: No, they were too close in age and social status. Pederastic relationships were based on social power structures and Hephæstion, being the son of a nobleman, Amyntor, who would have been among Philip II's *hetairoi* [companions], would not have needed social mobility.

**Q: If same-sex relations were common in ancient Macedonia, why would they censor their relationship?**

A: Alexander was well documented to be shorter, stockier, and more feminine than Hephæstion and there may have been concern that he would be viewed as the passive partner. My research suggests that subsequent cultures who compared Julius Caesar and Napoleon to Alexander the Great would have concealed this relationship to avoid an implication of passiveness.

**Q: What about Alexander's wives?**

A: Macedonian royal marriages were about power and sealing alliances. Alexander needed heirs for his throne and married two of the conquered Persian Great King's daughters at the Mass Weddings at Susa in 324 BCE. Hephæstion was the only other Macedonian to marry a daughter of the fallen king, making Alexander and Hephæstion's sons first cousins and officially elevating Hephæstion to the royal family. However, Hephæstion did not live long enough to sire a child.

**Q: Why should I care about this?**

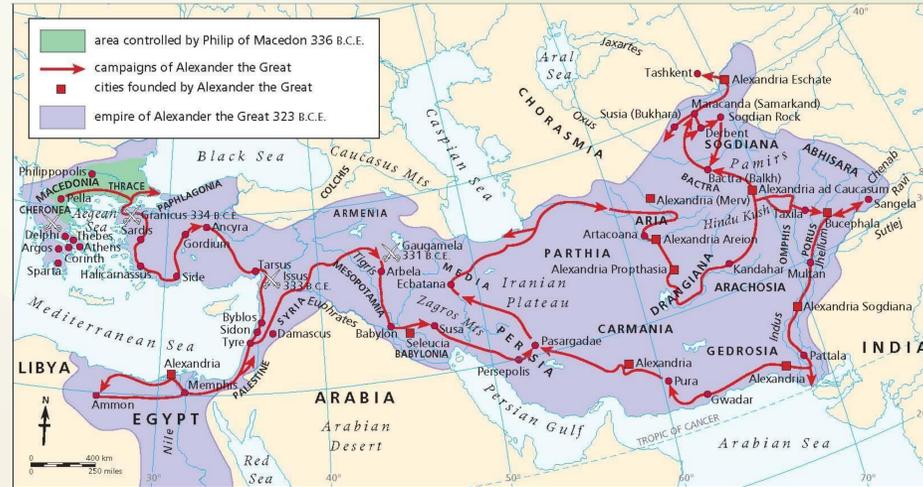
A: The censorship of the relationship between Alexander and Hephæstion suggests a larger implication of bisexual erasure throughout history. Historical representation of strong figures such as Alexander of Macedon is key for legitimizing modern bisexual identity politics.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

For full text including footnotes and works cited, please contact Athena Richardson at [athena44@gwu.edu](mailto:athena44@gwu.edu)

Map: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/92112754851499360/>

Photo Credits to the Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2008.



Map of Alexander the Great's Conquests

### EVIDENCE OF THEIR BISEXUAL RELATIONSHIP:

- Alexander and Hephæstion as Boyhood Friends
- Polygamy as a Norm in the Macedonian Court
- Alexander's Disinterest in Sex with Women
- Comparison to the Lovers Achilles and Patroclus
- Other Macedonians' Jealousy of Hephæstion
- Hephæstion's Rapid Rise in the Court
- Alexander's Suicidal Campaigns Fueled by Grief Upon Hephæstion's Death
- The Subsequent Censorship of their Relationship



Busts of Alexander (left) and Hephæstion (right) in the Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2008. Note Alexander's longer hair and feminine features vs Hephæstion's short hair and masculine features.



Bust of Hephæstion from three sides in the Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2008. Such portraits are extremely rare.