

SPECIAL ARTICLE

Bisexuality in Ancient Greek-Roman Society

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ABSTRACT

The figure of the hermaphrodite, the human being with both male and female sex characteristics, has always fascinated the human mind and excited man's imagination. The purpose of this study was to present the concepts and beliefs on bisexuality in Ancient Greek and Roman tradition. A thorough study of the early scripts of ancient Greek and Roman literature was undertaken. The first reports on bisexuality are found in the legends on the nativity of Hermaphroditos who was considered to be the son of Hermes and Aphrodite. Concurrently, the social status of these bisexual beings, and their fate in Greek – Roman antiquity varied from total rejection and marginalization to deification.

Keywords: *Hermaphroditism, Male pseudohermaphroditism, Female pseudohermaphroditism, ancient history, Greek World, Roman World.*

INTRODUCTION

Hermaphroditism (Gr. Hermaphroditos a person partaking of the attributes of both sexes) is a state characterized by the presence of both male and female sex organs. Hermaphrodites (bisexuals) have somatic characteristics mid-way between the two genders, due to the hormones secreted by the ovariole or the ovary on the one hand, and by the testicle on the other. While normal for some invertebrates, hermaphroditism (hermaphroditism, bisexuality) is abnormal and extremely rare in human beings; in fact it only exists in a form that is incomplete to one extent or another (pseudohermaphroditism, false hermaphroditism), which does not enable the dual function of fecunding and being fecunded. The two opposing gonads for hermaphrodites are never well developed and functional; at best only one is able to function. In most cases, bisexuals are sterile.

Pseudo-hermaphrodites can be superficially divided into gynandroids and androgynoids: -Gynandroids (gyn + andr + Gr. eidos form) are women with male characteristics. They can be divided into andromasts without breasts, with developed body hair and relatively few malformations in their external genitals, or phaloids with genitals similar to male genitals, in the same way as a her-

niated ovary in the labia majora can simulate an ectopic testicle.

Androgynoids are men presenting certain female characteristics. They can be divided into gynecomasts with developed breasts and atrophied genitals, and irregular androgynoids sometimes mistaken for women due to their extremely poorly developed external genitals.¹

THE "FORERUNNERS"

Beings that are both male and female at the same time have always fascinated minds and excited the human imagination since ancient times.

Christian theologians in the middle ages, and Jewish rabbis, claimed that Adam was the first hermaphrodite, a self-sufficient being, like his creator, and they even provide some biblical references to support this argument.² According to these commentators on the Bible, either the sexes remained undivided until the moment when woman was separated from the first man, or as punishment for the original sin, Adam was divided into two imperfect sexes, incapable of reproducing on their own, but on the contrary, only able to do so in pain and misery. This same idea of a single bisexual being can also be found in Persian tradition, or for the Phrygians, the Chaldeans and the Phoenicians.

The cult of the dual being is also to be found amongst the numerous arcane mystical religions of Hindu nations, before spreading through Syria to the island of Cyprus, and then into Greece, where it degenerated and met the same fate as the hystero-phallic cults; hermaphroditism during such times of decadence for some classes of society was most probably the embodiment of sexual excess, but for the philosophers, it represented the twofold nature of the human being, considered as the original being.³

HERMAPHRODITES IN ANCIENT GREECE

The history of hermaphroditism goes back to the time when "human beings were shaped by the Gods". Greek mythology abounds with examples of such mixed beings. Even the Gods themselves were often hermaphrodites. Striking examples are Dyalos, the androgyne, Arsenothelys, the man-woman, Gynnis, the effeminate, Phanes, the creator god to be found in the orphism doctrine, Adgistis, with two sexes, born out of the seed of Deus and Dionysos, also known as Pseudanor, the fake man. Tiresias, diviner in Thebes, was successively a man and a woman. To justify the existence of hermaphrodites amongst the humans, the storyteller Esopus wrote that

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