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Male-Bonding: Homosexuality and Friendship in Byzantine Saint's Lives.

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Introduction

There is no queer theory in the history of Byzantine homosexuality. I am not sure I can change that today!

One of the oddities of Byzantine studies is that it has long attracted homosexual scholars, but virtually none of them have written about Byzantine homosexuality. There may be reason for this - in comparison with the mass of information about Ancient Greek and Roman homosexuality, the thousand years of Byzantine culture is poorly served. Entire classical genres disappeared - plays, satires, secular philosophy. It was a surprise (to Byzantinists at least) when John Boswell's *Same Sex Unions* for a time has made Byzantine liturgical manuscripts a focus of much general interest.

Normative Approaches

There has been, instead, a legal tradition to explore; rather a lot of monastic regulation; and the occasional comments in elite historiography on homosexual activity by some emperors. In short, laws, regulations and gossip have dominated modern discussions. Vern Bulloch's chapter in *Sexual Variance in Society and History* is a good summary of this approach: first you document the anti-homosexual legislation of late antiquity, then you shift attention to the various stories told about certain emperors, and that was about that.

The problem, of course, is that normative documents such as law codes, cannot possibly have much to do with social realities. This is especially the case in Byzantium where the law codes in question were effectively a series of edited compilations of laws deriving from the middle centuries of the Roman Empire. The activities of emperors, need less to say, do not seem to be any guide at all to activities and attitudes lower down the social scale.

I want to argue here that there is considerable room for further exploration using other types of sources. In particular, a number of saints' lives reveal diverse opinions, and relatively little shock, about homosexuality, but they have not been fully exploited. I suggest that there are number of ways in which Byzantine saints lives expand our account or homosexuality in Byzantium;

- A. Saints' lives enable us to contextualize what the Byzantine legal material is discussing - usually pederasty.
- B. Saint' lives give us our only characters - albeit literary creations, who are non-elite participants in pederastic activity.

- C. Saints' lives give us examples of Byzantine homophobia.
- B. Fourth, and this will be the focus of the second part of my paper, saints lives present examples of relationships but I, at least, wish to queer. They present homosocial pairings between men with little comment. Although certainly not sexually active, it is common to find Byzantine saints paired with each other in relationships which can be analyzed from the perspective of desire - "friendship" hardly begins to describe what they are about.

Note: By "Byzantium" I mean the Greek speaking world from roughly the 8th to 15th centuries, a period which has considerable claims to be treated as a unity.

Pederasty

1. Regulatory texts

Laws

Ecloga aucta 17:6 [8th Century]

...Those who are guilty whether actively or passively of committing unnatural offences shall be capitally punished with the sword. If he who commits the offence passively, is found to be under twelve years old, he shall be pardoned on the ground of youthful ignorance of the offence committed.

...Those guilty of "abominable crime" [homosexuality?] shall be emasculated.

Note: Although these and other laws have been the focus of so much writing, there is a real way in which they are irrelevant. They simply do not seem to have been enforced. Angeliki Laiou, Angeliki, *Marriage, Amour et parenté à Byzance aux XIe-XIIIe siècles*, gives one of the most important modern analyses of Byzantine homosexuality, and notes that we have no examples of any later legal cases; and canonical discussions in only the most general way.

Monastic regulations

Theodore of Studium: Reform Rules (d.826), excerpts

Have no animal of the female sex in domestic use, seeing that you have renounced the female sex altogether, whether in house or fields, since none of the Holy Fathers had such, not- does nature require them.

Do not take as pupil into your cell a youth for whom you have a fancy; but use the services of some one above suspicion, and of various brothers.

The concern is women and boys.

2. Historiography

Invective!

Theophanes: Chronicle [9th Century]

443: 15 [On Constantine V]

He condemned to death useful men, important in the army or in government, who undertook the monastic way of life - **and especially those who had been near him and witnessed his licentiousness and unspeakable actions**, as he suspected their statements would disgrace him. Because of this, as was said before, he killed Strategios the brother of Podopagouros when he learned Strategios, who did not approve of his illegal acts of unnatural lust, had told them to the blessed Stephen (the solitary monk at the church of St. Auxentios) and had received the medicine of salvation. Thus Constantine, who had taken the comely Strategios as partner (for because of his licentiousness he loved to have such people by him), accused him of plotting with the monk.

Hinting

Michael Psellus: On Constantine VIII

II.1 Constantine was...a person of decidedly effeminate character with but one object in life - to enjoy himself to the full. Since he inherited a treasury crammed with money, he was able to follow his natural inclination, and the new ruler devoted himself to a life of luxury.

II.4 He was generous in his favours, more than all the emperors, but this good quality was not in his case tempered by justice. To members of his -court he threw wide open the gates of his favour, heaping gold on them as though it were sand; but to those far removed from the palace this virtue was less displayed. They were his friends most of all whom in their infancy he had castrated and whom afterwards he used as chamberlains and private servants. These men were not of noble birth nor free-born. ...Their physical degradation was obscured by an adroit and liberal distribution of largess, by their eagerness to confer benefits, by their display of other gentlemanly qualities.

3. What Saints Lives Add

The problem of boys/beardlessness as an attraction
Condemnation of Andromania

Cyril of Scythopolis: *Lives of the Monks of Palestine* [6th Cent.]

Life of Sabas 29

...Sabas would never allow an adolescent to live in his community who had not yet covered his chin with a beard, because of the snares of the evil one. Whenever he received an adolescent of immature age who wished to make his renunciation, he would welcome him and then send him to the thrice-blessed Abba Theodosius....When sending a brother to the great Abba Theodosius, as has been

said, would first give him the following admonition: My child, it is unsuitable, indeed harmful, for a laura like his to contain an adolescent. This is the rule made by the ancient fathers of Scetis and transmitted to me by our great father Euthymius. For seeing me wanting to settle in his laura when an adolescent, he sent me to the blessed Theoctistus, saying that it is out of place and harmful for an adolescent to live in a laura.

Why?

Epistole of Paul Helladikos, superior of the Elusa monastery, which dates to the first quarter of the sixth century, cited complete in the Foundation documents of *The Rule* of John for the Monastery of St. John the Forerunner of *Phoberos* [12th Century]

Phoberou 58:

For we have known some who were really faithful men and powerful warriors in spiritual action, poor and strong and vigorous, knowing how to wrestle and box with demons that opposed them, keeping vigils and fasting and drinking [only] water and being satisfied with only a mat to sleep on, having many accomplishments and praying constantly, and because they were tempted regarding their own mothers and sisters and brothers and their own young sons, they were compelled by the pleasure loving spirits of impurity to carry out the madness of their evil desire and after this they confessed these actions openly with tears, striking themselves and shouting, "We have sinned, we have transgressed, we were possessed by demons." For the desire of the flesh is truly a mighty and lawless demon and pleasure is bitter and destructive.

Phoberou 58:

For Satan often encourages a woman to desire a woman, and for that reason reverent mothers superior of communities instruct the nuns under them not to gaze at each other's faces simply and naturally, lest through the act of seeing they should slip into passion and harm, but to lower their eyes and look at the ground and in that way speak virgin to virgin.

But saint's lives enable us more than just to expand on the notion of pederasty

The Life of St. Andrew the Fool

c. 17 Andrew rejects the gift of a sodomite eunuch

As he sat on the ground in front of the gateway there came beyond eunuch who was the chamberlain of one of the nobles. His face was like a rose, the skin of his body white as snow, he was well -- shaped, fair-haired, possessing and unusual softness, and smelling of mask from afar. As Epiphanius had been brought up together within and was his friend they loved each other dearly.... But the holy man, who with the eyes of his spirit already knew the works of his soul, looked at him sternly and said, "**Fools do not eat a gift of colophonia! [fruits from the ass]**" The eunuch, who did not understand what he said, replied, "You are truly crazy man, when you see dates you think they are fruit from Colophon?" The blessed man said to him, "**You deceiver, go**

into your master's bedchamber and perform with him the sick practice of the sodomites [tʰʌn ʧsqʃneian twɪn Sodomitwɪn] that he may give you other dates too. You wretch, who do not see the rays of the kingdom of heaven, or do not know the cruelty and bitterness of hell, and do not even feel shame before the angel who accompanies you as a Christian? What should be done with you, impure that you are, because you frequent the corners and do what should not be done, things which neither the dogs nor swine, nor reptiles nor serpents do? You accursed fellow, why do you do this? Woe to your youth, which Satan has wounded and thrown down headlong into the terrible depth of hell with vehemence and boundless vigor! See it you do not go further, lest the God head treat you as you deserve, here know you whole with flashes of lightning, there with the hell of fire. When the eunuch third this he traveled with fear, his face turned red like a fire and his shame was great. Epiphanius said, "Sir, what happened to you? Why were you ashamed Did I not tell you that he is crazy and says whatever occurs to him? However, my dear friend in the Lord, if you are aware that you are guilty Of something of what he said to you, go at once and reform yourself and do not be angry with him for his words! you are young, dear friend, and Satan is wicked, deceiving us to commit sin for no other reason than to have us too for a consolation in the fire of hell."

When the eunuch heard this he went away, whereas the honourable Epiphanius helped they holy man to his feet and showed him to his room. There they found a table ready and sat down, enjoying the gifts of God. After they had finished their feast Epiphanius said to the blessed man, "Venerable sir, why did you rebuke my friend so bluntly?" The blessed man answered, "Because he is dear to you and beloved, for this reason did I give him this lecture, for had he not been your friend, he would not have heard a single word from me. This is not my vocation, to rebuke sinners, but to run the straight road which leads to a better life." Epiphanius said again, **"I know that too, you servant of God, but this young man is a slave, and when he is forced by his master what can he do?"** The holy man replied, "Yes I know, I am not ignorant of that. However, a slave should serve the man who bought him with regard to his physical needs, not with regard to the works of the devil, especially not when it comes to this cursed and disgusting abnormality in which not even animals engage." Epiphanius said, "If a master enjoins his slave to minister to his needs, be they physical, spiritual or sinful, and the slave fails to obey, you surely know, my Lord, how much he will suffer, being maltreated, beaten, threatened and receiving all sorts of punishments". The holy man answered, "This, my son, is the martyrdom of Jesus Christ at which he hinted when he said, 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."**Thus if the slaves do not bow to the abominable sodomitic passion of their masters they are blessed and thrice blessed, for thanks to the torments you mention they will be reckoned with the martyrs."**

c. 22 The rich man's funeral

Another day when he went out to his spiritual struggle he met a funeral procession. ...

After the procession had passed he looked attentively again, and behold, a beautiful young man, very sad and depressed, came walking along, lamenting and wailing greatly. The holy man approached him and, thinking that he belonged to the dead man's relatives and that this was the reason for his moaning, forgetting, as it were, his God-pleasing work, he stretched out his hand and held the wailing young man back, saying to him in a tone of consolation, "By the God of heaven and earth, why do you moan and shed so many tears? I never saw anyone make such lamentations for a dead man." **The angel answered, "The reason for my lament is this: the man whose funeral procession you have seen has fallen to the lot of the devil. This is the cause of my distress and my moaning and I lament because I have lost him."** The blessed man said, "Tell me, dear friend, for I know who you are: which were his transgressions?" The angel answered him, "Since you are Andrew, the chosen one of God, you are entitled to learn, for when I saw the beauty of your soul, bright and glittering like pure gold, I felt relief in my grief. **This man, my venerable friend, was one of the nobles of the emperor, but he was most sinful and wicked, for he was a fornicator and an adulterer and a sodomite (pōrnoj kaˆ moicōj kaˆ črsenoko...thj), he was miserly and heartless, presumptuous and arrogant, a liar, a grudger, hating his fellow creature, greedy of unjust gain, a perjurer. On his piteous slaves he put a stranglehold by starving and flogging them and failing to give them clothes, leaving them naked and barefoot in the days of winter; many of them he even had killed with clubs and buried with the bones of his animals. He was so given to sodomy, the abominable sin that leads to the fire of hell, that the number of the slaves and eunuchs whom he defiled amounted to about three hundred. At last, you who enjoy the love of the Lord, the time came for him, too, to be harvested, and when death arrived it found him unrepentant, immersed in untold multitudes of sins. You have seen for yourself with what disgrace his impure and abominable body is carried away as if it does not even deserve a customary burial. These, my friend, holy and dear to God, are the reasons why I am distressed myself and moaning with much lamentation, for he has become the sport of demons and an unclean abode of a foul smell."**

Here we have what we never find in the law codes and rarely in the gossipy account of emperors: accounts of the bodies of catamites and sodomites. What we get are many conflicting messages:

- Those who engaged in sodomy were not necessarily despicable: they can be loved or grieved over by the good.
- The texts assume that desire was one directional. The passive party is forced to submit, while the active party defiles those under him.
- There is a focus on the act of anal penetration. Andrew is concerned about what goes on in the bedchamber - which is something he knows very well - hence the reference to "fruits of the ass".
- On the other hand the bodies of those who do sodomy are affected by it. The eunuch has a "*face..like a rose, the skin of his body white as snow, he was well -- shaped, fair-haired, possessing and unusual softness, and smelling of*

mask from afar." While the rich sodomite of the second story now has a corrupt and impure body which cannot be buried properly.

- One other point. A lot is made of pederasty being an age-dissonant category. I am less sure about this: in the Byzantine sources it is a matter of youth and eunuchness - age and gender.

Conclusion

The Byzantines preserved intact the Greek category of pederasty. The homosexual attraction of men for younger men was expected, condemned, and documented. For the Byzantines anyone could desire engage in homosexual activity with younger men. And it was pederasty, or age-dissonant sexuality, that was the only concern of the legal and condemnatory texts.

Within this category, there are some things to note: they reverse the blame/shame game: the dominant partner was the one to blame. There seems to have been relatively little animus against pederastically active people - it was a sin, condemnable as a sin, but not, for the most part, with a special force.

Male Bonding: Same-Sex Relationships

But pederasty does not limit what the Byzantine sources tell us about the history of same-sex emotive relationships. They also provide evidence of another way that Byzantine society made sense of male-male relationships. Such relationships could be seen as emotionally intense. Moreover there was a language available to discuss such relationships - that of classical *philia*.

I suppose this is the most controversial area of any discussion of the history of homosexuality. Is it a question of the history of genital activity and how it was conceived, or is it a history of emotive relationships between people of the same sex. And what qualifies as "gay history"? I wish to discuss this:

The issue is reasonably clear for the past hundred years. But before that there are complications. This is especially the case for Medieval studies. Some commentators, both avowedly gay and otherwise, wish to distinguish sharply between historical evidence about same-sex sexual activity in the past and other evidence about same-sex relationships. In other words they wish to argue, as I take it, that while the evidence about sexual relationships may indeed relate to a history of homosexuality, other non-sexual affective relationships must be subsumed under the sign of "friendship". Often, but not always, there seems to be a belief that while sexuality is complex and constructed in particular ways, "friendship" is an unproblematic category. Some commentators, religious ones in particular, seek to see "friendship" as in some sense "purer" and cleaner than sexual relationships.

When looking at same-sex relationships in the past, use of the sex/friendship dichotomy induces problems. We very rarely know that two people had sexual relations. For discussion of same-sexual activity, we are often thrown to legal codes, penitentials, denunciatory sermons and so forth. We very rarely have, before the late middle ages

when court records begin to survive in number, any real idea of how laws were applied. Careful analysis of Byzantine documents - but not court records - from the 12th century on, for instance, *seems* to indicate that the provisions against sodomy of the Justinianic code were not applied; and yet such laws are frequently taken as indicators of social attitudes centuries after they were legislated. They are no more compelling, than for instance, the argument that anti-sodomy statutes in the US stop heterosexuals having oral sex.

On the other hand we have a huge amount of material on same-sex emotional relationships: poems, letters, sometimes even sermons. We also have quite certain evidence that such relationships were, in various times and places, publically celebrated. Such relationships, it is asserted, were not "sexual" and reflect a variety of other forms of male-bonding.

Let us, for a moment, accept such a point of view - that is that all the socially affirmed same-sex relationships we see in the past eschewed sexual activity: that David and Jonathan, Alexander and Hephaestion, Hercules and Hylas, Patroclus and Achilles, Tully and Octavius, Socrates and Alcibiades, Sergius and Bacchus- that all were never understood in the past to have had sexual relationships. What would such a point of view say about our own western society? We would have to note that a very narrow range of same-sex relationships are in fact possible. The intense emotional and affective relationships described in the past as "non-sexual" cannot be said to exist today: modern heterosexual men can be buddies, but unless drunk they cannot touch each other, or regularly sleep together. They cannot affirm that an emotional affective relationship with another man is the centrally important relationship in their lives. It is not going to far, is it, to claim that friendship - if used to translate Greek *philia* or Latin *amicita* - hardly exists among heterosexual men in modern Western society. Indeed we use the word "friendship" today to describe human relationships so different from those indicated in the ancient and medieval texts that to apply the word "friendship" to those past relationships seems, to me at least, to be actively misleading - certainly as "anachronistic" than the "gay" used by John Boswell.

Turning out attention to modern "gayness" we find a number of interesting points, points that affect how we understand the relationships of the past, and the texts which refer to and refract those relationships. I use "gayness", because to seems to me that altogether too many commentators have been willing to reduce "gayness" to sexual activity. In some parts of the world this may be true. But in the modern West, "gayness" or its predecessors, have not been understood by gay writers in this way. From the mid 19th century on writer such as Karl Ulrichs in Germany, Edward Carpenter in England, and Walt Whitman in the US have claimed that same-sex relationships are much more than sex. Specific claims about "Uranian" (or "heavenly" love, a reference to Plato), or "homophile" love were made. Famously, the early gay male organizations in the US and Britain made use of the concept of "homophilia" to describe what they were concerned with.

Now it is true, gay leaders in the 1970s rejected the term "homophile" as conformist, and as a deliberate elision of sexuality. I think, for historical consideration at least, it may be time to resurrect this terminology. "Homophilia" points to a very important aspect of modern gayness - its support of a wide array of same-sex emotional relationships, with a an equally wide degree of sexual expression. Psychosocial studies of

the gay male communities of large cities have found is that homophilia is a central aspect of modern gayness, in relationships between men whether sexually expressed or not. Some gay men form couples in which sex plays little or no part. Many other gay men form "families", often of other gay men (some of whom may be former sexual partners) and sympathetic heterosexual women, families in which a high degree of emotional and personal closeness is achieved in a specifically "gay" context but where sex is not central.

Given that human beings in the past do not "belong" to anyone modern group, I would argue that "gay history", as an aspect of "the history of human relationships" is specifically one focused on same-sex relationships. Since "gay" in modern use covers "homophilia" as well as "homosexuality", I wish to continue to claim that placing the study of *philia* and *amicitia* in the past exclusively under the sign of "friendship" and excluding from the sign of "gayness" is not only unnecessary but misleading.

Clearly, I cannot place all past friendship under the sign of "homosexual", but some can be.

In Byzantium, in particular, we need to integrate into account of *philia*, both a discussion of the realities of "heterosexual friendship" in Byzantium, and the Byzantine willingness to add a kinship aspect to same-sex relationships.

Philia

The Tradition

There was a continuing tradition of *Philia* in Byzantine letters

Michael of Ephesus [12th cent], in a Commentary on the Nic. Ethics, notes that in an epitaph for Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian [ie Nazianzus] had noted "one soul in two bodies".

Euripides [Orestes, l. 1046], has the phrase "one soul" - Elektra to Orestes describing their [brother-sister] relationship.

Aristotle [Nic.Eth. 1168b] cites "mia psuche" as a saying. The Loeb renders this [the context is the nature of *Philia*], 'friends have one soul between them'.

Diogenes Laertius [Vita 5.19.12, 1.20] says that in answer to the question "what is a friend", Aristotle replied "a single soul dwelling in two bodies".

In sum. The phrase seems to originate as a Greek description of "*philia*", and is taken up by Aristotle in that light. It is used for a number of other relationships: brother-sister, ecclesial community, mother-son [surely a rare usage though?], and, depending on how Clement and Chrysostom are using it, for marriage as well

This tradition was preserved in literary forms. From many examples:

Leo of Synada: Correspondence [10th Century]

34. From the Metropolitan of Nicomedia to the Metropolitan of Synada

Not only would a lamp go out very quickly should someone fail to feed it with oil, but the light of love also is in danger of being snuffed out unless friends are in constant communication, either in person or by letters, if they are separated. Because this is the very thing we feared, that is, that long absence, separation, and lack of communication for so great a period of time would extinguish the flame of our long-standing friendship, we have begun this letter as a means of raking the embers of love and reviving the fire in them and, as it were, stirring it up to a sky-high blaze. Mark how much time has slipped by and no letters have passed between us, no friendly greetings, no tokens of affection. I hold myself responsible for this overlong period of silence; yet I blame you too, my love, for being equally silent, and I think you ought to honor us with a friendly letter and let us know how you are. We hope and pray that all is well. For even if, as the divine Apostle says, "Love never faileth," and even if spatial distance does not dampen desire, but where it has taken root the flower of love shoots up, blossoms, and lives forever; still it certainly must be sprinkled with letters and the sweet outpourings of the waters that spring from the soul. I hope that you, my greatly missed lord, will not fail to do this.

I for my part have always had sure knowledge of the purity and guilelessness of your love; yet the Lord Constantine, the God-crowned emperor, has given me greater assurance of it. For he himself, since he frequently saw your holiness, reported to us in what terms you spoke of our worthlessness to his majesty and how, warm with affection for us, you love us from the bottom of your heart. This is worthy of your holiness and befits your good heart. May the Lord of Love reward you for this "because you have loved much" and because you have endeavored to keep Christ's commandment as his true disciple. Please do not fail to remember us in your prayers to the Lord.

35. The Metropolitan of Synada Replies

To tell the plain truth, marvelous and reverend lord, without flattery and, as they say, straight from my heart and soul, you have from the first been the object of admiration, respect, and awe. I prefer, honor, and regard you above most, or even all, men for many reasons: your way of life, your character, your intellect, your temperament, your honesty, your erudition, your wisdom, and nearly everything else. For the present, let's leave out your temporal assets and the things outside our control: your see, wealth, prestige, honor, eminence, and position. These things too bring you greater honor and elevate you to the very peak of moral excellence because you put them to excellent use. It is therefore of slight consequence if I called you an excellent man because you have these things and more, for you are excellent and worthy of respect—remember the beginning of my letter—as well as wise, good, gentle, kind, godlike, and, in short, a treasure house of virtue.

That this is the kind of man you are and that I say so is no favor. It would be if I said it with the hope of reciprocation, if it were false, if I were influenced by worldly values. But, as it is, I'm proud to say I told the truth, and I shall say the same things again to everyone: "I shall not refrain my lips." That the fire of our love refuses to go out after I have been kindled by just one pouring of the oil of your friendship is a marvelous and clever thing such as surpasses the properties of both Median oil and that oil that a certain non-Christian poured into the bath and over which he spoke charms, charms which only

the man who uttered them knows. Therefore, my highly discerning friend, do not equate silence with hostility, just as we do not confound bombast with affection. For this reason, our father, rely on us as a loyal son and friend, one who is fair in his judgments and true in his affection. I tell you God's own truth when I promise and declare-and **I do so emphatically that I cherish and adore you, that I feel blazing fires of passion for you and I am forced to call my affection love, and even that does not tell the whole of it.** This is how your excellent and virtuous qualities have affected me. I shall close with the addition of this line from Sophocles: "Saintly man, concentrate your efforts on the others; the bonds of affection, on my part at least, will never be shattered."

The existence of this tradition, and the very rhetorical letters we have about it, would seem to exclude **philia** from any consideration of "queer: history."

The Reality

The reality was somewhat different: See Margaret Mullet's seminal 1988 article, "'Byzantium: A Friendly Society", in *P&P*.

Kekaumenos: Precepts and Anecdotes [11th Century]

If you have a foreign friend and he comes through the city where you live do not put him up in your house. Let him stay somewhere else and send him the things he needs there - that is a better arrangement. If he were to live in your house then let me tell you of the difficulties. **Do not let your wife, daughter or daughter-in-law leave their rooms and look into the house proper.** If it were to happen that they should have to come out then your friend would immediately notice and fix his eyes upon them. **If you are present then he will let his eyes drop, but he will find out their movements, their dress and their eyes, in short he will know them from head to toe. If he is alone with your people then he will chat them up and make them laugh.** He will undermine your servants, your table, your household. He will ask your people whether you have this or that. Why don't I spell it out? If he has the opportunity he will make signs of love to your wife, looking at her with unchaste eyes, and if possible misusing her. And this isn't all, when travelling he will tell of these misdeeds." "And even if he doesn't say it himself your enemy will throw it in your face in battle"

There seems to be little doubt that in the middle Byzantine period especially, the literary conception of *philia* bore no relationship to reality - which was a society ill-supplied with social bonds other than the family.

'Fictive Relationships' - Adelpopoiesis Now

It is in this context that I wish to discuss the issue of *adelpopoia*, and the contribution of saints' lives to that issue

Claudia Rapp's recent "Ritual Brotherhood in Byzantium", in *Traditio* 52 article is perhaps, at this point, the best place to start. Almost uniquely among the people who have written after Boswell she completely avoids personal invective. Nor does she claim Boswell was personally a "liar" or "untrustworthy", nor does she compare him to Hitler and Stalin [see a much cited review by Daniel Mendelsohn in *Arion*], nor invent sins of mistranslation [see the disgraceful review in *GOTR*].

What she does do, uniquely, is look at the sources with, I think, some more care than Boswell (at times); she looks at other sources not considered by Boswell, and she attempts a "history of adelphopoiesis" - i.e. an examination of how the ritual changed in its use. As a result she comes up with a significantly different interpretation than Boswell about the ceremony as represented in most of the sources available. Essentially Boswell had his liturgical manuscripts and very little else. Prof. Rapp uses historiographical evidence to examine how such texts were used.

She begins with a discussion of the terminology of adelphopoiesis, and similar fraternal terminology, in Byzantine sources. Then she outlines history of adelphopoiesis : first she notes it in hagiographical sources (the earliest texts which mention it are saint's lives: *The Life of Theodore of Sykeon* (online by the way); *the Life of Euthymios the Younger*; and *the Life of Symeon the Fool*); second she looks at an "imperial phase" and specifically the use of the rite by Basil I; finally she looks at the discussion of adelphopoiesis in later legal sources.

- Refer to Symeon text on handout
- There are other discussion of saintly friendship
- refer to Euthymius text on handout.

She argues that adelphopoiesis was a ritual which seems to have originated (as far as our sources are concerned) in ascetic and religious life, then was deployed at the highest levels of society to create relationships, a move which was later rather widely emulated. Adelphopoiesis was a ritual which created life long bond, almost always between two people, and usually two men. This bond was considered as a kinship bond.

There were other Byzantine rituals and roles which did the same thing - e.g. the co-godparenthood role. In general, Prof. Rapp thinks that adelphopoiesis function as a form of "fictive kinship" [other examples of this possibly loaded phrase would include, *synteknia*, adoption, and, although she does not say so I think, surely marriage also]. In the range of fictive kinships in Byzantium, she sees it as more like *synteknia* [co-godparenthood) than marriage.

Because she is so clear, the limitations of the sources are very apparent. For instance, when she discusses the use of adelphopoiesis by Basil I, she discerns a clear political motivation for this actions with Danelis' son [see p. 312], and thus points out that the bond was unlikely to have been motivated by feelings of personal attachment. [This also applies to Theodore of Sykeon, but I am leaving that aside - I think the text was describing something very different than with Basil]. Later on she uses texts deriving

ultimately from legal cases by members of the elite. The problem here is that the number of liturgical manuscripts clearly suggest a much broader user of the ceremony, at least after the 10th century. I really doubt that the motivation of royalty and aristocratic elites can be generalized to speculate on the social significance of a much more widely used ritual. If, for instance, we were to use such texts to discuss marriage, we might come up with the same conclusions! The difference is that we have many more sources on marriage. OTOH, I acknowledge to go further than Prof. Rapp would be speculation. I merely suggest that some serious caveats apply to her conclusions.

An overlooked text from a Saint's Life.

Prof. Rapp's view of adelphopoiesis seems to see it as an essentially cold, contractual, unemotional form of social bonding. One of much less weight than marriage [although again, I wonder about the emotional weight of marriage.] I am not convinced such a conclusion holds against this text reported by Nicholas Kataskepenus about Cyril of Philea, written at what, by many accounts, was the height of adelphopoiesis in Byzantium [i.e. after it became more generalized, but before the onset of legal derogation of the rite.]

Nicholas Kataskepenos: Life of St. Cyril of Philea [12th Cent.]

"Cyril teaches **There are seven manners and seven kinds of prayers**, as says the Abbot Anastasios. Three of them exist under the rule of fear and chastisement; the four others are used by those who are assured of their salvation and have a share in the kingdom of God. When a man is plunged into voluptuousness he holds to a prayer as a man condemned and without confidence, as a man touched by the pain of death; in the second manner, a man takes himself before God and speaks to him as a debtor; the third manner differs from the two preceding, for one presents oneself to the Master as a slave, but a slave remains under the rule of fear and the fear of blows; in the fourth, the man carries himself in regard to God as a freed [?] servant, freed from servitude and waiting to receive a recompense because of the mercy of God; **in the fifth manner, better than the first four, one holds oneself before God and speaks to him as a friend**; in the sixth manner, superior to that, the man speaks to God in all confidence as a son "for I have said that you are of the gods, you are of the son of the Most High", you all who want it; in the seventh manner, **which marks a progress and which is the best of all, one prays among those who have undergone adelphopoiia with Christ** [or "among the adopted brothers of Christ"].....

This text suggest to me that adelphopoiesis - here seen as the highest form of intimate relationship - cannot be fully comprehended in the terms Prof. Rapp suggests.

Support by a Phoberou text

The Rule of John for the Monastery of St. John the Forerunner of Phoberos
[12th Century]

53 [B]. Concerning the fact that no one should depart from the monastery because of a chance difficulty.

Furthermore, it is necessary to be clearly convinced of this also, that the person who has once entered into a bond and relationship of a spiritual brotherhood could not cut himself free and separate himself from those with whom he was united. For in many instances if a person entered into an association in the material world, he would not be able to withdraw from it in contravention of the agreements, or if he did so, he would be liable to stated penalties. For the person who has entered into an agreement of spiritual companionship with those who have an eternal and unbreakable relationship, it would be much more impossible to separate and cut himself off from those with whom he was united, or if he did so, he would be subjected to the most serious divine penalties. **For if a woman forming an association with a man and having a physical relationship with him is caught plotting against him, she is condemned to death, he who was united in a spiritual association (before the Spirit himself as witness and mediator) is much more liable in the case of separation.**

As the limbs of the body which have been united together by a bond of nature could not be broken off from the body, and if they were broken, that broken piece would become dead, so also one practicing the religious life, being bound to a brotherhood by a bond stronger than that of nature and being held fast by a union of the spirit, would not have the power to cut himself free from those to whom he was united, or if he did so, he would be dead in his soul and would be deprived of the providence of the Spirit, as one who violated his agreement with him.

Saints Lives give us incidental reports of this:

The Life of Mary the Younger, [10]

c. 6 The husband. of Mary's sister, named Vardas Vratzes, had in Thracian Messene a *proasteion*, which is called "tou Vratze" after him even today. **Vardas would often go out to this small property, and he became a friend and companion of a certain Nikephoros, a *droungarios* who hailed from a village named Kamarai. As, with time, their friendship grew greater and stronger, Vardas was eager to make it even closer; so he devised a firm and unbreakable bond. Once, as he was talking with Nikephoros, he said, "Since, O dearest of men, we have been connected and bound together so intimately, I think it proper to make this bond of love more forceful and more perfect, by adding to it the ties of marriage alliance [lit. "bonds of kinship"], so that we may be twice bound, adducing kinship to our acquaintance."** And then he began to recount to him the following: "My wife has a sister, a virgin most beautiful both in appearance and in soul, so that her inner beauty is reflected in the beauty of her body. Take her for your wife, if it please God, and thereafter we shall preserve our love unbroken. It will be my affair to persuade the girl's mother

to assent to the marriage of her daughter.” Nikephoros heard these words with pleasure, and without further ado they went to Constantinople and discussed the matter with the girl’s mother. She was persuaded, and married her daughter off to Nikephoros; thus, the most excellent Mary followed her husband when he set out for home. [p. 693]

c 30. I will omit willingly the majority of the miracles wrought by the blessed one, because of the length of the narrative. But it is natural for attentive listeners to feel the loss, since they would like to learn about the saint’s children, how and in what condition they met their death; so, let the discourse leave room for a few words to be said about this as well. Vaanes, having grown up under his father’s authority and become a man, was married to a woman of distinguished family. Even though he achieved the rank of *droungarios*, he did not become conceited because of any of the honors of this world, but rather, emulating his mother in all things, remained gentle, quiet, cheerful, fair, and kind, surpassing everyone in expert military achievements. For he was courageous in body, but much more courageous in his soul and predisposition. Being above material things and the desire of profit, he always conceded the spoils to his fellow soldiers, and as a result he was much loved by them, and highly reputed, and spoken about by everybody. **As his associate and helper in all, his excellent exploits he had a certain Theodore, who succeeded his [Vaanes’] father as *tourmarches*, a man brave and robust in military matters but braver still in the ways of God. Vaanes was yoked to him, like a pedigreed, powerful young bull, and together they plowed in themselves as though in fertile land, and they sowed the seeds of virtue like the best of farmers. In due season they cheerfully harvested, depositing the ripe fruit with God and in the divine vats, and received therefrom eternal joy.**

Fictive kinship

The concept of "fictive kinship" plays an important role in Prof. Rapp's analysis. This is an essentially anthropological term, although useful. [However, if anyone thinks Boswell was anachronistic in using the word "gay" about the medieval past, I suggest it would be rather easier to explain what we mean by "gay" to a Byzantine than to explain what we mean by "fictive kinship". I think that she is plum wrong (except in the most restricted sense) in claiming that "Byzantium is unique among medieval societies in having formally incorporated into its ecclesiastical ritual the ceremony by which the priest's prayers and blessings 'make' brothers of two men". I do not think enough work has been done in Muslim sources to justify the claim, and I am sure that such ceremonies existed in China, where the sexual aspects of such relationships were clear, but the language of brotherhood prevailed.

Prof Rapp, because of her close attention to the texts, avoids almost entirely any discussion of adelphopoiesis in terms of homosexuality. This is perhaps fair enough, as we can never know what went on under the sheets [did Byzantines use sheets, by the way?], and I think in terms of her article this was a useful strategy - a way of avoiding the hothouse discussion. But I think we must not avoid the issue entirely. In a point of here I

agree with she notes that adelphopoiesis was associated with an relationship of *equality*, or future equality, between the participants [p. 312].

Now there is little question that "equality" was not a defining characteristic of the predominant classical discourse on same-sex sexual relationships. There the defining language was that of *pederasty*, an age differentiated relationship between a penetrator and a penetrated, sometimes valorized, other times condemned. And it was within such and understanding that condemnations of homosexual sex took place - especially with the Greek Christian notice of the "abuse of boys" [that this was a specifically Christian concept was suggested by Randy Trumbach]. But this range of discourse clearly had no contact with what little we can grasp of the realities of adelphopoiesis. There is little doubt, I think, that at some stages in its history adelphopoiesis was used by men who were sexually active with one another [whether this was ecclesiastically approved, or communally approved is another issue.] I do not know how to resolve this as an issue, but it seems to me it cannot be forever side-stepped.

If we are going discuss this ritual in anthropological terms, then we must face the fact that *many* societies have used "fictive kinship" rituals to create familial relationships between people of the same sex. In many cases the terminology has used that of "brotherhood". I am not convinced that such cross-cultural comparisons are necessary or valid, but if we are to use anthropological categories, then I think they do need to be taken into account.

I think that Rapp does show that adelphopoiesis' relationship to marriage in Byzantium is not that strong. But it does have an aspect which has not been explored - that of adding bonds of kinship to categories of friendship. Rather than saying "this was gay marriage", we need to acknowledge, as Ruth Karras once put it That "here's a society that had a type of relationship between men that is unlike anything we know today."

Conclusion

So how then, do we theorize homosexuality in Byzantium?

The Byzantine legal texts, which have been used to discuss from his sexuality by most commentators, are indeed concerned with actions. Thus I think, in Saints Lives we are clued into a much more complex understanding of homosexuality and homosociality: a world in which, desire for the same sex can be universal, in which the bodies of catamites and sodomites appear, and a world in which same-sex relationships could be the basis of kinship arrangements.

Other texts which may yield more are the small number of Byzantine romances now coming under increased scrutiny. It may be thought that they are about "heterosexuality", but much current scholarship in western literature suggests that this will not be a satisfactory way in which to evaluate them.

Byzantium also supported an important sexual category not common in modern life - the eunuchs who rose to prominence in Church and state. There was even a monastery specifically for eunuchs. Comments on this group, as with any liminal group, help explain a society's gender expectations.

Finally, it cannot be overlooked that ancient texts tend to survive in Byzantine made copies. Which texts were copied, how often, and where are all answerable questions which may yield insight into Byzantine mores. While they did not write much homoerotic literature, they did copy it and, presumably, read it. Why?