

# Female Homoeroticism in the Roman Empire: How Many Licks Does it Take to get to the Disruption of a Phallocentric Model of Sexuality?

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## Research and Methods

For this research, I used Latin and Greek texts predominantly from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries CE to understand the view of female homoeroticism held by those living in the Roman Empire. I used a combination of poetry, dialogues, medical texts, and astrological texts to analyze the view of the male author towards female homoerotic relationships and the women who engage in them, most specifically how these relationships relate to the phallocentric model that the Romans held for male sexuality.

## Background

### The Phallocentric Model:

- Romans thought of sexuality not as a product of the gender of partners, but as an issue of activity versus passivity.
- In this model, a person can either be the active/penetrative partner, or the passive/penetrated partner.
- Men were meant to be active, and thus if they took on a passive role, they were deemed effeminate and stigmatized for their violation of gender role.
- As long as a man was active, he was not stigmatized, regardless of the gender of his partner.

### Female Homoeroticism in a Phallocentric Model

- Most modern scholars believe that the Romans still thought of female homoeroticism within a phallocentric model, despite the lack of a biological penis.
- In many female homoerotic texts written during the Roman Empire, the author depicts one hyper-masculine (and often phallicized) woman and one passive woman.
- If the Romans were truly attempting to fit female homoeroticism into the same phallocentric model used for men, all (or nearly all) depictions would include one active/penetrative woman and one passive/penetrated woman, and only the active woman would be stigmatized for her sexual activity.
- Through my research, I argue that these relationships did not always fit these requirements, and rather that the Romans thought of female homoeroticism as something outside of their normal phallocentric model.



Figure 1. 19<sup>th</sup> Century depiction of Sappho and her boy-lover Phaon

## Depictions of Active and Passive Partners

### The Active Partner:

- The term most commonly used to describe an active/penetrative partner is *tribas* in both Latin and Greek. *Tribades* were typically masculine, had a preference for sex with women (though sometimes were depicted as penetrating men), and often had (usually undescribed) ways of penetrating their partners.
- The figure of the *tribas* most typically fits the phallocentric model, and because of her gender deviance, she is treated nearly universally with contempt.

### The Passive Partner:

- Though the passive partner is often not described at all, there are some texts (Seneca's *Controversies*, Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) which show a passive woman expressing shame for her homoerotic relationship or attraction.
- As a woman following her culturally-assigned gender role, the passive partner should not have a reason for shame in the Roman model. The fact that these women show shame illustrates a deviance from the commonly-accepted model.

## Reciprocity in Female Homoeroticism

- Any amount of sexual reciprocity or mutuality defies a phallocentric model, which should have one completely active and one completely passive partner.
- The word *tribas* comes from the Greek verb τρίβειν, meaning "to rub." Thus the word itself suggests a kind of sex act separate from penetration, allowing for greater reciprocity and breaking from a phallocentric model.
- Though almost all texts specify an act of penetration, several texts use words like "each other" (ἀλλήλων) and "mutually" (*inter se*) when describing sex-acts to subtly imply reciprocity. Indeed, Juvenal even explicitly states that the women "ride [each other] in turns" (*inque vices equitant*).

## Cunnilingus

- Though cunnilingus is rarely referenced in female homoerotic texts, it was most likely practiced, and presented a unique problem to a phallocentric model.
- Modern scholars typically agree that the Romans viewed cunnilingus as a woman orally penetrating her partner, making the one performing cunnilingus the passive partner. While this seems to be true for a man performing cunnilingus, some texts depict women performing cunnilingus as active, and some texts depict them as passive.



Figure 4. Fresco found in Suburban Baths in Pompeii

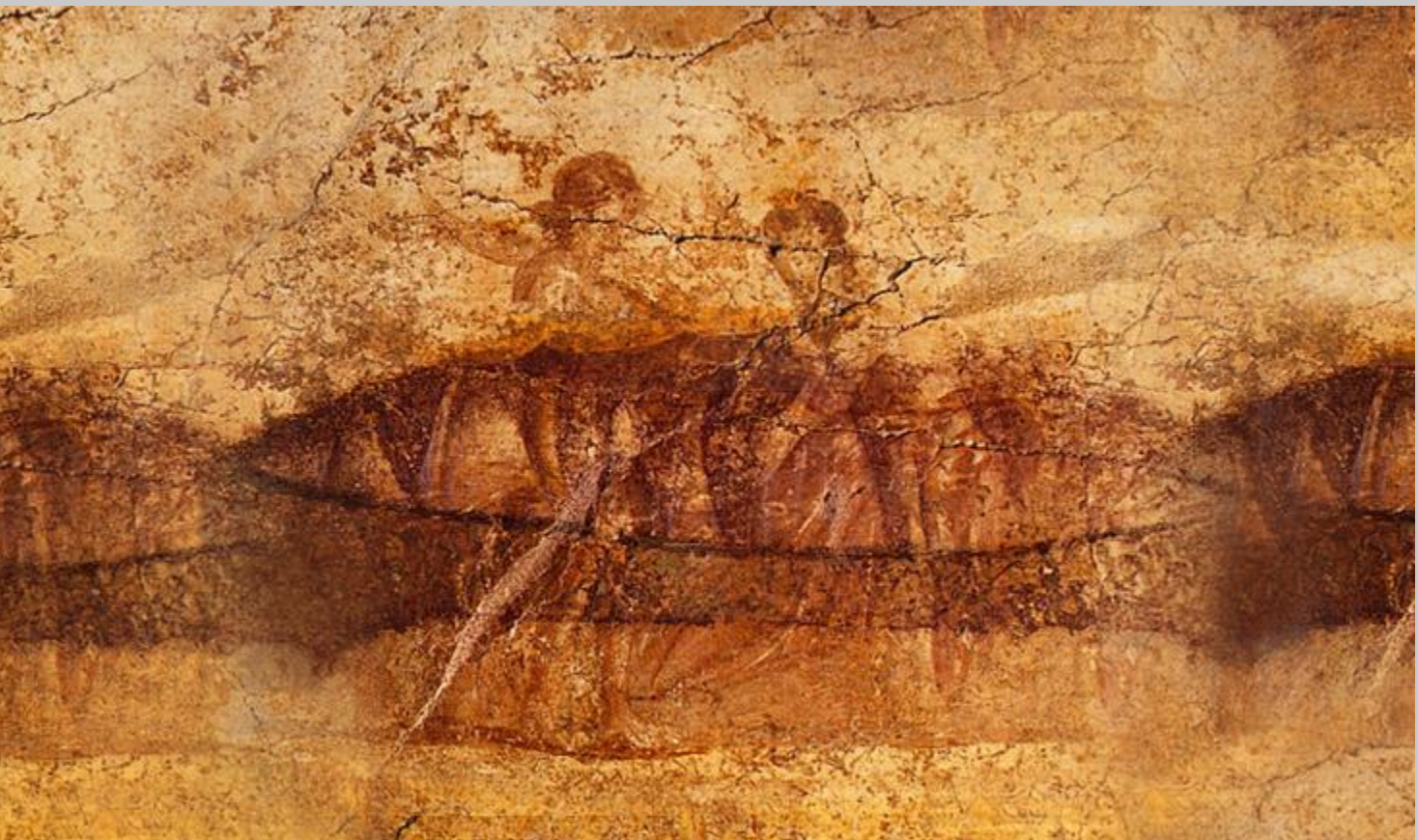


Figure 2. Fresco found in Suburban Baths in Pompeii



Figure 3. Reconstruction of Fresco

## Conclusions

- By showing sexual reciprocity between women and depicting the passive partner as being shameful, authors in the Roman Empire deviate from a phallocentric model when discussing female homoeroticism.
- In order to be more accurate, modern research and analysis should treat female homoeroticism differently from male homoeroticism, in order to better understand the Roman reception of female same-sex relationships and the motives behind and implications of that reception.

## References

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