**'An Army of Lovers' - The Sacred Band of Thebes**

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Louis Crompton argues that male love and military prowess went hand in hand in classical Greece.

The question whether homosexuals make good soldiers has been a controversial issue in many Western countries in the twentieth century. Most NATO nations accept them in their military establishments: Britain, Turkey and Portugal do not. In the United States homosexuals' right to serve has sparked a heated debate on a national scale, recently resolved in favour of a controversial 'don't tell' policy which allows gays and lesbians to enlist provided they do not divulge their sexual orientation. Given these often negative attitudes, it is intriguing to note that in ancient times, one Greek city state actually recruited a regiment of male lovers, the so-called Sacred Band of Thebes. Modern historians, mainly concerned with the achievements of Athens and Sparta, have paid little attention to their story, but it is a remarkable one, told in some detail by Plutarch.

In ancient Greece, Alcaeus, Anacreon and Pindar celebrated love between males in lyric poetry. Aeschylus, writing of the love of Achilles for Patroclus in his tragedy, The Myrmidons, dramatised its heroic possibilities. Philosophers hailed male love as a source of inspiration and followed Plato in decrying, or Zeno in approving, its physical expression. Cities with every kind of constitution took notice if its influence and directed it to their own political ends. Oligarchies, where an aristocracy or a wealthy few held sway, recognised its power to forge bonds between youths and older mentors within the ruling class. (This was the case in Sparta and in Theognis' Megara). Democracies like Athens, on the other hand, saw in male love a bulwark against oppression, and traced the re-establishment of popular freedom to a famous male couple, the tyrannicides, Aristogiton and Harmodius. But the major source of its prestige was the Greeks' conviction that such relationships could contribute effectively to military morale.

Homer's account in the Iliad of Achilles' devotion to Patroclus – especially his willingness to risk his life in avenging his dead comrade – exercised an enduring influence on Greek culture. This was a potent, if legendary, tradition of love that inspired valour in battle. But what of real history as opposed to epic poetry? The earliest documented instance of idealised homosexual love in a military context appears to be an episode recorded by Plutarch. The incident took place in the so-called Lelantine War between Chalcis and Eretria, two cities of Euboea, the island that hugs the eastern coast of Greece, paralleling the line of the Attic peninsula. Unfortunately we cannot date the Lelantine War with any exactitude – historians, guessing, place it about 700 BC. Plutarch, in his 'Dialogue on Love', tells us that one side, the Chalcidians, won a victory because of the courage of a general named Cleomachus, who led their Thessalian allies:

His beloved was there and Cleomachus asked him if he was going to witness the battle. The youth said he was, embraced Cleomachus tenderly and put on his helmet for him. Filled with ardour, Cleomachus assembled the bravest of the Thessalians about himself, made a fine charge, and fell upon their enemy with such vigour that their cavalry was thrown into confusion and thoroughly routed. When subsequently their hoplites also fled, the Chalcidians had a decisive victory. It was, however Cleomachus' bad fortune to be killed in the battle. The Calchidians point to his tomb in the market-place with the great pillar standing on it till this day [i.e. c.AD100].

Plutarch tells us that the Chalcidians, before this, had disapproved of pederasty but after this victory they enthusiastically embraced it.

By Plato's day, the idea that love of other men made warriors brave in battle had become a popular cliche in Greek society. It is not surprising therefore, that Plato had Phaedrus, in the opening speech of the Symposium, praise love in this fashion:

For I know not any greater blessing to a young man who is beginning life than a virtuous lover, or to the lover, than a beloved youth. For the principle which ought to be the guide of men who would live nobly – that principle, I say, neither kindred, nor honour, nor wealth, nor any other motive is able to implant so well as love ... And if there were only some way of contriving that a state or an army should be made up of lovers and their loves, they would be the very best governors of their own city ... and when fighting at each other's side, although a mere handful, they would overcome the world. For what lover would not choose rather to be seen by all mankind than by his beloved, either when abandoning his post or throwing away his arms? He would be ready to die a thousand deaths rather than endure this. Or who would desert his beloved or fail him in the hour of danger? The veriest coward would become an inspired hero, equal to the bravest, at such a time; Love would inspire him.

Uninformed modern readers, coming upon this rhapsody, are likely to discount Phaedrus' notion of an army of lovers as a flight of pure fancy. But the fact is that within a decade of Plato's penning of this speech (usually supposed to have been written about 385 BC) such a military force came into being.

The army that incarnated Phaedrus' heroic ideal was, of course, the so-called Sacred Band of Thebes. This force, created by the Theban general Gorgidas in about 378 BC, was made up, we are told, of 150 pairs of lovers who at first fought interspersed throughout other regiments. Later, under Gorgidas successor, Pelopidas, they fought as a separate contingent of shock troops. Their success was to make Thebes for forty years the most powerful state in Greece, and their fate was in the end the fate of Greece itself.

Theban tradition easily sanctioned such an institution. Thebes, the principal city of Boeotia, and Elis, the town near Olympia where athletes trained for the games, are repeatedly cited as the two states of the Greek mainland which most unqualifiedly encouraged homosexual relations. Xenophon in his Constitution of Sparta observed that such pairings were transitory at Elis but that at Thebes men and boys lived together in a kind of publicly recognised marriage. The cult of Heracles was especially strong in Boeotia. Not surprisingly, it was Heracles and his young lover and companion-in-arms Iolaus who became the patrons of male love at Thebes. Aristotle, in a lost work, described a sacred 'tomb of Iolaus' in Thebes where Boeotian lovers plighted mutual devotion. Plutarch thought the Sacred Band derived its name from this rite, which he notes was still a part of Theban life in his own day some four centuries later. (Two thousand years have changed the moral geography of Europe; male lovers seeking civic recognition of their relationships now find it not in sunny, conservative Greece, but in Norway and Denmark).

In 404 the Peloponnesian War had come to an end after twenty-seven wearisome years with the total defeat of Athens by Sparta. Unfortunately, the victors misused the power peace brought them. Sparta wielded its new hegemony harshly, imposing oligarchic rulers favourable to Spartan interests on states that had formerly had democratic regimes. Among these was Thebes where, in 382, a Spartan commander treacherously seized the citadel and installed new pro-Spartan leaders. Three years later democratic Theban exiles under Pelopidas returned and recaptured the fortress in a daring coup which drove out the Spartans. Conflict with the most formidable military regime in Greece now seemed inevitable. At this crucial juncture Gorgidas organised the Sacred Band, turning the fantasy of the Symposium into a military reality about seven years after its writing.

Plutarch, who was born and lived in the tiny village of Chaeronea some twenty miles west of Thebes, was particularly interested in Boeotian traditions. Thus it is that his biography of Pelopidas gives us a unique description of the Sacred Band. Throughout all his writings Plutarch can be counted on to give special attention to male love affairs: they are a recurrent theme in his Lives and in his moral essays. In the 'Life of Pelopidas' he shows himself very conscious of the peculiar esteem Thebes granted to these passions, and is at pains to trace their history. Among the various legends of the birth of pederasty (which usually ascribed its introduction either to gods like Zeus or to cultural heroes like Minos or Orpheus), one story traced its origin to the abduction of the boy Chrysippus by Oedipus' father, Laius, King of Thebes. Plutarch was clearly unhappy with this legend, since it made the Theban tradition begin with a brutal rape. He denies that this was the root of local custom. Instead he makes the institutionalisation of male love in Thebes a conscious decision on the part of its civic authorities. Finding Theban youth unruly and uncouth, Plutarch tells us, the city's rulers sought to 'relax and mollify their strong and impetuous natures in earliest boyhood'. To this harmonious end, they decided to train them in music and 'give love a conspicuous place in the life of the palaestra [the civic wrestling school], thus tempering the dispositions of the young men'.

Gorgidas, the first commander of the Band, must have been killed in some skirmish shortly after its inauguration, for the next year its leadership passed to Pelopidas, the young Theban who had led the exiles in their assault on the citadel. Now under siege by the Spartans, the Thebans at first hesitated to challenge their redoubtable enemies in a formal battle. But having come unexpectedly upon a Spartan force during a reconnoitering expedition at Tegyrae, Pelopidas daringly attacked. Though the Spartans outnumbered them two or three to one, his spirited leadership won the day. Plutarch thought the occasion notable:

For in all their wars with Greeks and Barbarians, as it would seem, never before had Lacedaemonians in superior numbers have been overpowered by an inferior force, nor, indeed, in a pitched battle where the forces were evenly matched. Hence they were of an irresistible courage, and when they came to close quarters their reputation sufficed to terrify their opponents, who also, on their part, thought themselves no match for Spartans with an equal force.

This unexpected victory gave the Thebans new hope by suggesting that the Spartans were not, after all, invincible.

Plutarch called the undefeated Pelopidas 'valiant, laborious, passionate, and magnanimous'. But his fame was eventually eclipsed by another Theban, his friend Epaminondas. Epaminondas' life contrasted with Pelopidas' in several ways. Pelopidas, though he lived modestly, was wealthy; Epaminondas, despite his renown, remained poor till the day of his death. Pelopidas married and had children; Epaminondas died a bachelor. At the time the citadel was seized Epaminondas was looked upon as a scholarly recluse. A devoted disciple of the Pythagorean sage, Lysis of Tarentum, who had settled in Thebes, he divided his time between exercise in the gymnasium, lectures and philosophy. He declined to participate in the assassination of the Spartanising Thebans, but once the revolt began he joined Pelopidas in re-establishing democracy. Early in their careers he bravely risked his life to save his wounded friend. Though they competed for glory on the same narrow stage they were never rivals, an unusual circumstance among the jealous Greeks. Epaminondas now developed into an orator and statesman as well as a soldier. Indeed, it was he who, at a general peace conference in 571, challenged Sparta's overlordship of the Peloponnesus. In retaliation the Spartan king, Agesilaus, angrily excluded Thebes from the peace treaty. Thebes hastily prepared for full-scale war.

The battle that tried the issue between Sparta and Thebes was one of the most decisive in Greek history. Pausanias called it 'the most famous [victory] ever won by Greeks over Greeks'. It took place at Leuctra in 371. On the battlefield Epaminondas devised a new manoeuvre. He strengthened his left wing and, holding his right wing back, attacked the Spartans obliquely, throwing them into confusion. Then Pelopidas led the Sacred Band to the charge and smashed the squadron commanded by the Spartan co-king, Cleombrotus, who was killed on the field. Epaminondas' current lover, Asopichus, also won fame in the battle. He put up so formidable a fight that, as Plutarch relates, a soldier who later dared to engage him in single combat was on this account granted heroic honours by the Phocians.

Their defeat at Leuctra destroyed at a blow the military supremacy the Spartans had enjoyed for centuries in Greece. In the wake of his victory, Epaminondas invaded the Peloponnesus, freed the provinces of Messenia and Arcadia from the Spartan yoke, and carried the war into the suburbs of the city; this was the first siege the Spartans had suffered during the 600 years since they had occupied the Peloponnesus following the Dorian invasion. Thebes was now the leading power in Greece.

The victorious Epaminondas acted with a magnanimity that contrasted strikingly with Spartan tyranny. Though the hegemony of Greece now fell to Thebes, he declined to subject other cities to Theban domination and pillage as the Spartans and Athenians had done earlier when they yielded power. No doubt he had the intelligence to realise that the economic and military resources of Thebes would not have sustained this enterprise. As a result he won a unique fame as a liberator rather than a conqueror.

Classical and modern historians alike have joined to salute Epaminondas as (Greece's greatest warrior-statesman. It was the opinion of Diodorus Siculus (who wrote in the age of Julius Caesar) that Epaminondas 'excelled ... all Greeks in valour and shrewdness in the art of war'. Diodorus ranked him above Solon, Themistocles, Miltiades, Cimon, Pericles and Agesilaus in generalship and reputation:

For in each of the others you would discover but one particular superiority as a claim to fame; in him, however, all qualities combined. For in strength of body and eloquence of speech, furthermore in elevation of mind, contempt of lucre, fairness, and, most of all, courage and shrewdness in the art of war, he far surpassed them all.

Diodorus was a Sicilian Greek and perhaps partial, but his Latin contemporary, Cornelius Nepos, a man of a totally different traditions, was if anything, even more eulogistic. In an essay in his Book of the Great Commanders Nepos assumes that Roman readers will look askance at Epaminondas' reputation as a musician and dancer, but begs them to remember that the Greeks esteemed such frivolities. But he praises without apology Epaminondas' intellectual and athletic prowess and finds he meets Roman standards of temperance, prudence and seriousness: he was 'practised in war, of great personal courage and high spirit' and 'such a lover of truth that he never lied even in jest'. One part of his character was quite unclassical (if we except Caesar): 'he was self-controlled, kindly and forbearing to a surprising degree'. Nepos acclaims him as one of the few successful Greek military leaders whose integrity was equal to his talent. His contemporary Cicero agreed. Discussing the influence of culture and philosophy on such leaders as Pisistratus, Pericles, Timotheus and Agesilaus in his De Oratore, Cicero hailed Epaminondas as 'perhaps the most outstanding figure in Greek history'.

Theban pre-eminence lasted only as long as Epaminondas lived. Pelopidas had led a force north to free the people of Thessaly from the vicious tyranny of Alexander of Pheras. Daring as ever, he was killed in 364 in a rash attempt to engage Alexander in single combat. The Thessalians mourned, and granted their would-be liberator heroic honours. In the meantime the weakening of Sparta left the Peloponnesus in turmoil. Rival factions in Arcadia summoned Thebes and Sparta to their aid and Epaminondas once more found himself face to face with his old foes at Mantinea in 362. His brilliant strategy again routed the Spartans, but at a fatal cost. Diodorus tells a story of his death. Pierced by a spear, he was told he would die when the point was withdrawn from his chest. After conversing with his friends, he said 'It is time to die', and ordered them to withdraw the weapon. Another lover of Epaminondas, Caphisodorus, also died at Mantinea; the two dead heroes were buried together on the battlefield.

The Theban Sacred Band survived for exactly four decades and then met its nemesis in Philip of Macedon. There is kind of irony in this finale, for a crucially formative period of Philip's own youth had brought him into intimate contact with the Band. As a young prince, Philip had been sent to Thebes in 367 at the age of fifteen as a hostage by Pelopidas and remained there for three years. This was shortly before the battle of Mantinea at a time when Thebes was at the height of her prestige. Philip must have been stirred by the victories of Epaminondas and Pelopidas, and fascinated by their new fighting methods. He later revolutionised military tactics by adapting them to his own purposes. Dio Chrysostom even links him intimately to the Sacred Band by making him the beloved of Pelopidas. Perhaps he was, or perhaps this is a purely honorific assumption in accordance with the Hellenic motto, cherchez l'amant. At any rate, Plutarch says Philip lived not with Pelopidas but in the house of Pammenes, the general who was to assume leadership of the Theban army after the death of Epaminondas. Pammenes was an enthusiastic advocate of the Greek theory of military discipline that underlay the organisation of the Sacred Band. In Homer the aged commander Nestor had been represented as organising the fighting units of the Greek army by tribes, as the most effective way of utilising group loyalties. Plutarch quotes Pammenes' criticism of this arrangement:

For tribesmen and clansmen make little account of tribesmen and clansmen in times of danger; whereas, a hand that is held together by the friendship between lovers is indissoluble and not to be broken, since the lovers are ashamed to play the coward before their beloved, and the beloved before their lovers, and both stand firm to protect each other.

On his return to Macedon, Philip put to use what he had learned at Thebes. When he came to the throne, he built up a strong professional army, and having secured his position in the north, managed by a series of adroit diplomatic manoeuvres to extend his power into southern Greece, with the intention of uniting the entire country under his command. Thebes and Athens belatedly formed an alliance to oppose him. The crucial battle took place in 358 at Plutarch's Chaeronea. The Sacred Band were once more the prime troops of the Greek army, still intact and undefeated, but this was their Gotterdammerung. True to their traditions, they stood their ground, and were killed to the last man, so that the bodies of the 300 lay strewn on the field. In the triumph of victory Philip came upon the remains of the regiment he had known in Thebes as an adolescent thirty years before. Plutarch describes his reaction:

And when, after the battle, Philip was surveying the dead, and stopped at the place where the 300 were lying, all where they had faced the long spears of his phalanx, with their armour, and mingled one with another, he was amazed, and on learning that this was the band of lovers and beloved, burst into tears and said: 'Perish miserably they who think that these men did or suffered aught disgraceful'.

The geographer Pausanias, touring Greece, visited the site 500 years later. In the empty fields overlooking the common grave of the Thebans, before a row of cypresses, he saw their memorial, a gigantic marble lion. It stands there still. It was restored in 1902 by an organisation called the Order of Chaeronea. This was in fact a secret, quasi-Masonic society of English homosexuals, founded and led by the reformer George Cecil Ives. In a tiny museum nearby are relics of the battle. During the nineteenth-century war of liberation, a Greek general broke up the lion's pedestal looking for treasure. He found none, but cemented into the ancient base were the spears and shields that belonged to the Sacred Band. On some of the shields can still be made out the names of the friends who fought together. Modern excavations of the battle graves have discovered the remains of 254 men, almost the whole complement of the Sacred Band, laid out in seven rows.

Philip had used Theban lessons to smash Thebes. He did not long outlive his victory. He had succeeded in his effort to unify Greece and stood poised to invade Persia. Then, two years later in 356 he was assassinated at his daughter's wedding under sensational circumstances. Homosexuality does not seem to have been as institutionalised in Macedon as it was in Thebes and Sparta. Nevertheless it played an important part in the lives of several of its monarchs, and, indeed, in Philip's assassination.

Accounts of the murder often speculate on the possible complicity of his wife, the fierce Olympias, and his half-estranged son, Alexander. The full story is less well known, but it is given in circumstantial detail by Diodorus Siculus and confirmed by Aristotle. The polygamous Philip, who 'waged war by marrying' had several wives and numerous mistresses, but he also had male favourites. One of these, Pausanias ('beloved by him for his beauty') had been succeeded in his affections by another younger man, who by chance bore the same name. The elder Pausanias denounced his rival as a whore who did not love the king:

Unable to endure such an insult, the other kept silent for the time, but, after confiding to Attalus, one of his friends, what he proposed to do, he brought about his death voluntarily and in a spectacular fashion. For a few days after this, as Philip was engaged in battle with Pleurias, king of the Illyrians, Pausanias stepped in front of him and, receiving on his body all the blows directed at the king, so met his death.

Though Philip was often a rough and brutal man, one is nevertheless struck by the fact that he could have won such devotion. But the sacrifice had further fatal consequences. Appalled at this suicide, Attalus, who was one of Philip's chief generals, invited Pausanias (the elder) to a feast, made him drunk with wine, and had him raped by his muleteers. Pausanias demanded vengeance from Philip. The king was sympathetic but since Attalus was one of his most valued commanders and the uncle of Philip's newest wife, he did not punish him. Pausanias bided his time, then, when Philip was walking in his royal robes unguarded in his daughter's marriage procession, he stabbed him to death before the assembled guests. Pausanias was then killed by Philip's attendants as he fled the scene.

It would be hard to over-estimate the role played by homosexuality in classical Greece. In Macedon it was an important fact in the turbulent lives of its rulers. In Athens, at the beginning of the sixth century, it was reputed to have bound such leaders as Solon and Pisistratus by intimate personal ties. At the end of the century, the lovers Aristogiton and Harmodius were credited with over-throwing the tyranny of Pisistratus' sons, and became the patron heroes of Athenian democracy. Its significance in Greek intellectual life is brilliantly reflected in the dialogues of Plato. But love between men owed its high prestige primarily to one consideration – its perceived ability to inspire heroic self-sacrifice in men, especially in some military cause. In this respect it supported one of the society's pre-eminent male ideals – that of the courageous warrior, an ideal required by the fact that a city or state that failed to produce such men might face subjugation or even enslavement by its rivals.

Of all the instances of the institutionalisation of male love in the pursuit of military ends, the case of the Sacred Band is the most noteworthy. It provided, in the view of the Greeks, incontrovertible proof that this ideal, which had hitherto existed only in theory and in isolated literary and historical examples, could be realised in contemporary life and made a bulwark of civic security.

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