Greek “Homosexuality”

Terminology:

“Homosexuality,” as the word is used today, is quite misleading when applied to the ancient Greek context. The more correct term is paiderasteia, so long as one does not take the word to mean what its English derivative—pederasty (= pedophilia)—means. To break the word down etymologically, the stem paid- means “boy” and erast- means love(r). Thus “boy-love.” But “boy” here does not mean little boy. The Greeks who engaged in paiderasteia were not pedophiles (child-molesters). “Boy” in this context meant post-pubescent males, from about 13 to about 19 years of age. Attractive young males were eligible as “beloved ones” or eromenoi (sing. eromenos). The older males who were attracted to them were “lovers” or erastai (sing. erastes), men of a mature age (about 20 and over) who were full-fledged members of the social, political, and military community of the city-state. A whole set of “dating rules” was in place, much as in heterosexual courtship in modern times. The lover was to be polite and solicitous, the beloved modest and not too “easy.” As part of the courtship of an eromenos, the erastes gave gifts. A beautifully painted vase was a favorite item, as we can tell from the common inscription “ho pais kalos” (“the boy is beautiful”).

Thus, the two participants in a paiderastic relationship were not normally age-mates or equals in terms of socialization/enculturation. This is rather different from the modern sense of “homosexuality.” Also different is the co-existence of such a relationship alongside monogamous heterosexual relations. The typical Greek male, even though the strongest romantic or erotic attachments of his life were likely to be with other males, nonetheless married, fathered children, and functioned as the head of a family (kurios), and even loved (!) his wife. But he might also engage in sexual relations with non-respectable women such as prostitutes (hetairai) or slaves in his household, and he might have a mistress (pallake).

In short, Greek males had available to them a whole range of sexual outlets. To classify individuals as gay or straight or “bi” would have made little sense in the ancient world. Why identify someone exclusively as (say) a broccoli eater, when he also eats turnips and beans? Moreover, in Greek culture there was no religious interdiction whatever against eating broccoli.

In this gender system, women were either non-respectable (and usually non-citizens), sexually available to any and all males, or respectable, that is, wives and mothers, sexually available to one and only one male. The kurios had to be sure that the child he fathered on his wife was his own. Hence, respectable women were sequestered and even segregated within their own homes.
The philosophical aspect:

Ancient Greek society was strongly patriarchal in its gender system. The philosophical bias (codified particularly in Plato and Aristotle) was that women were—by their very nature—confined to the realm of the physical: reproduction, motherhood, the rearing of small children, etc. Respectable women were to stay out of sight and out of mind, to paraphrase Pericles in his famous funeral speech. Women were not encouraged to develop their minds and so came to be thought of as possessing little intellect to begin with. (Women like Pericles’ Aspasia were exceptions to the rule; they were also considered non-respectable.) Thus, true love, that is, love that went beyond the merely physical, was more feasible for two males than for a man and a woman. The mindset here is that exclusively heterosexual interests were base and degrading, since a male could only derive physical gratification from a female. “Higher” love required two males.

The erotic aspect:

It seems apparent from both literature (esp. Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*) and art (esp. vase paintings) that powerful physical attraction to a younger male was a common, and not an exceptional, experience for Greek males. Even Socrates admits to having feelings of arousal in the presence of a beautiful younger male. And, outside the rarefied atmosphere of philosophical dialogues, physical gratification was certainly one element of the attraction to younger males. This could be accomplished in all the usual homosexual ways, but a certain stigma often attached to those who submitted too easily to penetration, whether anal or oral, perhaps because such submission was thought too feminine a behavior. The preferred method of intercourse was between the thighs or “intercrural” (much of the really good sexual vocabulary in English is Latin-derived).

At a certain point (typically when the beard of the *eromenos* came in more thickly), the physical intensity of the paiderastic relationship waned. The *eromenos* morphed into an *erastes* in his turn. Still, the non-sexual attachment between the two men undoubtedly remained strong throughout their lives.

The social/educational aspect:

The paiderastic relationship, in its ideal formulation, served a valuable social function in Greek culture. The *eromenos* acquired a mentor who modeled for him the behavior of a mature adult who fulfilled his responsibilities to his family
and to his city-state. It was the task of the “boy” to strive to merit the high esteem that the older male clearly felt and expressed for him. The erastes was expected to have the best interests of his beloved always in mind. He strove to be worthy of any esteem and physical affection that the eromenos might reciprocate. He needed to prove himself a proper role model, a good citizen and warrior. He must never abuse or degrade the eromenos. He should show interest in and place a high value on the well-being of his beloved in all aspects of life. Plato characterized the positive effects of love in such a relationship: true love is ennobling, it makes one a better person, a person who cares more about the other than about his own self-gratification.

Some historical examples:

• Harmodius, Aristogeiton, and Hipparchus: two erastai interested in the same eromenos (Harmodius). Insulting behavior triggered violence and murder.

• Alcibiades and Socrates: the eromenos-as-hussy (Alcibiades) “comes on” to Socrates who, though not impervious to sexual attractiveness, is focused on “higher” matters only; he is interested in Alcibiades’ mind, not his body. True “Platonic” love.

• Philip II: the sexual athlete, an erastes who goes through eromenoi (also women and the odd quadruped) like jelly beans.

• Alexander and Hephaestion: Though close in age (they were raised and educated together) Alexander was eromenos (like Achilles, his favorite heroic role-model) to Hephaestion’s erastes (like Patroclus, Achilles’ best friend). Hephaestion was, after Olympias, the person closest to Alexander in every sense. Alexander (like Achilles with the dead Patroclus) was devastated by Hephaestion’s death in 324, and survived him by less than a year.

• The Sacred Band: we all want to look good in the eyes of those we love and those who love us. This could be a formula for amazing bravery on the battlefield. Both the eromenos and the erastes would rather die than look bad in the eyes of the other. Unit cohesion taken to another level.
Further reading:

