“THE SPIRIT OF FORNICATION, WHOM THE CHILDREN OF THE HELLENES USED TO CALL EROS”: 
MALE HOMOEROTICISM AND THE RHETORIC OF CHASTITY IN THE LETTERS OF NILUS OF ANCYRA

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“If frosts and fasts, hard lodging and thin weeds, 
Nip not the gaudy blossoms of your love…” 
(William Shakespeare, Love’s Labour’s Lost act V, scene II)

Some time during the first two decades of the fifth century AD, two young men living in Constantinople fell in love with each other. One of them mentioned this in a letter sent to an old Christian ascetic, an acquaintance of his, who at the time was leading a life of prayer and renunciation in a monastic settlement in Asia Minor, near modern day Ankara. In a reply couched in somewhat hesitating, yet unambiguous, terms, the monk told his young correspondent that he was deceived: what he felt for the other young man could not be love. It was rather a trick of the devil, for such “love” was inappropriate for a well-educated Christian nobleman. He should keep away from his “beloved,” fast, and invoke God’s help in order to preserve his chastity undefiled.

Beyond this apparently resolute prohibition of male homoeroticism, there is much that makes this monastic response to the problem of male same-sex relationships extremely interesting, especially if we consider it in its historical context and in comparison with other (both Christian and non-Christian) problematizations of this aspect of male sexuality. First of all, one may ask why such a relationship would be regarded as inappropriate for a young man living in the increasingly Christianized society of the Eastern Roman Empire and why it would take a monk to define it as problematic. Furthermore, one may look at the reasons put forward by the monastic advisor in order to motivate the young man to deny and repress his avowed same-sex attraction as well as at the rhetorical strategies employed in his messages to achieve this purpose. Finally, it would be necessary to investigate other contemporary sources and situate his response in its specific historical and spiritual contexts. How representative was such a rejection of male homoeroticism for the
society where its proponent lived? Was it so determinate only because the man who formulated it was a Christian ascetic? Would other, less ascetic-minded, contemporaries agree with his verdict?

In what follows I intend to search for answers to some of these questions by looking at a series of texts produced in Late Antiquity in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire during the last decades of the fourth and the first three decades of the fifth century AD. The main group of sources I will use deals with male\textsuperscript{1} same-sex relationships (and with some other connected issues) and was authored by a Christian ascetic living in a monastic (most probably cenobitic) milieu. In addition to its more obvious value (i.e., as a primary source for the history of homoeroticism in early Christian times), this set of texts also offers a unique opportunity to analyze monastic problematizations of same-sex activities addressed to recipients living in non-monastic environments within the new Christian society, i.e. the laymen. Existing investigations of monastic attitudes towards same-sex behavior were based mainly on texts produced, intended for, and circulated within the monastic milieus. The present study attempts to take advantage of what seems to be a unique opportunity. Discussing a set of texts which, although produced by a monk, were explicitly aimed at Christian individuals living in a non-monastic context is likely to offer a necessary corrective to the existing, rather one-sided, picture of monastic attitudes towards male homoeroticism. Yet these texts have not attracted scholarly attention, despite the considerable interest they present for studying the history of homoeroticism in (Late) Antiquity and Christian attitudes towards same-sex relationships. This makes them all the more appealing, especially in a field where new original sources, virtually untouched by previous researchers, are a commodity hard to come by.

There are several possible explanations for such neglect. While there has been a virtual explosion of publications on ancient homoeroti-

\footnote{Sources for female same-sex relationships in monastic milieus during this period are extremely limited. This reflects the general situation of ancient female homoeroticism, which was rarely seen as problematic by the male authors to whom we owe most of the surviving sources and was, therefore, rarely discussed. For a discussion of Christian attitudes, see Bernadette J. Brooten, \textit{Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism} (Chicago, 1996), with relevant bibliography. Ancient Greek and Roman sources are collected in Thomas K. Hubbard, ed., \textit{Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents} (Berkeley, 2003); see also Juan Francisco Martos Montiel, \textit{Desde Lesbos con amor: Homosexualidad femenina en la Antigüedad} (Madrid, 1996).}