A recent article in this journal by Mr. David F. Wright has challenged the contention of Dr. John Boswell that ἀρσενοκοίται denotes "male sexual agents, i.e., active male prostitutes." Through much of Wright's article he cites texts with ἀρσενοκοίτας as denoting, variously, "homosexual activity" (139, 140); "homosexual conduct" (137); "male homosexuality" (131, 133, 134); "homosexuality" (141, 145); "male homosexual activity" (144); "that homoerotic vice which Jewish writers ... regarded as a signal token of pagan Greek depravity" (145); and, finally, in his title, "homosexuals": "Homosexuals Or Prostitutes: The Meaning of ἀρσενοκοίται (1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim 1:10)."

For some time, I too have been uncomfortable with Boswell's definition. Wright has performed a service in calling attention to the translations in the Versions, and to the LXX echoes in the word. As evinced above, however, there is considerable imprecision in Wright's own speaking of the meaning of ἀρσενοκοίτας. Reference to a dictionary will make manifest the distinctions among the multiple translations Wright offers.

In a future article I will discuss the adequacy of the various translations of ἀρσενοκοίτας. Broken into its roots, it literally translates as "the ones (masc.) who lie/sleep with men", and, in the interval, that is the translation I would espouse. Here, I only wish to point out that the translation given by Wright in his title, "homosexuals", is unacceptable.

Wright is not alone in offering "homosexuals" as the translation of ἀρσενοκοίτας; indeed, it is the rendering of today's most widely used English Bible translation, the Revised Standard Version (1 Cor. 6.9). In this brief note, I wish to call attention to a major disjunction between contemporary thought—especially as enshrined in our modern
noun "homosexual(s)"—and the categories of thought in the time of Paul. Both in Classical and Roman antiquity, male sexuality was regarded as polyvalent. There were an infinite number of options, any number of which might be pursued serially or simultaneously. A man might be, variously, a husband (άνήρ), a frequenter of prostitutes (πορνοκόπος), a lover of another man or young man (εραστής), a lover of youths (παιδεραστής), and/or an adulterer (μοιχός). While individual tastes might vary, virtually the total spectrum of known sexual behaviour, with the exception of transvestism, was acceptable (with varying degrees of enthusiasm on the part of the chronicler, of course). Thus, a man could be characterized sexually only by describing his sexual acts: man A is άνήρ και πορνοκόπος; man B is άνήρ και πορνοκόπος και εραστής; man C is πορνοκόπος και εραστής.

With the emergence of Christianity (which, as Wright correctly points out, largely appropriated Jewish sexual mores), new lines were drawn, now dividing sexual behaviour into the "natural" and the "unnatural". But these new labels were, perforce, applied on the basis of acts, just as the earlier Greco-Roman labels had been.

Thus, within both pagan and Christian antiquity, no categories of "homosexuals" and "heterosexuals" existed; indeed, such categories would not have made sense. Instead, acts were the crucial matter, earning you a sobriquet from Greco-Roman society, and a "natural/unnatural" label from Christian society. This fact is laid out with absolute clarity by Sir Kenneth Dover, in a work with which Wright is familiar:

The Greeks were aware ... that individuals differ in their sexual preferences, but their language has no nouns corresponding to the English nouns "a homosexual" and "a heterosexual", since they assumed that virtually everyone responds at different times to both homosexual and to heterosexual stimuli ...

History moves on, however, for better or worse. The same-sex love which many Greeks considered the highest, most noble form of human emotion, was called a heresy and a sin by the church. Later it was viewed as a crime, and subsequently as a medical illness.

It is at this point in history, in 1869, that a Hungarian physician, Karoly M. Benkert, writing in German in an open letter appealing for more humane treatment for those who prefer to love members of their own sex, first used the noun "homosexual". Benkert's word—he appears to have coined it—described certain "männlichen oder weiblichen Individuen" who were "bei der Geburt" erotically oriented towards their own sex.