



Greece: Modern

by Tina Gianoulis

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Considered by many to be the "cradle of homosexuality," as well as the birthplace of democracy, philosophy, and many modern sciences, Greece is a nation that takes great pride in its ancient roots. However, modern Greece is a largely conservative society, strongly influenced by the dominant Greek Orthodox church and Mediterranean notions of "machismo."

Although there is a certain acceptance of homoerotic love, there is little tolerance in the Greek mainstream for openly queer lifestyles. However, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender activists have worked since the 1970s to increase queer visibility and improve the status of gay men and lesbians in Greek society.

The Athenian democracy and the classical Hellenic Empire were followed by the Constantinople-based Byzantine Empire, which tied Greece as firmly to the East as to the West. The fiercely nationalistic Greeks bitterly resented their conquest by the Ottoman Turks during the fifteenth century, and many modern Greeks still celebrate the guerilla struggle that led to their independence in 1929.

Almost 51,000 square miles in size, Greece, called Ellas by the Greeks, is slightly smaller than the state of Louisiana. Three quarters of this area is mountainous, leaving only twenty-five percent of the land suitable for agriculture. Twenty percent of the nation consists of islands, which, while an obstacle to travel and shipping within the country, have been an undeniable asset in one of Greece's most modern industries--tourism.

Some Greek islands, notably Mikonos for men and Lesvos for women, have become gay tourist destinations, drawing thousands of international queers every year and giving Greek gays and lesbians a chance to party in public. Lesvos, the island on which Sappho lived, has been a particular site of pilgrimage for lesbians; Skala Eressos, the town where Sappho was born, also attracts European lesbians in great numbers.

Although queer lifestyles are largely closeted in the countryside, most large cities, such as Athens, Thessaloniki, and Iraklion, have many gay and lesbian bars, baths, and cruising areas.

Modern Liberation Movement

The modern gay liberation movement in Greece got its start during the 1970s. *Apeleftherotiko Kinima Omofilofilon Elladas* (AKOE) or Greek Homosexual Liberation Movement, founded in 1978, was one of the first openly gay organizations in the country and produced the first Greek gay publication, the journal *Amphi* ("Of Both Kinds"). Though AKOE dissolved in 1989, it became active again during the early 1990s.

Other queer rights groups have been formed throughout Greece, such as OPOTH, the Homosexual Initiative of Thessaloniki, which produced a gay radio program and published the journal *O Pothos* ("desire"). Another organization, EOK, the Greek Homosexual Community, organized the 1989 conference of the International



Top: Greece and neighboring countries.
Above: Mount Olympos on the Isle of Lesbos as photographed by Henryk Kotowski. Lesbos is a popular tourist destination.

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Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) in Athens. The Solidarity Association for Transvestites and Transsexuals offers support to transgendered queers.

Like lesbians in many countries, Greek dykes found themselves facing misogyny in the gay movement and homophobia in the women's movement. The lesbians who helped form AKOE soon left it in 1980 to join a feminist House of Women on Romanou Melodou Street in Athens. There they published a short-lived but important lesbian journal called *Lavris*.

However, though there were other women's houses during the 1980s, Greek lesbians have not found an easy alliance with straight feminists. They have continued to form their own groups, such as the very active Bookshop of Women, which not only wrote articles and released publications, but also hosted lesbian radio shows during the 1990s.

Lesviaki Omada Athinas, or Lesbian Group of Athens, arose out of discussion groups after the April, 2000, Gay Pride demonstration in Athens. Websites like lesbian.gr and Sapphites offer information and chat rooms in Greek.

Lesbian Visibility

In societies where masculinity is revered, homoerotic feelings between men are often understood and tacitly accepted, as long as heterosexual lifestyles are maintained. Lesbians, however, as women who do not need men, are often almost inconceivable in such cultures.

Lesbian visibility continues to be a problem in Greek society, and courageous activists such as Maria Catsicadacou and Christiana Lambrinidis have worked in different ways to give Greek dykes a public face. Catsicadacou, who also uses the name Maria Cyberdyke, has worked on lesbian radio shows and has been central in organizing large queer parties, both in Athens and in the lesbian resort town of Skala Eressos on the island of Lesbos.

Lambrinidis is an activist playwright. In 1998, she produced a pivotal dyke consciousness-raising event with *Lesbian Blues*, a play about Greek lesbian experience. The script of the play was created entirely from the work of women in writing workshops led by Lambrinidis. Controversial in Athens, *Lesbian Blues* won an award for "promotion of lesbian and gay culture" from the northern European cultural organization, Tupilik.

Legal Status of Homosexuality

For economic and cultural reasons, Greece values its membership in the European Union, but it has only grudgingly acceded to the EU's pressure to liberalize laws regulating homosexuality and it has flatly rebuffed the European Parliament's call in 2000 for member states to recognize gay and lesbian unions.

Although homosexuality per se is no longer criminalized in Greece, and lesbians are not mentioned at all in the Greek criminal code, several Greek laws discriminate against homosexuals. For example, homosexual prostitution is illegal, while there is no prohibition against heterosexual prostitution. The age of consent for homosexual activity is seventeen, while it is sixteen for heterosexuals. Moreover, vague references to "moral standards" have been used to discriminate against gay men and lesbians in both civil and criminal law, including areas such as military service, adoption, and marriage.

International gay advocacy organizations, such as the International Lesbian and Gay Association, have frequently spoken out against Greece's discriminatory laws and have appealed to the European Union to penalize Greece for violating its charter. However, the Greek Orthodox Church exerts a great deal of influence over Greek public policy and its attitude toward homosexuality is strongly condemnatory. Without stronger pressure from the EU, Greece is unlikely to move toward equal treatment for its homosexual citizens.

Political Demonstrations

Political demonstrations are a beloved Greek tradition, and gay men and lesbians have frequently demonstrated in the streets, whether at Gay Pride demonstrations in Athens, or in lesbian contingents in feminist marches like the World March of Women Against Poverty and Violence in 2000.

One of the most dramatic public gay demonstrations occurred on November 14, 2003 after the government fined a major television company 100,000 Euros for airing a program that showed two men kissing. Dozens of queers gathered in front of the national radio and television council for a public kiss-in.

Athens hosts the Summer Olympics in 2004, and a major Gay Pride celebration is planned in the city for September, 2004.

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Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.