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“THE SPIRIT OF FORNICATION, WHOM THE CHILDREN OF THE HELLENES USED TO CALL EROS”: PROBLEMATIZATIONS OF MALE HOMOEROTICISM IN LATE ANTIQUE MONASTIC MILIEUS

“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 in the first two decades of the fifth century CE, two young men living in Constantinople fell in love with each other. One of them mentioned this in a letter 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 delicate yet unambiguous terms, the monk told his young correspondent that he had been deceived: what he felt for the other young man could not be love. Rather, it was 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 when considered in its historical context and in comparison with other (both Christian and non-Christian) problematizations of this aspect of male sexuality. First of all, we should ask why such a relationship was 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. In addition, we should look at the reasons offered by the monastic advisor in his attempt to motivate the young man to deny and repress his avowed same-sex attraction and at the rhetorical strategies employed in his messages to achieve this purpose. Finally, it will 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 of the society in which its proponent lived? Was it so determinate merely because the man who formulated it was a Christian ascetic? Would other, less ascetically minded, contemporaries agree with his verdict?

In the following, 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 century and the first decades of the fifth century CE. The main group of sources I will use deals with male¹ 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. laymen. Existing investigations of monastic attitudes towards same-sex behavior were based mainly on texts produced and circulated within the monastic milieus. The present study attempts to take advantage of what appears to be a unique opportunity. Discussion of texts, which, though produced by a monk, were aimed explicitly at Christian individuals living in a non-monastic context, is likely to bring a necessary corrective to the existing, rather one-sided picture of monastic attitudes towards male homoeroticism. Remarkably, these texts have never attracted any scholarly attention, despite their considerable relevance to the study of homoeroticism in (Late) Antiquity and Christian attitudes towards same-sex relationships. This fact makes them all the more appealing, and all the more so in a field in which new original sources, virtually untouched by previous researchers, are a commodity hard to come by.

There are several possible explanations for this neglect. While there was an explosion in publications on ancient homoeroticism starting in

the 1980's,² these mainly focused on Classical Greece, the Hellenistic world, and the early Roman Empire, for which most sources were well-known, properly catalogued, and readily available. A significantly smaller number of works dealing with same-sex relationships in later periods (such as the later Roman Empire, Byzantium, and the Medieval West) has since appeared.³ Most notably, despite some recent efforts, Byzantine homoeroticism remains a severely understudied topic.⁴ The limited access to sources for the Christian period, many of them improperly edited, of difficult access, and not available in modern translations is partly to blame. To further complicate the matter, the study of ancient and medieval sexuality seems to be subject to an increasing tendency of highly theoretical and speculative discussion. Many a modern scholar appears to find conceptual controversy and discussion of essential epistemological issues more attractive than the old-fashioned search for new and unexplored material. Such debates are undoubtedly important in building the necessary hermeneutic framework within which to approach the problem of homoeroticism in pre-modern societies. Nevertheless, they tend to result in somewhat sterile dogmatic clashes, in which scholars brandish sweeping generalizations--quasi-definitive answers to important questions. Sadly, methodological sophistication is not always matched by a similar interest in searching for unexplored original sources that may produce new data and lead to subtle adjustments to established interpretations, which more often than not tend to be too rigid.

However, the most important obstacle in the way of proper scholarly research into early Christian attitudes towards same-sex relationships still remains the extremely partisan nature of most investigations into this highly sensitive issue. It seems difficult, on the one hand, to look at same-sex relationships in historical periods in which Christianity played an important role in shaping violent official reactions to unorthodox sexual behavior without resorting to concepts such as "intolerance," "persecution," "guilt," and "responsibility." On the other hand, confession b(i)ased approaches to this problem go to great lengths to exculpate the Christian Church by resorting to arguments of the "unnatural" character of same-sex relationships, which, in their opinion, motivated a "natural" reaction, a "continuous," "resolute," and "coherent" rejection of such behavior. The (ab)use of historical research into same-sex relationships as doctrinal panoply for contemporary debate concerning fundamental gay rights is likely to prevent further dispassionate and neutral research in the field,

an ideal that some militant scholars nowadays consider impossible as well as undesirable.⁵ The sad example of John Boswell's pioneering work stands as a reminder of how creative energies that might otherwise have been better spent go to waste in false debates.⁶

It will not take long to quote the few existing studies that address, mostly *en passant*, the issue of same-sex relationships in late antique monastic milieus.⁷ Those dedicated exclusively to this topic are yet fewer and, until recently, amounted to little more than inventories of relevant judicial and ecclesiastic sources with minimal discussion.⁸ Two more focused attempts at analyzing attitudes towards homoeroticism in Egyptian monastic texts are methodologically unreliable, and provide a highly distorted view of the original evidence.⁹ Finally, two recent investigations of homoeroticism in monastic and hagiographic sources should also be mentioned here. These approach the topic from different perspectives than that of this study.¹⁰ Most of the work, then, remains to be done, and in the following I will suggest that this work should concentrate on identifying and analyzing more relevant primary sources before drawing general and 'definitive' conclusions.¹¹

It is most unfortunate that the letter sent by Pierius, the young nobleman from Constantinople, to his monastic advisor, St. Nilus of Ancyra, has not survived. What must have been a passionate description of his erotic involvement with another young man can now only be guessed from the dry summary of his message contained in Nilus' reply.¹² It is even more unfortunate that this reply had to lay buried until now in an improperly edited collection of letters,¹³ of difficult access, and which, furthermore, is plagued by significant doubts concerning its authenticity.¹⁴ I think it unlikely, however, that we will find an equally direct and powerful statement of same-sex love in any other late antique sources. And this is probably as close as we could get to a man involved in a homoerotic relationship expressing his ardent feelings for another man without resorting to a tantalizing display of traditional rhetoric. It would seem, Nilus wrote to Pierius, judging from

the contents of your letter, [...] that during this month you have developed a great passion for Dionysiodorus, the *magister's* son, so powerful and hard to bear that you do not wish either to eat or to drink or to live if you cannot see the youth who first fell in love with you...¹⁵

Apparently unimpressed, and probably alarmed by the candid tone of his young friend's confession, the good monk hurried to put matters straight from the very opening lines of his response. Pierius should not be deceived: "love according to God (ἡ κατὰ Θεὸν ἀγάπη) is one thing, and worldly and bodily friendship (κατὰ κόσμον καὶ σάρκα φιλία) of a rather brutish and irrational sort is another" (280B). His so-called "love" for Dionysiodorus was nothing but a relationship based on physical attraction.¹⁶ Worse still, it was a sin, into which, Nilus assumes, the young man fell unawares, lured by "the deceitful and filthiest demon who [was] set on ensnaring [his] virtuous and God-loving soul." The monk promptly exposed this demon as what it was, namely, "the spirit of fornication (τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς πορνείας), whom the children of the Hellenes used to call Eros (ἔρωτα)" (280C). Love for another young man was sinful because the demon that inspired it, easily recognized by an experienced Christian ascetic, though not so obviously dangerous to a young Christian nobleman, came from the pagan past bringing with it the threat of πορνεία, illicit sexual activity. These are the main points on which Nilus dwelled in the rest of his letter, and which I intend to analyze in the following.

Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to substantiate some of the assumptions of the above summary. Though we may know but little about Nilus himself, it seems certain that throughout the later part of his life he lived as a Christian monk near the city of Ancyra, in Asia Minor (modern day Ankara, in Turkey).¹⁷ Based on the information contained in his works, I consider it plausible that he had spent his youth, before becoming a monk, in Constantinople. It is likely that he then met and became close to John Chrysostom, archbishop of Constantinople between 398 and 404 CE. Furthermore, judging by the high quality of the rhetorical skills displayed in some of his writings,¹⁸ it is probable that Nilus benefited from a traditional education (παιδεία), which in the fourth and the fifth centuries CE was still a privilege of the well-to-do ruling elite of the Roman Empire. To this he added a profound knowledge of Christian Scriptures and a first hand acquaintance with the works of several major Christian writers of the time.¹⁹ His profile is typical for the recently emerged Christian intellectual elite, some of whose members embraced and endorsed a particularly ascetic form of Christianity somewhat contrary to their thoroughly traditional education acquired in the schools of rhetoric, which at the time were still largely dominated by pagan masters.

As for Pierius, several indications point to the fact that he belonged to the privileged ruling class of late antique society, i. e. Nilus' own

background before his conversion to a monastic lifestyle. The *Ep.* 2.177 bears the heading ΠΙΕΡΙΩΙ ΚΟΜΗΤΙ ΝΕΩΤΕΡΩΙ “To Pierius, the younger comes,” and although its content offers no other evidence of the exact identity of the addressee, it makes a reference to his beloved, identified as Dionysiodorus, “the *magister’s* son” (Διονυσιόδωρον τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ μαγίστρου).²⁰ At the time when Nilus wrote this letter, Dionysiodorus’ father probably occupied the position of *magister officiorum*, one of the most important civilian ministers at the emperor’s court in Constantinople.²¹ Consequently, Pierius will have belonged to an aristocratic Constantinopolitan family, as is suggested by his being awarded the honorary rank of *comes*.²² Dionysiodorus’ father may have held his position some time between 406 and 414 CE, in the early years of the reign of Theodosius II (412-450 CE).²³

In addition to belonging to the aristocracy, Pierius was also a Christian and probably raised in a Christian family, as suggested by Nilus’ use of phrases such as “your virtuous and pious soul,”²⁴ and “virtuous offspring of a virtuous root.”²⁵ In any case, the extensive use of scriptural material in the letter he received from the monk assumes on his part some knowledge of both the Old and the New Testaments.²⁶ A spiritual relationship (of the type master-disciple) probably existed between Nilus and Pierius, although it is not clear how this functioned given the geographical distance separating them. It is certain that the young man did benefit from the monk’s instruction on several occasions,²⁷ even if this exchange of wisdom was probably carried out only in epistolary form and not face to face as happened with another young Christian nobleman called Domninus, who lived in Ancyra and received an extensive letter from Nilus detailing the perverse operations of the “spirit of fornication” in very similar terms to those of the letter to Pierius.²⁸

Seemingly, Pierius was not worried about the moral status of his involvement with Dionysiodorus, which he readily defined as “love.” Whether he delivered the news of his homoerotic passion to Nilus in a casual manner in his letter or, worse still, wrote to solicit advice as to how to proceed in this situation will remain unclear as long as the original text is lost. I assume, however, that loving another young man was not problematic for Pierius. It was in fact something a young aristocrat might “naturally” do. Nilus seems to imply as much when alluding to “other signs and indications that are contained in the letter which you wrote to me” (280D) and by which he was able to detect the problem while his correspondent clearly failed to do so.

Nonetheless, a same-sex relationship was problematic for a Christian nobleman in ways unsuspected by Pierius, whose attitude towards the Christian moral code appears to be one of candid ignorance, if not outright neglect. At the beginning of the fifth century CE, the moral code of the wealthy educated elite, to whom Pierius belonged, would have offered him a problematization of homoeroticism that still differed in many respects from Christian problematization(s). And it would have done so despite the gradual emergence during the first centuries of the Roman Empire of stricter, more ascetic pagan standards of moral behavior, which led to a gradual blurring of boundaries between Christian and non-Christian morals, a process well documented by modern research.²⁹ Although this austere pagan moral code probably entailed a less comfortable acceptance of homoeroticism, it still regarded it as a possible form of erotic fulfillment.³⁰ The simple fact that Pierius could describe his involvement as “falling in love” proves that some individuals in the aristocratic circles of Christian Constantinople still thought that women were not the only possible (or legitimate) objects of sexual attraction and that love could still go both ways. What would certainly pose a problem to them were such issues as the role one played in a same-sex relationship (i. e., active or passive), the extent to which the individual gave in to his passions, the consequences for health, and, probably most of all, the reputation that might be acquired as a result.³¹

It is highly significant that, with one important exception that will be discussed below, Nilus’ reply did not concern itself with these aspects. For the Christian ascetic, loving thy neighbor, in the way Pierius did, was simply out of order because it was a sin. It went against being a Christian since it infringed upon God’s law as expressed in the Scriptures, the basis of Christian morality. Though Nilus did not spell this out, his references to “sin” and “wicked deed”³² in describing Pierius’ “love” is most telling. More importantly, the colorful and highly disparaging terms he used to refer to sexual passion and to its agent, the devil, with their emphasis on “impurity”³³ and “death,”³⁴ all suggest that what Pierius felt for Dionysiodorus was strongly condemned by Nilus because it trespassed against the Christian moral rules as understood by a Christian ascetic.³⁵

Does this make Nilus “intolerant” or “homophobic”? Asked in such terms, the question is clearly meaningless.³⁶ What Nilus condemns is not homoeroticism *per se*, which he apparently regarded as an equally available, albeit morally objectionable, option. He warned his young friend that the deceitful demon could *equally* assume the face of a male

or of a female in order to deceive his victim: "At first, however, he (viz. the demon) [...] instills an unsuspecting affection for some person, either familiar or foreign, *be it male or female* (ἄρρενος ἢ θηλείας)."³⁷ In accordance with a certain part of the Christian tradition, our ascetic rejects *all* sexual activity or, in his terms, πορνεία. This rejection illustrates a significant shift of focus in the realm of moral reflection, namely an evolution concerning what Foucault has termed "determination of ethical substance."³⁸ While for traditional Greek (and, with certain differences, Roman) morality it was the sexual act, seen in its close relation to desire and the ensuing pleasure, that was the essential part of the self that was the object of moral behavior and regulation, for Christian thinkers it was desire alone, now defined as sinful, which formed the main domain of an individual's moral behavior.³⁹

Foucault's theoretical formulation is borne out well in Nilus' letter to Pierius in which the good monk went to great lengths to argue that what a Christian should worry about most is carnal desire and the guilty pleasure that accompanies it.⁴⁰ Both had to be extirpated⁴¹ in order to obtain a blessed state of purity, the only condition befitting a Christian young man.⁴²

Some of the effective means Nilus suggested for achieving this blessed purpose and fighting "the beasts of luxury"⁴³ came from the traditional arsenal of asceticism (severe fasting, fervent prayer, and psalmody).⁴⁴ These were drawn from Nilus' experience as a spiritual monastic leader and from his good knowledge of the ascetic writings available at the time. Both these sources also inform his intricate psychological analyses of the mechanisms of temptation included in the letter to Pierius.⁴⁵ It is, I think, remarkable that he directed such advice to a young Christian nobleman living in the luxurious urban environment of Constantinople, a hotbed of temptation and a quite unsuitable place for following the ascetic program he recommended to Pierius.⁴⁶ That Nilus undoubtedly expected his young friend and disciple to follow this ascetic routine is a sign of the times.⁴⁷

Nonetheless, Nilus must have been aware that Pierius, even assuming he was intending to follow the prescribed regime, did not live in the comforting solitude of the desert. Therefore, he offered him other, more appropriate, common sense advice ("out of sight, out of mind"): stay away from Dionysiodorus! This, incidentally, reveals the monk's perfect acquaintance with a wide range of activities and venues that two young men in love might use for getting close to each other, probably learnt

from his own pre-monastic experiences in Constantinople. First, Nilus compiled a descriptive list of day-to-day activities to be avoided *qua* morally problematic. The devil, says our monk,

bids us to converse with that person and to spend time together, to keep company with them, to associate with the person and be at ease together, then be partners in necessary affairs and join in celebrations, as well as have fun and dine together without any licentious thought (χωρίς λογισμοῦ πορνικοῦ). All these become foundations, bases, beginnings, and roots of sin.⁴⁸

A second list is more prescriptive and included a strong injunction to abstain from such activities in the company of the beloved or, if this was unavoidable, to transform them into morally unobjectionable occurrences by a fierce display of *gravitas*.

Take care, he wrote, and be on the lookout as much as it is in your power for this whoremongering and wicked demon (τὸν μαστροπὸν καὶ πονηρὸν δαίμονα). Shun the company of Dionysiodorus, and neither feast with him, nor attend gatherings together, neither eat nor drink with him. Do not spend your time in his company even if you only have in mind to accompany him for a short while. Should it somehow become necessary for you to meet with him, do not look him in the face lest through your windows (I mean your eyes) the death of sin might enter your soul as the Prophet says [Jer. 9.21]. Rather, look down unto the ground and give him answers with a serious countenance and with a stern face, and do not permit yourself to laugh or bathe together with him.⁴⁹

The scrupulous monk then warned his young correspondent that, since the multifarious demon of fornication is such an accomplished schemer, he may even disregard age-old Greek assumptions about love being engendered only by beauty. And, in consequence, Nilus felt compelled to add:

You should also know that the enemy tempts some people not only by means of good-looking faces, but even through uncomely and disfigured faces, both female and male, instilling into the soul some sort of blind passion (ἔρωσ). Since the filth-loving demon is mischievous and multifarious, he often attempts to ensnare [us] in one way or another by means of an unseemly and shameful craving (διὰ τῆς ἀτόπου καὶ αἰσχρᾶς ὀρέξεως).

Avoid, therefore, intercourse with unclean youths, be they handsome or uncomely!⁵⁰

After imparting such beneficial admonitions, Nilus could have left it at that and trusted his young and distant disciple to stay out of the devil's way. This he did not do, however, and this brings us to what I consider the most fascinating aspect of his *Letter* to Pierius. Nilus had no practical way of ensuring his advice was followed; the young man was far away and this did not facilitate a proper relationship of spiritual fatherhood. We can surmise from his *Ascetic Discourse* how Nilus imagined this relationship ideally should work:

When masters of this kind are found [viz., perfect], they need pupils ready to deny themselves and their will to such an extent that they would differ in no respect from inanimate bodies or from the material which is modeled by a craftsman, so that as the soul does whatever it thinks fit in the body, the latter should not resist it. And, as a craftsman exhibits his skill upon the material and this does not prevent him in any way from reaching his purpose, so the master will effect the skill of virtue in his submissive pupils, who do not contradict him in any respect."⁵¹

We can safely assume Nilus would have had somewhat lower expectations from a layman; still, it is obvious that the master lacked in this case the means of control readily available to the elders of the desert or the superiors of *coenobia*. Consequently, he had to rely on the *bona fides* of his disciple, which he skillfully tried to secure in his letter by means of a combined strategy of admonition and praise, flattering and instructing at the same time.⁵² Furthermore, Nilus' efforts to adapt his discourse to a non-monastic audience are clearly evident in the amount of explicit, at times very graphic details of sexual arousal and its possible fulfillment in his letters to the two young men. This stands in marked contrast to similar problematizations of sexuality extant in monastic sources composed for the benefit of other monks. Several ascetic authorities admitted that it was extremely dangerous to discuss openly (and yet more so, to put down in writing) titillating details which might whet the imagination of the audience, giving young monks food for sinful thoughts.⁵³ Nilus himself voiced a similar concern when he described the qualities required of a spiritual advisor, observing that

for the one who talks about passions, even if by doing so he wipes off the stains of others, it is impossible to remain himself undefiled. Even the [simple] mention soils the thought of the speaker. [. . .] It is necessary that a [spiritual] master be skilled to such an extent that he should not ignore any of the enemy's devices in order that he could indicate to those who submit to his control the hidden weapons by unmasking them. He also needs to know how to predict the strategies of the adversary so that he may render victory effortless to his pupils and lead them out of combat crowned with the crown of victory. Such men are rare and it is not easy to find them.⁵⁴

The reasons behind his detailed description of sexual temptation are clear. Both Pierius and Domninus, the two young men to whom Nilus was writing, lived in a world full of temptations and, unlike the safely secluded young monks with plenty of spare time on their hands, the two did not have the opportunity to dwell upon sinful *thoughts*. On the contrary, for them, temptation in respect of sinful *actions* was of a much greater concern, since this was available with every step they took in the bustling streets of the late antique metropolises of Constantinople and Ancyra. Thus, they needed to be instructed in detail about the works of the shameless demon of πορνεία. And Nilus did not recoil from providing detailed guidelines for the correct hermeneutics of their desire.⁵⁵ To Pierius he wrote in a few words how even an apparently innocent friendship could turn into spiritual disaster:

At first, however, [the demon does], so to say, nothing that would be very hard to bear, but he only instills a sort of curiosity and a candid affection for some person, either familiar or foreign, be it male or female. Then, he bids us to converse with that person and to spend time together, to keep company with them, to associate with the person and be at ease together, then be partners in necessary affairs and join in celebrations, as well as have fun and dine together without any licentious thought. All these become foundations, bases, beginnings, and roots of sin. Afterwards, once a certain amount of time has passed, and it has become difficult for you to tear yourself away from that bad acquaintance, it is precisely then that the demon approaches the genital organs, suddenly ignites the flames of the body, and heats up the members until they blaze like bronze. And by shooting against your heart the fiery arrows of the thoughts of illicit pleasure, he urges [it] towards the wicked deed, setting it powerfully ablaze like the furnace of Babylon.⁵⁶

In his letter to Dominus, he was yet more explicit and painted a remarkable picture of the dynamics of sexual arousal up to its final consequences, alluding to or openly mentioning such things as erection, masturbation, erotic dreams, and (involuntary) ejaculation.⁵⁷

Now listen and be astonished at how the accursed demon will instruct in this matter even those who are not yet experienced in the disease of fornication! Often, while the youth lay in bed around midday, the demon, approaching him in complete silence as a crafty and villainous snake, starts speaking to the soul through some imaginary representations, as if from the mouth of another person, male or female, and persistently urges him towards the loathsome passion. Sometimes, attacking also the head of the youth, he chases sleep away from his eyes in order that, staying awake and having nothing to do, [the young man] might be completely engaged in the thoughts of impurity and, having indulged himself with shameful desires, he might very easily become practiced in fornication. However, if the young man comes under attack while asleep, [the demon] now approaches him through dreams, depicting sin to him accurately, touching his [sexual] organ and kindling an inflammation. Another one he makes see the image of a person with the face of some man or of some woman and this [he performs] in a fashion which is both unsuspected and hard to recognize, hinting at nothing, so to say, sexual, but displaying [merely] a simple friendship and an insatiable affection. Nevertheless, the demon's intention in all this charade does not have an honest purpose, but a wicked one. To some he warmly and quite openly suggests that they put into practice the desire of their heart. Some other he draws towards pleasure by having him converse with youths of the same age, and yet another he drags out of the entrenchment of divine continence through some sort of illicit acts which are better left unspoken.⁵⁸

The demon does not depict the passion only in dreams in an impure and most shameful manner. Nay, often even when a man is awake [the devil] makes him see with [the eyes of] his mind men and women impurely meeting, so to speak, for sinful purposes and engaging in sexual intercourse. And, again, it can also happen sometimes, when one is actually praying in church, that [the devil] both excites the genital organs, by igniting them with an inflammation, and pierces the heart with improper thoughts. And there are also times when he causes the one whom he is tempting to suffer even an emission [of sperm] because of [that person's] keen enjoyment. And often, as he had made a large quantity of sperm accumulate in the loins, when one urinates the urine brings forth with it this sperm to the effect that some people, scared and dismayed [by this occurrence] will fall

into despair and loss of heart. Some others the terrible and shameless one tempts most frequently especially during the holy feasts.⁵⁹

In writing to Pierius (and to Dominus) of such delicate matters, Nilus was imparting some of the wisdom he had acquired as a monastic leader. He also assumed the position of an external authority that tried to shape and influence the moral behavior of a subject so that it comply with an established moral code. The monk appealed to the two young men urging them to embrace what effectively amounts to complete sexual renunciation (a highly valued item in the ascetic Christian moral code).

He also tried to ensure compliance by means of a twofold appeal to values which do not immediately strike the reader as typically Christian. The first of these is glory, good fame, and the appreciation others will show for a continent young man, that is, if his abstinence from same-sex relationships confirms and enhances his noble family's prestige. Pierius should be most concerned about this because his liaison with Dionysiodorus, as Nilus writes, would certainly harm him "for the reputation of this young man is not of the best, and it is necessary to avoid the suspicions that his company might bring upon you" (281D). It is hardly suitable for a nobleman like Pierius, "virtuous offspring of a virtuous root" (281C) to shame his family's good name by failing to control his lust, that "worldly and bodily friendship of a rather brutish and irrational sort" (280B) he felt for Dionysiodorus.⁶⁰ Nilus trusted that his young friend was after all not one of those people "who are bent on pleasure and who are careless about the punishments to come and about that universal tribunal" and whom "the spirit of fornication, whom the children of the Hellenes used to call Eros, quite openly and rapidly and without any effort drags into the pit of wantonness" (280C).

Nilus drew a very sharp distinction between the crowd, which submits without fight to its irrational appetites, and the valiant few who choose to fight their sexual urges, thus revealing their self-mastery and their superior nature. By appealing to Pierius' pride of belonging to this "natural" elite of society, Nilus skillfully manipulates this feeling (which is hardly Christian and less so monastic⁶¹) in order to convey to him that compliance with the Christian (ascetic) moral code and elite membership are not mutually exclusive. This comes out even more clearly in his *Letter to Dominus*, the young city-councilor.

For you are inspired both by your birth and by your most virtuous choice (τῆ καλλίστῃ προαιρέσει), and strive to offer unceasingly to God the admirable continence of your parents and of your grandfathers, scorning the beauties of life, fasting each day and adorning yourself with prayers and charitable deeds as well as preserving your purity amidst a thousand things that might defile it.⁶²

With his skilful antitheses, Nilus establishes a stark contrast between the few who consciously adopt a superior lifestyle and the many who remain content with their beast-like condition. These he depicts as the others, the crowd (οἱ πολλοί), forever “bellowing under the sting of pleasure” and who “[do] not wish to contemplate or consider the realm of virtue and its dominion.”⁶³ These are the cowards who put up no fight, show no fortitude, and gain no victory. They are the ones who, as Nilus writes elsewhere, betrayed true Christian values by failing to rise up to the ascetic lifestyle Christ had set as a paradigm for all his true followers, that “image of a most virtuous way of life.”⁶⁴ A true nobleman by birth, Pierius is invited to become a true nobleman by choice by entering the ranks of the Christian elite.⁶⁵

The second argument is even more manipulative, although in less obvious ways. It plays with the concept of “passivity,” an essential component of Greek and Roman images of masculinity.⁶⁶ If people praise Pierius for his continence, just imagine what they would say if they found out that he gave in to his guilty passion for Dionysiodorus! Nilus does not explicitly link Pierius’ same-sex attraction with a passive position in a possible sexual intercourse, something abhorrent to a young freeborn Roman male. He does, however, insinuate, mainly by the language he uses, that giving in to guilty pleasure would cause Pierius to lose his mastery of himself, the active position central to the traditional definition of masculinity with which he and his peers most probably operated. Enslavement to passion (if only spiritual) would undermine his masculinity and make him less of a man, a mere toy for the demon of same-sex lust. Assuming the young man’s posture after his fall, Nilus described this enslavement in metaphoric terms: “But I am caught like a lion for slaughter, and I am led in chains like a dog, and like a bird into the trap, and I am burning with the fiercest fever of impurity” (281B). He also used a very telling image to suggest the probable result of this submissiveness: “I am surrounded by a wall of shameful passion (τῷ τῆς αἰσχροπαθείας τειχίσματι)” (ibid.), with αἰσχροπαθείας literally meaning “suffering

that which is shameful." The most powerful formulation appears in the *Letter to Dominus*.

It is impossible for pleasure ever to remain calm or be appeased in those who have been subjugated and defeated by her. On the contrary, like some barbarian mistress, she afflicts [them] with the wounds of sexual intercourse and unceasingly demands her tribute, constraining even by force those who, by their failures, have become her slaves, and allowing almost no respite to those subjected to her. [...] And freedom does not appear easily, since men are eager to serve evil quite willingly day and night, willfully allowing themselves to be defeated by corruption and always loving the poison of pleasure.⁶⁷

Cowardice, defeat, captivity, voluntary enslavement, servitude to a barbarian,⁶⁸ and a woman at that, all play upon the same *active vs. passive* opposition which characterized classical Greek male ideals in both the sexual and social sphere.⁶⁹ In the game of power (over the self, over the others, over the demons), Nilus employs the same opposition and appeals to the same ideal.

How effective this strategy probably was will become apparent if we take a look at other sources on homoeroticism from a similar time as Nilus' *Letters*. Most of these show the same obsessive concern with the sexual passivity freeborn citizens might engage in (of their own free will or otherwise), and they suggest that this was a matter of the utmost importance, which shaped (aristocratic) male perceptions of same-sex relationships at the turn of the fifth century CE.

First, there is the imperial legislation: on two occasions in the fourth century, Christian emperors issued laws against male prostitutes, i. e. men willing to adopt a passive role in same-sex intercourse for material gain.⁷⁰ One law, aimed at male prostitutes working in Rome, connected passive homoeroticism with failing masculinity much in the same way Nilus did. The author of the law issued in the name of Theodosius I argued that submission to another male not only affected Roman individuals who agreed to such an unspeakable deed, but brought disgrace upon "the city of Rome, mother of all virtues." The mere presence of passive individuals who forfeited the essence of their masculinity for material gain stained the Eternal City and insulted the manly force of its initial founders.⁷¹ Death by burning was prescribed "so that all should understand how sacred the dwelling of a virile soul must be."⁷² If these two early

laws referred explicitly to male prostitutes, in 438 the compilers of the vast legal corpus known as the *Codex Theodosianus* also included a shortened version of the law from 390, along with the constitution of Constans of 342. In its new wording, which was to take precedence over all existing related legislation, the law now referred not to passive male prostitutes, but to passive males generally:

All those, through whose crime a male's body is treated as a female [body] and is compelled to suffer the passivity specific to the other sex, in fact have nothing that would differentiate them from women; they will pay for a crime of this kind through the avenging flames in full view of the people.⁷³

It is important to note that repressive measures against same-sex activities appear to become harsher and more extended over time, probably in connection with the increasing Christian influence on the imperial household. An ascetic emperor like Theodosius II, praised by ecclesiastical historians for converting his imperial palace into a monastery, was more likely to condone a general condemnation of passive males, while his predecessors had legislated exclusively against passive male prostitutes.⁷⁴

Death was not only punishment for sexual submission to another male; it was sometimes preferable to it. A rhetorical declamation composed by Libanius (314-393 CE), the famous sophist of Antioch, argued as much.⁷⁵ Notwithstanding the fictitious topic it addresses,⁷⁶ I consider this text quite relevant to the present study. Such declamations were intended to serve as didactic material in the schools of rhetoric that still trained the educated Late Roman intellectual elite at the end of the fourth century CE. As such, they did not serve as mere "storehouses of technique and felicitous wording"⁷⁷ from which many a Roman nobleman drew the substance of his own speeches when appearing in public. They also offer precious indications about the attitudes and mentalities instilled into the minds of the young men who attended these schools and went on to become city councilors, civil servants, military governors or, with increasing frequency, bishops and monastic leaders. A young man like Pierius, for instance, was expected to read such texts, and use them as models for his own compositions. The well-educated Nilus probably did the same in his youth. Thus, by studying them, we can obtain, as a reputed connoisseur of the genre put it, "an idea of the values and prejudices that teachers assumed or encouraged."⁷⁸

In his *Declamation 42*, Libanius spoke in defense of a father accused of murdering his own son rather than have him submit to the lust of another male, a tyrant who, madly in love with the youth, threatened to make war against the city unless he got what he wanted. In the mind of the fictitious father there was apparently no dilemma, as “after all, rape is unbearable while death is not, so let the city be saved together with his chastity!”⁷⁹ Undefined chastity is seen here as the supreme value, an ideal with which many Christians would have agreed heartily. Many of the arguments Libanius developed in his discourse in defense of the fictitious father’s course of action would deserve detailed analysis. Hoping to return to them elsewhere, I will concentrate on only one, which is particularly relevant to the present topic. What was so painful in the boy’s fate if he had been allowed to go and live with the tyrant who was in love with him? For his father, the answer was clear: a fate worse than that of a slave. “My child, however, was not going to become a slave, terrible enough though that is. No, he would have been forcefully deprived of his manhood and reckoned among women...”⁸⁰ And worse still was to come once the prime of his youth had passed and he ceased to be sexually desirable for the tyrant.

What wife could I give him after that? How could he dare educate his own children? And how could he attend any religious celebration or any games or any sacrifices? Would he not lose his very name and acquire a new one derived from his outrage? A fine life, indeed, would that be if he did not dare as much as look into the eyes of his own slaves!⁸¹

Clearly, the father imagined by Libanius belongs to a timeless, fictitious world much more like the Athens of Pericles than the later Roman Empire. Some of the consequences associated by the Antiochene sophist with a violent deprivation of masculinity were, in fact, borrowed from a speech composed in the fourth century BCE, *Against Timarchus* of Aeschines.⁸² Nevertheless, it is not far-fetched to believe that some of the opinions of Libanius’ own contemporaries, be they Christian or not, were also mirrored in his *Declamation 42*. We know, from Libanius’ outraged remarks, that many adult citizens of Antioch indulged in same-sex relationships with young boys and men, some of whom were his own students.⁸³ Early in his teaching career in Constantinople, Libanius himself was accused of trying to seduce some of his young students. Although this accusation was probably nothing more than malicious slander, it nevertheless led to his

being driven out of the capital and again, once his “reputation” had caught up with him, from Nicomedia, where he had subsequently settled as a teacher of rhetoric.⁸⁴ Libanius described the existence of male prostitutes as something natural in a speech aimed at defending actors who played in mime shows against various accusations of immorality, including that of being covert male prostitutes.⁸⁵ John Chrysostom, whom Nilus greatly admired and who had been Libanius’ pupil--his *best* pupil, some say-- before converting to Christianity and asceticism, complained in one of his early works (between 378-386 CE) that Christian men in Antioch enjoyed sex with young boys much more than going to whores, although they certainly should have known better.⁸⁶ The phenomenon existed; attitudes towards it were in many respects similar to those of fifth-century Athenians: it was shameful for a young man to submit sexually to another male.⁸⁷ A perhaps more ascetic stance characterizes Libanius’ time and this is reflected in the basic argument of *Declamation 42*: chastity is a young man’s best treasure, to be defended even at the cost of his own life. For the loss of masculine (i. e., dominant) status by sexual submission to another male is something to be loathed and avoided. The death brought about by sin, as Nilus would have called it, brings eternal shame while fame won through chastity is everlasting. In Libanius’ words, spoken by the young man about to die by his father’s hand, “chastity will make a fine tombstone for me!”⁸⁸

It is in this context, I argue, that we can better understand Nilus’ *Letter to Pierius*, the assumptions on which it is based, and the skillful use our good monk made of these assumptions. Nilus’ rejection of male homoeroticism comes undoubtedly as a result of his adherence to the Christian moral code, which unambiguously condemned males who engage in sexual relationships with other males. However, same-sex relationships are only an incidental victim of this rejection, its true target being (illicit) sexual activity *tout court*. Such wholesale condemnation is best explained as a consequence of the ascetic view of Christian morality which Nilus, the monk, attempted to force upon Pierius, the young nobleman.

To do so, he recommended the traditional ascetic practices so aptly caught in Shakespeare’s lines quoted above at the beginning of this study. This was to be expected of a monastic mentor. At the same time, however, Nilus did not overlook other available means. My analysis has shown, I believe, that in order to be convincing, Nilus selected and used rhetorical strategies designed to appeal to Pierius’ sense of belonging to the ruling

elite, rather than to his faltering sense of Christian duty. He stimulated his correspondent's desire for good reputation and played upon his fears of losing dominant status through sexual passivity. The final message Nilus attempted to convey was that sexual abstinence, an element of moral behavior highly regarded by late antique Christians and pagans alike, could be construed as a sign of a superior lifestyle, a perfect means of defining an individual's elite status. Being a shared value, abstinence offered a solution of continuity for individuals with traditional elite mentalities and who had to adapt to the new moral environment of the Christian Roman Empire. Men like Nilus, though many of us today may dislike him, played an important part in this process. It is of them that Nietzsche once wrote: "One would deceive oneself utterly if one presupposed any lack of intelligence among the leaders of the Christian movement: oh, they are clever, clever to the point of holiness, these good church fathers!"⁸⁹

NOTES

- 1 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 good discussion of Christian attitudes, see Bernadette J. Brooten, *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., *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents* (Berkeley, 2003); see also Juan Francisco Martos Montiel, *Desde Lesbos con amor: Homosexualidad femenina en la Antigüedad* (Madrid, 1996).
- 2 Some of these will appear in the following notes; for the rest, the reader is referred to the extensive bibliographies provided in the recent works of Hubbard, *Homosexuality*, 533-47 and Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (New York, 1999), 367-75.
- 3 For the later Roman Empire, see Eva Cantarella, *Secondo natura: la bisessualità nel mondo antico* (Rome, 1988), 229ff., and Danilo Dalla, «*Ubi Venus mutatur*»: omosessualità e diritto nel mondo romano (Milan, 1987), 165ff., as well as Aline Rousselle's "Statut personnel et usage sexuel dans l'Empire romain," originally published in 1989 and now reprinted in her *La contamination spirituelle: science, droit et religion dans l'Antiquité* (Paris, 1998), 149-170. Other significant titles on medieval homoeroticism include Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London, 1955), an outdated classic offering an apologetic survey of Christian evidence; Vern L. Bullough, *Sexual Variance in Society and History* (Chicago, 1978); Michael Goodich, *The Unmentionable Vice: Homosexuality in the Later Medieval Period* (Santa Barbara, CA, 1979); V. L. Bullough and James A. Brundage, eds., *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church* (Buffalo, 1982) and Brundage's *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago, 1987); a more detailed bibliography is provided by Warren Johansson and William A. Percy, "Homosexuality," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern A. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York, 1996), 155-89; H. Lutterbach, *Sexualität im Mittelalter: Eine Kulturstudie anhand von Bußbücher des 6. bis 12. Jahrhunderts* (Köln, 1999) gives a valuable study of the early medieval penitentials in the West and summary overviews of earlier Christian attitudes towards same-sex (see esp. 32-33 and 41-42). See also V. A. Kolve, "Ganymede/Son of Getron: Medieval Monasticism and the Drama of Same-Sex Desire" *Speculum* 73.4 (1998): 1014-67, an excellent contribution focusing on Western late medieval monastic milieus, with an accessible theoretical introduction and further bibliography.

- ⁴ See the bibliography given by Kōnstantinos G. Pitsakēs, “Ἡ θέση των ομοφυλοφίλων στη Βυζαντινή κοινωνία [The position of homosexuals in the Byzantine state]”, in Πρακτικά ημερίδας *Οι περιθωριακοί στο Βυζάντιο 9, Μαΐου 1992* (= *Les marginaux à Byzance*), ed. Chrysa A. Maltezos (Athens, 1993), 170-269, esp. 170, preliminary note; to this add, for instance, Dion C. Smythe, “In Denial: Same-Sex Desire in Byzantium,” in *Desire and Denial in Byzantium: Papers from the Thirty-first Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, March 1997*, ed. Liz James (Aldershot, 1999), 139-148 as well as other studies in that volume.
- ⁵ Cf., for instance, Amy Richlin’s highly partisan remarks in the “Introduction” to her book *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humour* (2nd revised ed., New York, 1992), xx-xxi, with which I strongly disagree.
- ⁶ In his *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago, 1980), John Boswell tried to argue, against all evidence, that Christianity did not play a major role in shaping and promoting “intolerant” attitudes towards “homosexuals” and that a Church hostile to “gay people” only emerged in the thirteenth century. Such a misguided attempt sparked a heated debate and provoked furious reactions, often as misguided as the author’s original thesis. Boswell’s work, not lacking in scholarly merits but not exempt of serious blunders, was attacked from both sides by militant Christian and gay scholars; for this debate, see the extensive bibliography compiled by Paul Halsall, one of Boswell’s admirers, at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/index-bos.html>. Boswell’s last book, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York, 1994), further undermined his scholarly prestige through a sensational misinterpretation of a Byzantine office for “spiritual brotherhood” as a liturgical ceremony meant to celebrate “the same-sex equivalent of medieval heterosexual marriage ceremony” (ibid., “Preface,” x). I think the following lines, despite being from Boswell’s ideological opponents, fairly describe his work, which, “brilliant as it is, can best be understood as a work in the tradition of Christian Apologetics, not dispassionate scholarship, although it is written from a point of view that most other writers of Christian Apologetics could not and would not accept” (Johansson and Percy, “Homosexuality,” 179).
- ⁷ See the few comments in Dalla, *Ubi Venus mutatur*, 161-162, the occasional references in Peter Brown’s influential but sometimes problematic analysis of late antique sexuality, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988), 230, 234, 308, and Aline Rousselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, trans. by Felicia Pheasant (Cambridge, MA, 1988; originally published in French, Paris, 1983), 152-156.

- ⁸ See, for instance, Phaidon Koukoulēs, *Βυζαντινῶν βίος καὶ πολιτισμός*, vol. 6 (Athens, 1955), 506-511, highly unreliable in spite of its wealth of information; Spiros Troianos, “Kirchliche und Weltliche Rechtsquellen zur Homosexualität in Byzanz” *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 39 (1989): 29-48, a valuable if somewhat dry analysis of the juridical (civil and ecclesiastic) sources on homoeroticism, and Pitsakēs, “Ἡ θέση,” which provides a good collection of texts with some insightful comments, despite his general tendency of taking sources at face value; both Koukoulēs and Pitsakēs referred to Nilus’ *Ep.* 2.177, the main source explored in this paper, without analyzing it.
- ⁹ I quote here only as a negative example the unreliable book of Carlos Muriel Espejo, *El deseo negado: aspectos de la problemática homosexual en la vida monástica (siglos III-VI d. C.)* (Granada, 1991), a perfect match of flawed methodology, distorting reading of the sources, and disastrous disregard for the problems raised by texts such as the *Apophthegmata patrum*. Other scholars wrongly claimed, against the evidence of the sources, that homoeroticism was a late development in the monastic milieu of Egypt and a symptom of decaying quality of monastic life: see Ramón Teja, “El demonio de la sexualidad en el monacato egipcio,” in *Codex Aquilarensis. Cuadernos de Investigación del Monasterio de Santa María la Real*, vol. 11 (Aguilar de Campo, 1994), 21-31 and Derwas James Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire* (Oxford, 1966), 66-67.
- ¹⁰ David Brakke, “Ethiopian Demons: Male Sexuality, the Black-Skinned Other, and the Monastic Self” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10.3-4 (2001): 501-35, an excellent study, which looks at the homoerotic implications of passages in the *Life of Antony* and of several *apophthegmata*. By contrast, Virginia Burrus, “Queer Lives of Saints: Jerome’s Hagiography” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10.3-4 (2001): 442-79, despite occasional interesting formulations, strikes me as an unfortunate and often obscure queer reading of texts that stubbornly (and successfully) resist such sophisticated methodology.
- ¹¹ This need was recognized by Johansson and Percy, who wrote: “[too] extensive for any one person to digest, Migne’s collection of the Church Fathers, perhaps one hundred times longer than all surviving Greek and Latin texts together, needs to be scanned and searched by computer for key words to further illuminate Patristic attitudes” (“Homosexuality,” 180, n. 15). As I hope to show in what follows, sometimes even a traditional, careful reading of Migne’s dusty tomes will suffice.
- ¹² Nilus of Ancyra, *Ep.* 2.177 in *Patrologiae Graecae cursus completus* (hereafter *PG*), ed. Jean-Paul Migne, vol. 79 (Paris, 1869), cols. 280B-285A; all further references to Nilus’ letters are made to this volume with the column numbers in the *PG*. The Migne text, in fact, reproduces the text of the only complete

- edition of Nilus' *Letters* ever printed: *S. Nili ascetae, discipuli S. Joannis Chrysostomi, Epistolarum libri IV*, ed. Leo Allacci (Allatius) (Rome, 1668).
- ¹³ Fortunately, this situation is about to change; when close to completing this paper, I learned that a new critical edition of Nilus' letters, prepared by Georgios Fatouros and Michael Grünbart, was soon to appear in the *Corpus christianorum*. I feel this is an appropriate occasion to thank Dr. Grünbart, who kindly agreed to share with me the relevant pages of the manuscript of this new edition. This enables me to quote and translate the text of Nilus' *Ep.* 2.177 and 3.43 in a much improved form as compared to that printed in the *PG* (see above, n. 12; I have kept the references to Migne's reprint as, until the Fatouros-Grünbart ed. appears in print, this is likely to remain the only available edition of Nilus' *Letters*). For details concerning the new edition, see Fatouros' recent study "Zu den Briefen des Hl. Neilos von Ankyra," in *L'Épistolographie et la poésie épigrammatique: projets actuels et questions de méthodologie. Actes de la 16^e Table ronde organisée par Wolfram Hörandner et Michael Grünbart dans le cadre du XX^e Congrès international des Études byzantines Collège de France-Sorbonne Paris, 19-25 Août 2001* (Paris, 2003), 21-30, esp. p. 25 (a list of manuscripts on which the new text is based).
- ¹⁴ The corpus of letters ascribed to Nilus raises serious problems of authenticity. For a detailed study of the corpus, see K. Heussi's analysis in *Untersuchungen zu Nilus dem Asketen* (Leipzig, 1917), 31-123. Based on his own research as well as that of his predecessors, Heussi established lists of all the spurious items in the collection, of the items which are duplicate, of the pieces which belong to other authors, and of those which now appear as distinct items, but are probably the *membra disiecta* of larger letters. A very useful study of the manuscript tradition of Nilus' *Letters* was published by J. Gribomont: "La tradition manuscrite de S. Nil. I: La Correspondance" *Studia monastica* 11 (1969): 231-67. Alan Cameron further published a critical (and, to my mind, excessively skeptical) survey of some of the problems raised by the corpus: "The Authenticity of the Letters of St. Nilus of Ancyra" *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 17 (1976): 181-96. Cameron clearly showed that a sixth-century editor interfered with Nilus' letters and is responsible for massive forgery of their headings, though with no significant tampering with their contents. Although Cameron's conclusions certainly make a careful and detailed study of individual headings imperative, not to mention the possibly anachronistic elements introduced by the unknown editor, I am not convinced that serious doubts should be cast upon the actual contents of the letters where this presents no contradictions or anachronisms, and especially where it is in agreement with other works by Nilus of undoubted paternity. To my mind, while "the correspondence of Nilus of Ancyra" certainly "is a mess and a puzzle" as stated by Cameron (*ibid.*, 181), its potential as a "témoignage . . . surtout intéressant parce qu'il est concret,

bien situé et daté” (Gribomont, “La tradition,” 265) should not be underestimated.

15 *Ep.* 2.177, 280C; all translations of ancient sources in this paper are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

16 This is apparent from the disparaging terminology Nilus used to refer to Pierius’ sentiments: “terrible and loathsome passion” (ἔρωσ ὁ δεινὸς καὶ βδελυρὸς 281C), “the desire for the said youth” (διὰ τῆς ἐφέσεως τοῦ εἰρημένου παιδός 281D), “unseemly and shameful craving” (διὰ τῆς ἀτόπου καὶ αἰσχράς ὀρέξεως 284C), “the wicked passion” (τοῦ φαύλου πάθους *ibid.*). The only apparent exception is the verb προαγαπάω (τὸν προαγαπήσαντά σε “who first fell in love with you” 280D), referring to Dionysiodorus, but Nilus probably reproduced here (in order to criticize) a term originally used by Pierius in his letter.

17 Very little seems certain concerning Nilus’ life, except his location in a monastery near Ancyra, his probable *akme* between 390 and 430 CE, a close but otherwise undocumented relationship with John Chrysostom, and the fact that he had an extensive rhetorical training and a solid knowledge of Christian writers. For a more detailed account of the data concerning his life, as well as for a detailed bibliography, see M.-G. Guérard, “Nil d’Ancyre,” in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 11 (Paris, 1981), 345-56. Heussi’s critical analysis of the few external sources concerning Nilus’ life (*Untersuchungen*, 11-30) remains fundamental. Fabrizio Conca published a critical edition of a curious text which purports to be an autobiographical account: Nilus Ancyranus, *Narratio* (Leipzig, 1983), but the attribution of this text to Nilus remains problematic despite Conca’s attempts to find parallels between it and Nilus’ other works; for this, see F. Conca, “Le «Narrationes» di Nilo e il romanzo greco,” in *Studi bizantini e neogreci: Atti del IV Congresso Nazionale di Studi Bizantini*, ed. Pietro Luigi Leone (Galatina, 1983), 349-360 and “Osservazioni sullo stile di Nilo Ancirano” in *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 32.3 (1982): 217-25; this last study is, to some extent, methodologically flawed, since it draws comparisons between the *Narrationes* and the treatise *De octo spiritibus malitiae*, which is certainly not by Nilus.

18 The extent of his rhetorical training is best illustrated by a traditional panegyric he composed in honor of Albianus, an ascetic from Ancyra; see *Sanctis patris nostri Nili senioris In Albianum oratio* (PG 79: 696-712).

19 For the authors, both pagan and Christian, with whom Nilus was acquainted, see the discussion by Marie-Gabrielle Guérard in her valuable critical edition, *Nil d’Ancyre, Commentaire sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, editio princeps, vol. 1 (Paris, 1994), 38-47; this is the only critical edition of one of Nilus’ works to appear in modern times. It also contains the most recent bibliographic update on Nilus (p. 99-108).

20 *Ep.* 2.177, 280B.

- ²¹ On the origin and the functions of this official, see A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1964), 368-69 (hereafter *LRE*) and the comprehensive study by M. Claus, *Der magister officiorum in der Spätantike (4.-6. Jahrhundert): Das Amt und sein Einfluß auf die kaiserliche Politik* (Munich, 1980) as well as the more recent overview in Roland Delmaire, *Les Institutions du Bas-Empire Romain, de Constantin à Justinien*, vol. 1, *Les Institutions civiles et palatines* (Paris, 1995), 75-95.
- ²² On *comes*, see Jones, *LRE*, vol. 1, 104-106. Pierius found his way into the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, ed. by J. R. Martindale, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1980) (hereafter *PLRE*), 885 as “Pierius 3.” Contrary to the *PLRE* suggestion that the heading of Nilus’ letter 2.177 should be interpreted as meaning that Pierius was a *comes iunior*, I think that νεωτέρω merely refers to him as a young man.
- ²³ I have followed Claus’ interpretation; see his *Der magister officiorum*, 146 under “Anonymus 1,” and the table on p. 141. Dionysiodorus is listed in the *PLRE*, vol. 2, 363. His father also appears as “Anonymus 26” on p. 1224; see also the table on p. 1258.
- ²⁴ Τὴν σὴν ἐνάρετον καὶ φιλόθεον ψυχὴν (*Ep.* 2.177, 280C).
- ²⁵ Ἐγαθῆς ρίζης ἀγαθὸν ὑπάρχοντα βλάστημα (ibid. 281C). This was a set phrase of the encomiastic genre; it was used by Basil the Great (*Ep.* 5.1, *In quadraginta martyres Sebastenses*, PG 31: 524), Himerius (*Or.* 46.70), and by Gregory Nazianzen in a passage in which he makes an explicit connection between the formula (slightly reworking it) and the tradition of the *encomia* (see his *Or.* 18.5, PG 35: 989).
- ²⁶ The *Letter* to Pierius is rich in verbatim scriptural quotations and allusions, some reworked and integrated in elaborate structures in a way that denotes familiarity with the Scriptures; besides the Psalms (Ps. 30, 37, 39, 56, 65, 117, 140), which come naturally to a monk, quotations from the Book of Jeremiah and the Gospels of Mark and Luke also appear.
- ²⁷ In *Ep.* 2.177, 284A Nilus speaks of “all the other sorts of relief and aid which I often eagerly recommended to you (πλεονάκις ὑποθέοθα, σοι προὔθυμήθην)” (my emphasis).
- ²⁸ *Ep.* 3.43 (408D-413C). Young Dominus was a member of the inner circle of the *curiales*, the wealthy ruling class which governed late antique cities (for the *principales*, as these top city-councilors are known, see Jones, *LRE*, vol. 2, 731). Nilus reveals that Dominus was involved with tax collection when he mentions his “handling public affairs and assign[ing] tasks, as necessity arises, to public tax-gatherers” (τὰ δημόσια χειρίζων πράγματα, καὶ δημοσίως πρακτῆρσι, καθὼς χρεῖα, ποιῶν τὰς ἀποκρίσεις) (413A). Dominus’ aristocratic background as well as his Christian faith are implied by several comments made in Nilus’ letter to him: he is called “my noblest son” τέκνον ἐμὸν ἄριστον (409A) and exhorted to be worthy of “the

admirable continence of [his] parents and of [his] grandfathers" τὴν τῶν πατέρων καὶ πάππων θαυμαστὴν σωφροσύνην (412D). Having him close, Nilus could instruct him personally about matters such as a proper Christian attitude towards sexuality: "When you dismiss the tax-gatherers and have more time, come to me and I will tell you, face to face, more fully about the combats against fornication" (413C).

- ²⁹ This was first argued by Paul Veyne in "La Famille et l'amour sous le Haut-Empire romain" *Annales ESC* 33 (1978): 35-63 (see also his "L'Homosexualité à Rome" *Communications* 35 (1982): 26-33; English trans. in P. Ariès and A. Béjin, eds., *Western Sexuality: Practice and Precept in Past and Present Times*, Oxford, 1985), 26-35) and further documented by Michel Foucault in his influential work *Histoire de la sexualité*, esp. vol. 3, *Le Souci de soi* (Paris, 1984; English trans. by R. Hurley, New York, 1986). Rouselle's book *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity* remains probably the most complete and persuasive analysis of this process. See also the extensive discussion with special reference to homoeroticism in Cantarella, *Secondo natura*, 258-66. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 264, n. 46 aptly formulates this point: "Between the second and the fourth centuries A. D. there did, however, occur a gradual but decisive transformation in the realm of Roman morality, as witnessed by an increasingly ascetic approach to the body in general and sexual practices in particular. This process culminated in the problematization of all sexual activity not considered strictly necessary, i. e., not leading to procreation."
- ³⁰ In this new pagan morality "problematization and apprehension go hand in hand; inquiry is joined to vigilance" and, as a result, "sexual activity is linked to evil by its forms and its effects, but in itself and substantially, it is not an evil." This austere moral style "has trouble finding its place in the love of boys, but the latter is not therefore condemned as being contrary to nature" (Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 239). Though, I believe, essentially justified, this conclusion reached by Foucault is based on his problematic and highly selective discussion of pagan sources from the first two centuries CE; for important corrections addressing the texts which contrasted the love of boys with the love of women in this period, see the important contribution of Simon Goldhill, *Foucault's Virginity: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality* (Cambridge, 1995), 46-111 and D. M. Halperin, "Historicizing the Subject of Desire: Sexual Preferences and Erotic Identities in the Pseudo-Lucianic *Erôtes*," in Jan Goldstein, ed., *Foucault and the Writing of History* (Oxford, 1994), 19-34. Despite important shortcomings, Foucault's unfinished *History of Sexuality* remains an essential and most influential work; for a good overview of the critical debates around it, with special reference to the never published fourth volume that should have dealt with early Christianity, see now Daniel Boyarin and Elizabeth Castelli, "Introduction: Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*: The Fourth Volume, or, A

Field Left Fallow for Others to Till" *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10. 3-4 (2001): 357-74 and especially the important discussion by Jeremy R. Carrette, "Prologue to a Confession of the Flesh," in idem, ed., *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault* (New York, 1999), 1-47; on p. 2, n. 6 Carrette notes that the fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality* was almost complete before Foucault's death and a copy of it is extant in the Foucault archive.

31 These elements appear in most descriptions of classical Greek and Roman attitudes towards homoeroticism, such as K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (2nd ed., Cambridge, 1989), Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, and D. M. Halperin's *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality, and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990). They are central to the "constructionist" view of homoeroticism, with which I tend to agree. Its proponents argue that patterns of sexual preference assume different manifestations in different societies and that no essential identity can be postulated between individuals who engaged in same-sex relationships in different historical contexts. Since sexuality itself as "an *appropriation* of the human body and of its erogenous zones by an ideological discourse" (Halperin, *ibid.*, 25; his *Italics*) and, therefore, a cultural construct, one cannot speak of ancient "homosexuality" (no such term existed before the late nineteenth century). It is very likely that "ancient sexual typologies generally derived their criteria for categorizing people not from sex but from gender: they tended to construe sexual desire as normative or deviant according to whether it impelled social actors to conform or to violate their conventionally defined gender roles" (*ibid.*).

32 Nilus qualified Pierius' love twice as "sin" (τῆς ἀμαρτίας 280D, 281D), related to it as "fornication" (πορνεία 281B) and "corruption" (τῆς φθοράς 284A), described the acts associated with it as "bad acquaintance" (τῆς κακῆς συνηθείας 280D), "wicked deed" (τὸ πονηρὸν ἔργον 281A), "the evil deed" (τὸ κακὸν 284A), "improper impulses" (ταῖς ἀπρεπέσι κινήσει 281A), and finally condemned the ensuing pleasure as "illicit" (τῆς ἀθέσμου ἡδονῆς *ibid.*).

33 Numerous terms connoting "impurity" are used in the text of *Ep.* 2.177, some of which are not attested in other patristic writings; thus, the spirit of fornication is "the most foul demon" (τὸν πολὺσπιλον δαίμονα 280C), "the filthy serpent" (τοῦ ρυπαροῦ ὄφεως 281A, 281D), and "filth-loving demon" (ὁ φιλορύπαρος δαίμων 284B); homoerotic attraction is termed "the terrible and loathsome passion" (ὁ ἔρωσ ὁ δεινὸς καὶ βδελυρὸς 281C) or "the fiercest fever of impurity" (πυρετόν ἀκαθαρσίας λαβρότατον 281B) and those who might inspire it are "unclean youths" (τῶν ἀκαθάρτων νέων 284C).

34 What Pierius might derive from the view of his beloved is "the death [brought about by] sin" (ὁ θάνατος τῆς ἀμαρτίας 281D).

- 35 Foucault saw this preoccupation with purity as a defining feature of Christian asceticism, which distinguished it from previous “technologies of the self”: “Dans l’ascétisme chrétien, la question de la pureté est centrale” (in the final French version of an interview with H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow “À propos de la généalogie de l’éthique: un aperçu du travail en cours,” in Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits 1954-1988*, vol. 4, 1980-1988, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Paris, 1994), 626).
- 36 Some modern scholars, who believe there is an essential continuity between ancient forms of same-sex love and modern homosexuality, inappropriately use modern terminology in their analyses of ancient phenomena and speak of ancient “gay subcultures” and “homophobia”; this tendency is rightly criticized by Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 218-224 and 261, n. 18, 355, n. 319. Some of the translations of ancient sources in Hubbard, *Homosexuality* represent an extreme case of telescoping modern concepts and terminology into the past and, implicitly, reading modern realities in a world which did not experience them. Foucault repeatedly warned against attaching attributes such as “tolerant” and “intolerant” to ancient societies: “il ne s’agit pas d’une rupture morale entre une Antiquité tolérante et un christianisme austère” (“Généalogie de l’éthique,” 623).
- 37 *Ep.* 2.177, 280D. The same idea appears in the letter to Dominus: “the demon [...] starts speaking to the soul through some imaginary representations, as if from the mouth of another person, *male or female* (ἄρσνος ἢ θηλεία), and persistently urges him towards the loathsome passion” (*Ep.* 3.43, 409C).
- 38 “The way in which the individual has to constitute this or that part of himself as the prime material of his moral conduct” (Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 26).
- 39 Since the intended fourth volume of *The History of Sexuality* called *The Confessions of the Flesh*, supposed to deal with Early Christianity, never appeared, Foucault left no systematic account of this evolution. His main ideas are available in several studies in brief formulations such as the following: “Dans l’éthique [chrétienne], c’est le désir qui est le moment essentiel: son déchiffrement, la lutte contre lui, l’extirpation de ses moindres racines; quant à l’acte, il faut pouvoir le commettre sans même éprouver du plaisir - en tout cas en l’annulant autant que possible” (“Généalogie de l’éthique,” 622); “du point de vue chrétien, la matière morale est essentiellement la concupiscence (*ce qui ne vaut pas dire que l’acte était sans importance*)” (ibid., 619, emphasis added; Foucault himself sometimes disregarded this caveat in his own research).
- 40 “The root of bodily action is the flesh-loving thought (ρίζα τῆς κατὰ τὸ σῶμα πράξεως τυγχάνει ἡ φιλόσαρκος γνώμη)” (*Ep.* 2.177, 281D).
- 41 Nilus expressed this with the help of a metaphor: “uproot [desire] completely before it could spring and sprout the evil deed and make it grow into a vigorous stem. For this purpose, you should put in good order your axes

and concern yourself with [providing] fire as well as invoke plenty of help in destroying the tree of wantonness (τοῦ δένδρου τῆς ἀσελγείας). You see, if a root endures for some time, it often undermines even an extremely well built wall and [even] splits a rock" (284A).

42 The description of this pure state appears as a climactic end to the letter: "you will be raised from the 'pit of suffering' [Ps. 39.3] through divine grace, and you will then see a novel air of chastity and a passionless, pure, and unconfused condition (καὶ κατάστασιν ἀπαθῆ τε καὶ καθαρὰν καὶ ἀσύγχυτον), as well as a most brilliant, clear sky unfolding from some foggy and dark night, so that you will be able to say: 'This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!' [Ps. 117.24]. 'Now open for me, angels of God, the gates of justice! And, entering through these I will praise the Lord' [Ps. 117.19]. 'I will praise You, for You have answered me, and have become my salvation,' [Ps. 117.21] 'Blessed be God, who has not turned away my prayer, nor His mercy from me!' [Ps. 65.20]." (*Ep.* 2.167, 284D-285A). István Perczel kindly pointed out to me that this passage uses terminology and concepts found in the works of Evagrius, some of whose writings, after his condemnation in 553, were often circulated under the name of Nilus of Ancyra.

43 *Ibid.*, 280D.

44 *Ibid.*, 284A.

45 *Ibid.*, 280D-281A.

46 In a treatise entitled *Ascetic Discourse*, intended for the use of his monastic community, Nilus emphatically stated (for the benefit of his monks) that true asceticism was not possible in urban environments: "The master who has set himself on a peaceful life which lacks confrontation should be as far removed as possible from the warlike tumult and should have his habitation a long way from the confusion of the army camp" (*Ascetic Discourse* 41, *PG* 79: 769D). Life among people of the world is not possible for the true ascetic: "the saints ran away from the cities and avoided intercourse with the crowd, knowing that dwelling among people given to perdition is more pernicious for the soul than the disease of plague" (*ibid.* 60, col. 792D).

47 Starting in last decades of the fourth century, the society of the later Roman Empire experienced a veritable "ascetic invasion" (Robert Markus), especially as more and more bishops came from ascetic milieus: "[t]hrough its monk-bishop the people was linked to a source of spiritual life with a distinctly ascetic tinge; and the model for the life of the Christian community came, naturally, to be infected by the model for the monastic life." This model presupposed an obliteration of the lines dividing ascetic and non-ascetic Christians: "in [this] scheme, the world and the flesh will always tend to fall into the Devil's domain. Standards upheld to the lay world or the secular clergy will appear as imperfect approximations to the ascetic's standards, concessions to the weak, rather than as norms appropriate to the several forms of the Christian vocation" (Robert A. Markus, *The End of Ancient*

Christianity (Cambridge, 1990), 202 and 204; although based on Western material, this is, in principle, a valid description of the Eastern situation at the beginning of the fifth century CE).

48 Ibid.; note the emphasis on the initial absence of sinful thought, which points to the main issue at stake in the whole discourse.

49 Ibid. 281C-D. The curious epithet (μαστροπός--I prefer this, more common, spelling over μαστροπός, the form given by the manuscripts and retained by Fatouros and Grünbart), which the demon of fornication earns here, and which no other patristic author (as far as I can ascertain) employed, is explained by a passage from Nilus' *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 52 (ed. Guérard, 270), which reads "divine love has no need for a pimp (οὐ γὰρ μαστροπεύεται ὁ οὐράνιος ἔρως), but comes by itself, attracted by the beauty of the soul and encouraged by virtuous deeds." On the other hand, the passage from Jeremiah quoted by Nilus is a *topos* of patristic exegesis, referring to the best way to provoke the cessation of passion--severing the sensorial input of sinful stimuli; for similar interpretations, see, for instance, Gregory Nazianzen, *Or. 11 PG 35: 837* or his *Or. 27.7*, to quote just an example. The pagan tradition too was well aware of the erotic role of the eyes; see the superb passage from Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Cleitophon* (1.9.4) quoted and discussed in Goldhill, *Foucault's Virginité*, 74. This speaks of the "emanation of beauty flowing down through [the eyes] into the soul" and defines it as "a kind of copulation at a distance."

50 *Ep. 2.177, 284B-C.*

51 *Ascetic Discourse 41, PG 79: 769D-772A.* This text was produced for a monastic audience and exhibits a high-dose of self advertisement on Nilus' part, probably due to various internal and external challenges to his spiritual authority. A good discussion of these aspects is found in Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 2002), 177-190, although this author tends to overrate the role played by economic factors and by competition for lay patronage in order to explain Nilus' criticism of rival monastic milieus near Ancyra.

52 This is the same attitude as that mentioned by Xenophon in his *Symposium* where he speaks of the double function of the encomium; see Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 204.

53 Elizabeth A. Clark, in response to some of Foucault's simplistic generalizations concerning Christian asceticism, observed that, in Christian ascetic circles, self-examination did not necessarily lead to public (or at least open) discussion of the findings, for fear of stirring the soul and offering food for sinful thoughts; see her excellent study "Foucault, The Fathers, and Sex" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54.4 (1988): 619-641, here 629 with examples from Evagrius and John Cassian.

- 54 *Ascetic Discourse 28* (PG 79: 756D-757A). Of course, this implies that he was indeed such a perfect spiritual guide.
- 55 According to Foucault's insightful intuition, this was the main task of monastic thinking on sexuality. He wrote that "la tâche du moine [...] est de contrôler sans cesse ses pensées, de les sonder afin de voir si elles sont pures, de vérifier qu'il ne s'y dissimule pas ou qu'elles n'occulent pas quelque chose de dangereux; et de vérifier qu'elles ne se révèlent pas autres qu'elles ont d'abord semblé, qu'elles ne sont pas une forme d'illusion ou de séduction" and "cette tâche requiert non seulement de la maîtrise, mais aussi un diagnostic de la vérité et d'illusion. Elle exige une constante héméneutique du soi" ("Sexualité et solitude" in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 4, 176-77). He was wrong, however, to think that such detailed analyses were the defining feature of *all* Christian discourses on sexuality and that monastic authorities were not concerned with sexual acts or with relationships to others (cf. *ibid.*: "ces techniques ne visent pas directement le contrôle effectif du comportement sexuel" with justified criticism by Clark, "Foucault," 632-33). Furthermore, Nilus' *Letter to Pierius* clearly contradicts Foucault's statement that "il est peu question des rapports homosexuels, et cela en dépit du fait que la plupart des ascètes vivent, de manière permanente, dans des communautés d'une assez grande importance numérique" (*ibid.*); laymen like Pierius (but the monks too, as I will show in a future contribution) were indeed confronted with problems raised by homoeroticism.
- 56 *Ep.* 2.177, 280D-281A.
- 57 This is what Foucault referred to as "[le] problème de l'érection," namely, "l'ensemble des mouvements internes qui s'opèrent depuis cette chose quasi imperceptible qu'est la première pensée jusqu'au phénomène final [...] de la pollution" ("Sexualité et solitude," 177-78).
- 58 *Ep.* 3.43, 409B-D.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 413A-B. The mention of involuntary ejaculation raises interesting problems concerning ritual purity and abstaining from communion, for which see the detailed study by David Brakke, "The Problematization of Nocturnal Emissions in Early Christian Syria, Egypt, and Gaul" *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3 (1995), 419-60. Nilus speaks of the same problem in a long letter (*Ep.* 2.140, PG 79: 258D-264C) sent to a monk, although there the focus is quite different; instead of concrete details about the mechanism of sexual arousal, Nilus insists on the sinful thoughts, the means to fight them, and the dangerous temptation to fall into despair and deny God's forgiving grace after sinning, at which he merely hinted in his *Letter to Dominus* (see 261B-C).
- 60 Nilus thus draws a distinction between Christian love (here ἀγάπη) and worldly, i. e. non-Christian friendship (φιλία), which is qualified as fit for beasts (κτηνώδης) and irrational (ἄλογος). Comparison with irrational animals, among which same-sex behavior was supposedly unknown and, therefore, "unnatural," played an important part in Greek and Roman problematizations

of homoeroticism; see the recent discussion in Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 231-144 with further bibliography.

61 Christian monastic tradition is almost unanimous in condemning asceticism or moral behavior practiced with an eye to what others might say about it. However, in (textual) practice, seeking good fame does not always appear reprehensible; on this topic, see Maud Gleason, "Visiting and News: Gossip and Reputation-Management in the Desert" *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6.3 (1998): 501-21, an excellent study. Nilus himself, when writing the panegyric for Albianus, did not hesitate to use the language of Homer's epics to describe a monk who "has been admired by the inhabitants of that place even after his death and until this very day, and his glorious fame is being sung (καὶ κλέος αὐτοῦ ἀοίδιμον ἄδεται)" (PG 79: 705B). I provided an extensive analysis of such rhetorical uses of "fame" applied to Christian ascetics in my study "Theodoret of Cyrrhus and the Glory of the Syrian Ascetics: Epic Terminology in Hagiographic Contexts (II)" *Archaeus. Études d'Histoire des Religions* 4. 4 (2000): 151-178, esp. 163-77.

62 *Ep.* 3.43, 412D-413A.

63 *Ibid.* 412D.

64 *Ascetic Discourse*, PG 79: 721D. In a particularly harsh condemnation, he even assimilated those who did not practice the same strict standard of Christian life to Christ's traitors: "It was not only Judas," he wrote, "who betrayed our Lord by thinking slightly of the divine judgement. Even Christians who do not fulfill the divine laws are reckoned as traitors, since they disdain [these laws] and impose their own will, following rather their own wicked wishes" *Ep.* 2.100 (PG 79: 245).

65 Contrary to Foucault, Elizabeth A. Clark rightly argued that "the values that Foucault assigned to elite Greek males re-emerge, transformed, in the theorizing of the desert monks. For the monks, combat against the self is the primary task. Self mastery has been transformed into a holy war" ("Foucault," 631). This view emphasizes continuity between classical Greek ideals of self-mastery and Christian asceticism, which was denied by Foucault. As Clark well observed, Foucault's characterization of Greek sexual values ("a free male practices self-domination or self-mastery in order to create a life more brilliant than that of his fellow humans, and his elitist ethic is accompanied by a quest for self-knowledge, for 'truth'") is a very appropriate description of Christian asceticism (*ibid.*).

66 This is argued most cogently in Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*. For classical Greek views of passivity, see Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 204-14 and the sources referred to in Hubbard, *Homosexuality*, 8-14.

67 *Ep.* 3.43, 412D-413A.

68 In the *Ascetic Discourse*, the tempting demon is also presented as the Barbarian (τὸν Βάρβαρον), whom the monks are supposed to chase away "through chastity and abstinence" (διὰ σωφροσύνης καὶ ἐγκρατείας) (PG 79: 805C).

- ⁶⁹ On the isomorphism between sexual and social dominance in the traditional Greek moral code of the male elite, see Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 71-77. Present in popular sources such as various handbooks of dream interpretation, this strongly hierarchical view of sex survived late into Byzantine times together with the *active vs. passive* opposition it entailed; see S. M. Oberhelman, "Hierarchies of Gender, Ideology, and Power in Ancient and Medieval Greek and Arabic Dream Literature," in *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, ed. J. W. Wright Jr. and E. K. Rowson (New York, 1997), 55-93. Nilus was not the only one to play upon the connotations that submission and giving oneself up to the rule of inferiors still evoked in Late Antiquity. On this, see the excellent study by Kate Cooper, "Insinuations of Womanly Influence: An Aspect of Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy" *The Journal of Roman Studies* 82 (1992): 150-64.
- ⁷⁰ Legislation issued by Christian emperors concerning same-sex behavior began with a constitution issued by emperor Constans in 342 (*Codex Theodosianus* 9.7.3). This condemned men who submitted to other men as a woman would in somewhat obscure terms (*cum vir nubit in feminam*), which have been variously interpreted. Discussions by Dalla, *Ubi Venus mutatur*, 167ff and Cantarella, *Secondo natura*, 224-26 are fundamental. See also, Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 362, n. 5. This law does not refer to "homosexual marriages," *pace* Boswell, *Christianity*, 123.
- ⁷¹ *Non patimur urbem Romam virtutum omnium matrem diutius effeminati in viro pudoris contaminatione foedari et agreste illud a priscis conditoribus robur fracta molliter plebe tenuatum*; the text of this constitution was preserved as *Collatio legum Mosaicarum et Romanarum* 5.3 (ed. Riccobono, vol. 1, 481) and, in a significantly altered version, as *Codex Theodosianus* 9.7.6. See Dalla, *Ubi Venus mutatur*, 170-74 and Cantarella, *Secondo natura*, 226-230.
- ⁷² *Vt universi intellegant sacrosanctum esse debere hospitium virilis animae* (*Collatio* 5.3.2); Peter Brown's comments ("for the first time in history, in 390, the Roman people witnessed the public burning of male prostitutes, dragged from the homosexual brothels of Rome" *Body and Society*, 383) are certainly apt to create dramatic effect, but not altogether accurate: we do not know of any public execution of this kind actually carried out under this law.
- ⁷³ *Codex Theodosianus* 9.7.6; The increasingly severe stand imperial legislators took towards passivity is duly noted by Dalla, *Ubi Venus mutatur*, 183 ("riteniamo che [...] ispestitasi la severità, la norma sia servita nel V secolo a reprimere anche l'omosessualità passiva in genere") and Cantarella, *Secondo natura*, 230. This trend culminates in two laws of Justinian (*Novellae* 77 issued in 538 and 141 of 559), in which involvement in same-sex activities is punished by mutilation and death regardless of the role assumed. This blanket condemnation was followed by active persecution; for an account

of this see Dalla, *Ubi Venus mutatur*, 185-214, who speaks of “repressione totale.”

74 Cantarella (*Secondo natura*, 264-65) made a very important observation: Christian morality, especially that preached in ascetic circles, was more likely to endorse a condemnation of both parties engaged in a same-sex relationship, regardless of their role (active or passive) on scriptural authority and as a result of its Jewish heritage, which was openly hostile to any type of homoeroticism. Roman emperors, however, even if they were Christians, had to legislate for a society whose morals condemned only the passive male. In these circumstances, “che possibilità di successo avrebbe avuto un intervento legislativo che si fosse posto in totale, aperto e insanabile contrasto con la morale popolare,” that is to say, “con un’etica sessuale tuttora ispirata, fondamentalmente, all’esaltazione della virilità intesa come capacità di sottomettere [?]”

75 *Declamatio* 42 in Libanii *Opera*, ed. R. Foerster, vol. 7, *Declamationes* 21-51 (Leipzig, 1913), 400-430.

76 “A tyrant asked a neighboring city to deliver a beautiful young man to him, and threatened war if he did not get him. The city agreed to go to war. As the tyrant came and besieged the city, the young man’s father killed him and threw him down from the walls. The tyrant departed and the father is now being charged with murder.” This was a popular topic, it seems, in the schools of rhetoric; besides Libanius’ *Decl.* 42, two other texts treating similar imaginary cases survive: one earlier in Latin (Calpurnius Flaccus, *Decl.* 45, second century CE) and another one, later, in Greek (Choricus of Gaza, *Decl.* 9, first half of the sixth century CE). The latter replaced the boy with a girl, presumably reflecting the fact that in those days same-sex love was no longer suitable as a schoolbook topic; for a similar exclusion of same-sex content from a collection of “erotic” letters that date from the end of the fifth century, see W. G. Arnott, “Pastiche, Pleasantry, Prudish Eroticism: the Letters of ‘Aristaenetos,’” *Yale Classical Studies* 27 (1982): 291-320, esp. 314-15.

77 D. A. Russell, *Greek Declamation* (Cambridge, 1983), 81; this is a brilliant survey of the genre.

78 *Ibid.*, 22.

79 Libanius, *Decl.* 42.15, p. 409.

80 *Ibid.*, 42.41, p. 422

81 *Ibid.* 42.42, p. 423; this is echoed by Nilus in *Ep.* 2.38, addressed to a certain Asclepiodotus: “What is the use for you to command to your slaves when you are yourself enslaved by your passions like some harsh mistresses?”

82 The classic analysis of this speech is Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 19-109; for an English translation of relevant passages and recent literature, see Hubbard, *Homosexuality*, 118-121 and 131-153. It soon became a rhetorical *topos* to undermine an opponent’s credibility by insinuating that he had submitted sexually in his youth to another male; see, Williams, *Roman*

- 83 *Homosexuality*, 173-75 and 334, n. 69. Libanius uses this *topos* on several instances: see *Or.* 37.3, 4.15ff, and 39.5-6, which subverts the authoritarian appearance of a certain Mixidemus as a judge by dwelling on his lack of masculinity due to the fact that he had been passive in same-sex relationships. On male homoeroticism at Antioch in the last decades of the fourth century CE, see the sources collected and discussed by A.-J. Festugière in his *Antioche païenne et chrétienne: Libanius, Chrysostome et les moines de Syrie* (Paris, 1959), 195-210.
- 84 This story is reported by Eunapius (*Vitae sophistarum* 17.1.7-8, ed. G. Giangrande (Rome, 1956), 82), who speaks of an “accusation concerning young men” (διαβολῆς περὶ τὰ μειράκια). Libanius never detailed the circumstances of his expulsion from Constantinople, but it is likely that they were connected with these charges of pederasty; see Robert J. Penella, *Greek Philosophers and Sophists in the Fourth Century A.D.: Studies in Eunapius of Sardis* (Leeds, 1990), 102-103.
- 85 Libanius, *Or.* 64.39 dating from 361; ed. R. Foerster, vol. 4, 444: male prostitutes, presumably describing a contemporary situation: “those make a bad use of their own [masculine] nature and do not deny the name they acquired from submitting to the most shameful things” (translation mine). For an annotated translation of this text, see Margaret Molloy, *Libanius and the Dancers* (Hildesheim, 1996), esp. 153 and the discussion on p. 91-100. In 64.48 (Foerster, p. 450-51; Molloy, p. 155), Libanius speaks of young men who, although surrounded by good teachers and watchful parents managed to find a way to give in to the request of their lovers. In contrast to these, Libanius adds, “I myself know some young men better looking than Hyacinthus, who, although far away from their parents and [entrusted] to permissive guardians” nevertheless managed to stay chaste and adds: “I will not even mention here the chastity shown by young men who were orphans lest anyone suspect I am setting myself as an example” (a fine opportunity for self-advertising not missed by Libanius, who became an orphan early in his youth).
- 86 “But these persons who are, so to speak, ‘rational,’ who have had the benefit of divine instruction, who say to others what should be done and what should not be done, and who have heard the scriptures which have come down from heaven--these men have intercourse more fearlessly with young boys than with prostitutes!” (*Adversus oppugnatores vitae monasticae* 3.8 as translated in John Chrysostom, *A Comparison Between a King and a Monk / Against the Opponents of the Monastic Life*, trans. David G. Hunter (Lewiston NY, 1988), 142. Festugière dryly comments: “Si l’on devait prendre ces mots à la lettre, il semblerait que les chrétiens d’Antioche n’eussent pas été moins pédérastes que les païens” (*Antioche*, 208, n. 2); Pierius’ experience in Constantinople does not leave, I think, too much room for doubt.

- ⁸⁷ Libanius told his pupils that love for a youth was not something even an active lover should make public if he was an honorable man. This is what he had to say about his amorous tyrant in *Decl.* 42.33 (p. 418): "Great and powerful was the love (ἔρωσ) which burnt him, and oppressed him, and did not let him breathe. How can we tell? He spoke out the very things he should have kept secret. And he did it through a public embassy! A thing unheard of: a young man's beauty was requested through an embassy!"
- ⁸⁸ ἐγὼ δὲ ἔξω καλὸν τὴν σωφροσύνην ἐντάφιον (*Decl.* 42.56, p. 430). Calpurnius Flaccus also has a memorable *dictum* in this context: *perit homo sed pudor vivit* "the young man perished, but chastity lives on!" (*Decl.* 45; *The Declamations of Calpurnius Flaccus*, ed. Lewis A. Sussman (Leiden, 1994), 82).
- ⁸⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. by Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1954), 651.

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