

Worshipping Eros- the God of Love

NB: This blog is targeting a general audience interested in ancient history.

Eros.

Who is he and why was he important? And most importantly, for the purpose of this post: how and why was he worshipped?

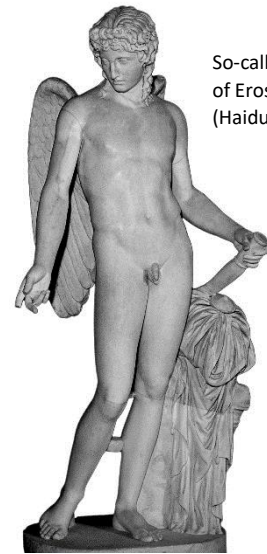
Eros is the name of the Greek god of love and is often connected to Aphrodite due to them being within the same sphere of influence. He is symbolic of attraction and embodies the chaotic nature of love and lust (Graf, 2006).

Now, although Eros did not have many sanctuaries solely dedicated for him, that did not mean that he was lacking in worship from the people. Being not only the god of fertility, but also the god of love whose focus was on the beauty of both genders, means that he had plenty of individual worship focused upon him (Hanfmann *et al*, 2012). This is especially noted when reading Pausanias' *Description of Greece*, as within this he describes how Eros had a stone monument in place which was worshipped in his honour (Paus, 9.27.2). Pausanias was a Greek traveller who recorded descriptions of Greece alongside historical accounts, and as such, is a great resource when looking at the ancient world (Spawforth, 2012).

Why did he receive such adoration? Well, reasons for worshipping Eros are clear when considering what exactly it is that he represents. As noted by Fritz Graf, Eros was quite literally the "Greek personification of love as sexual desire" (Graf, 2006). For this reason, despite the fact that he was never too prominent within Greek religion, he was very important to the people and the culture.

Eros was also important to warriors. This is seen in how there was an entire Spartan custom set around sacrifices for Eros prior to battle (Athenaeus, 13.561f). This, as argued by Mark Cartwright, seemed to derive from the erotic bonds which could be found between the soldiers. As such, he was an important figure in their lives and they devoted their respect to him in kind (Cartwright, 2019).

Another way in which Eros touched their lives was in regards to marriage. He appears frequently in images of which the subject is weddings. This makes sense when you consider the fact that he was the god of love and had, in Stafford's words, "displayed a heterosexual concern with fertility" (Stafford, 2013, p.175). Her statement stems from the fact that being the god of fertility, his role in marriages were clear. He would have been deemed very important in preserving the family groups that make up the society of the time.



So-called Eros Farnese, statue of Eros of the Centocelle type. (Haiduc, n.d.).



Bronze statue of Eros sleeping (Rogers Fund, 1943)

The Cults

Bobbin with Eros. (Jastrow, 2008).



As mentioned briefly above, despite Eros not having many individual places of worship, he was not lacking in more individual appreciation. This usually meant that he received adoration in conjunction to Aphrodite, but he was also the main subject of a few cults of worship (Lear, 2010). Two known locations were Athens and Thespieae, and the presence of which demonstrated a special devotion from the community for what he represented (Hanfmann *et al*, 2012).

Thespieae:

- Thespieae was a town in Boeotia.
- It was the home of the stone monument described by Pausanias (Hanfmann *et al*, 2012).
- In *Eros* by Andrew Lear it is also mentioned that alongside the stone monument, Thespieae was the home of festival Erotidia. It was a festival which comprised of both sports and arts, with events like gymnastics and music contests held in his honour (Lear, 2010).
- In fact, this festival provided the setting within which Plutarch's (Greek philosopher and biographer) *Erotic Dialogue* took place (Lear, 2010).
- The Thespians were devoted to Eros on a level even higher than others, "Of the gods the Thespians have from the beginning honoured Love most" (Paus. 9. 27.1).

Athens:

- As noted by Emma Stafford in *From the Gymnasium to the Wedding: Eros in Athenian Art and Cult*, Athens had two major cults with a focus on Eros: one at the gymnasia and the other (in conjunction with Aphrodite) on the north slope of the Acropolis at the sanctuary (Stafford, 2013, p.175).
- In the sanctuary, phallic symbols were found to have represented Eros (Hanfmann *et al*, 2012).
- Altars for worship were placed and demonstrated that male beauty desire was just as important as their female counterparts.

Other cult centres existed, and demonstrated a deep respect for Eros that was not commonly found in his absence from many of the religious texts (Cartwright, 2019).

Now, what does all of this mean? Well, it demonstrates that although Eros did not have as many individual cults and festivals as some of the other gods, he was still a very important figure in Greek culture. He was a respected figure, and though often seen in conjunction with Aphrodite, was considered very important in his own right. He represented more fully, the male side of desire and due to the emphasis placed on familial groups, he was considered essential (Thumiger, 2013, p.160).

Bibliography

Athenaeus. *The Learned Banqueters, Volume VI: Books 12-13.594b*. Olson, S.D. (trans.). 2010. Loeb Classical Library 327. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Cartwright, M. (2019.) *Eros*. Available at: <https://www.ancient.eu/Eros/> (Accessed: 26/10/20).

Graf, Fritz (Columbus, OH) and Birley, A. R. (Düsseldorf), "Eros", in: Brill's New Pauly, Antiquity volumes edited by: Hubert Cancik and , Helmuth Schneider, English Edition by: Christine F. Salazar, Classical Tradition volumes edited by: Manfred Landfester, English Edition by: Francis G. Gentry. Consulted online on 22 October 2020 <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/10.1163/1574-9347_bnp_e401810> First published online: 2006

Haiduc. (n.d.). *So-called Eros Farnese, statue of Eros of the Centocelle type*. [Farnesian Statue]. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eros_Farnese_MAN_Napoli_6353.jpg (Accessed: 26/10/20).

Hanfmann, G.M.A. Pollard, J.R.T. Arafat, K.W (2012). 'Eros' The Oxford Classical Dictionary, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Jastrow. (2008). *Bobbin with Eros*. [Red-figure pottery]. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eros#/media/File:Eros_bobbin_Louvre_CA1798.jpg (Accessed: 26/10/20)

Lear, A. (2010). 'Eros' The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Pausanias. *Description of Greece, Volume IV: Books 8.22-10 (Arcadia, Boeotia, Phocis and Ozolian Locri)*. Jones. W.H.S, (trans.). 1935. Loeb Classical Library 297. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Rogers Fund. (1943). *Bronze statue of Eros sleeping*. [Statue]. Available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/254502> (Accessed: 26/10/20)

Spawforth, A.J.S. (2012). 'Pausanias' The Oxford Classical Dictionary, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Stafford, E. (2013). 'From the Gymnasium to the Wedding: Eros in Athenian Art and Cult', in Sanders, E. Thumiger, C. Carey, C. Lowe, N. (ed.). *Erôs in Ancient Greece*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Thumiger, C. (2013). 'Part III Divine Eros and Human Erôs', in Sanders, E. Thumiger, C. Carey, C. Lowe, N. (ed.). *Erôs in Ancient Greece*. Oxford: Oxford University Press