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Classical Mythology

Alexander the Great and Bagoas

Alexander the Great's relationship with Bagoas is detailed to be of a romantic and sexual nature in the accounts of Plutarch and Athenaeus, and disgracefully achieved in the account of Quintus Curtius Rufus. Where Athenaeus and Plutarch's mentions of Bagoas are mostly in reference to a kiss between him and Alexander the Great following a successful stage play that Bagoas was a part of, Rufus explicitly defines Bagoas as a prostitute and continues to bash the relationship between Alexander the Great and Bagoas through his choice in words when recounting the history of Bagoas. A continuous companionship beyond the boundaries of sex between men was less commonplace in Roman times, and even just sexual engagement was less accepted and openly discussed, a stark difference from the relationships formed between men in the Greek civilizations. This means that it is possible that Rufus's discontentment with Bagoas and Alexander the Great's close relationship outside of the bedroom stems from a lack of acceptance of close homoerotic relationships. (MacMullen, 490) It would only be heightened by the fact that Bagoas was not noted to be Greek, but rather Persian or from another civilization which would likely have been perceived by Rome as "barbaric" and in turn, Alexander the Great allowing Bagoas so much power over him would have been seen as shameful. (Jonsson, 16)

Rufus outlines the way that Bagoas was not honored by Orsines due to the way Bagoas found his way to Alexander the Great's side. Rufus's account states that Bagoas achieved

Alexander the Great's attention and admiration through prostitution, and despite many people around the two reprimanding Orsines for his refusal to honor Bagoas, the man continued to refuse to show any sort of respect to Bagoas, stating that "he was honouring the friends of the king, not his harlots, and that it was not the custom of the Persians to mate with males who made females of themselves by prostitution." (Rufus, 10.1.26-27) This account shows how Bagoas was clearly a staple figure around Alexander the Great, and well-known enough for multiple people in Alexander the Great's army to defend him to someone who was outright scorning him. Defending someone of a low status would not be high priority for the soldiers around Alexander the Great, simply due to the way that status and respect worked in the ancient Greek world, so this heavily implies that Bagoas was of high importance to Alexander the Great and was elevated past his status as a eunuch and a prostitute.

The Roman historian writing about Bagoas' position in Alexander the Great's life clearly disapproved of the way that Bagoas was held in such high importance by Alexander the Great, his bias against the man easy to parse out when examining his word choice throughout the text. The next few sections of the account refer to Bagoas as having gained his power through "...shame and disgrace against the life of an eminent and guiltless man" and abused this power to tell Alexander the Great lies about Orsines to get revenge for the man's disrespect against Bagoas. (Rufus, 10.1.27-29) The interaction ended with the execution of Orsines, brought upon by the accusations Bagoas leveled against him that stirred Alexander the Great into anger. Rufus makes clear his disapproval of this outcome, which is a contrast of the accounts coming from Greek historians and a show of his bias against men like Bagoas who found their way into the favor of men in power with sex. The disdain regarding Bagoas is telling of Rufus's opinions about the relationship Bagoas had with Alexander the Great.

While the mention of Bagoas is less in Plutarch's account, the word choices when describing Bagoas are considerably kinder than the choices made by the Roman historian. Bagoas is referred to as a victor and Alexander the Great's favourite, without a trace of malice against the man. (Plutarch, 67) Plutarch appears to be indifferent to the nature of Alexander the Great and Bagoas' relationship, presenting the facts as he was told them and recounting the stories without adding in his own thinly veiled opinions. The account of Alexander the Great kissing Bagoas at a stage play is spoken of again in Athenaeus 603b, where the author recounts the way that the crowd approved of the kiss and cheered until Alexander the Great kissed Bagoas for a second time. The accounts from Greek authors incorporate less negative viewpoints about Alexander the Great and Bagoas, speaking of the kiss in an objective manner and forgoing using any descriptors for Bagoas besides his definition as a eunuch. Plutarch even refers to Bagoas as Alexander the Great's "beloved" at one point during his writings. (Plutarch, 67.7-8) The usage of that specific word paints Bagoas as a lover to Alexander the Great beyond just being a sexual partner being paid, implying a deeper relationship between Bagoas and Alexander the Great that could have been romantic in nature. This would align with the ease in which Alexander believed everything Bagoas said in Rufus's account and had no qualms against executing Orsines for his actions.

The stories of Bagoas are few and far between, but the clear differences in accounts display the differing mindsets between the Greek and Roman civilizations when it came to open homosexual relationships. Where the Greek accounts were more objective and kinder to Bagoas, the Roman source painted him as a rather negative character. Alexander the Great's relationship with Bagoas was likely romantic in nature, and he clearly cared for Bagoas as shown by the way he kissed him so openly and took his words into serious consideration even in what

was a potentially tense political situation. The contrast in descriptions of Bagoas shows the difference in attitudes towards relationships like Alexander the Great and Bagoas' within the Greek and Roman civilizations, with the Greek accounts using less harsh language to describe Bagoas and speaking of him in a more casual manner.

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