

New research indicates homosexuality prevalent in early Christian Rome

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Dr Mark Masterson, from Victoria's School of Art History, Classics and Religious Studies, has analysed communications of all kinds from the late fourth and early fifth centuries to develop a fuller picture of late-ancient men. This includes correspondence between men, as well as legal notices from the authorities of the time which initially ruled against homosexual prostitution and later perhaps against homosexuality itself, although, Dr Masterson says, the law is unclear.

"While sex between [men](#) wasn't against the law in those times, it was explicitly frowned upon by the authorities," he says. "But the very fact that the authorities talk about how men 'must not do this with another man', using humorous language and puns, reveals that these activities were prevalent and quite well-known. After all, you don't make decrees against an activity unless it's something that actually happens in society."

Many of the letters between men featured an element of 'bromance', says Dr Masterson. "They use super warm language and when you analyse it you find that they're quoting erotic poetry to each other, as well as using words of love. Although this might not necessarily mean they are having a [sexual relationship](#), their friendship is portrayed in a sexual way to underline its closeness. If you read letters like these between a man and a woman you'd figure they were having a sexual relationship."

Dr Masterson's findings are detailed in his book, *Man to Man: Desire, Homosociality, and Authority in Late-Roman Manhood*, the culmination of 10 years of research.

"My work pushes the conversation further along about sexuality in ancient times. The usual image of the early Christian empire is that society was all buttoned up and much more careful, but my research suggests that people don't always obey society's 'rules'—they don't now and they never have."

Provided by Victoria University

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