

BEN-HUR THROUGH THE EYES OF BEEFCAKE

One set of lenses from the late 1950s and early 1960s that helped to expose the homoerotic possibilities of *Ben-Hur* was the beefcake industry—magazines and short films of soft-core pornography produced for gay men that developed at the same time as the era of the postwar biblical epic. The beefcake industry came into existence as a variation on an already accepted form of publishing—the bodybuilding and health magazine. Health and fitness magazines had been around since the turn of the twentieth century, sold to a growing middle class with more leisure time for athletics, and capitalizing on bourgeois anxiety that less physical labor would lead to the softening of bodies, minds, and morals.¹³ In the 1930s, a subgenre of bodybuilding magazines, advertisements, and brochures illustrated a growing culture of physical development. Most notable among these early fitness magazines were Bernarr McFadden's *Physical Culture*, founded in 1908; Joe Wieder's *Muscle and Fitness*, founded in 1940 (still being published, and still the bodybuilder's bible); and ads and catalogues sold by Charles Atlas (the famous "98-pound weakling" ads, promising to make a skinny wimp into a "real man") begun in 1929.¹⁴ These publications featured exposed male bodies, often wearing only a loincloth, a bikini brief, or a "posing strap"

(essentially a g-string bikini that covered the genitals and pubic area but left the buttocks exposed). The possibility of sexual pleasure and erotic gaze was always present in muscle magazines, but the style of the photographs and the surrounding articles encoded the images as being solely for the inspiration of heterosexual men to aspire to greater physical development. As beefcake scholar Valentin Hooven suggests, echoing Mulvey, "Male nudity always required a reason why. . . . There was an unspoken agreement that men never took their clothes off just to be admired for their looks."¹⁵

In the 1950s, somewhat by accident, photographer Bob Mizer stumbled on an audience for physique photos that challenged this rigid sexual construction. As a gay man who had been photographing nude males since he was a teenager, Mizer set up a studio in Hollywood to shoot photographs of well-developed men and put them together in a catalogue. The idea was to create an agency, which he called the Athletic Model Guild (AMG), for artists, fitness magazines, and film productions that were looking for buff models. The catalogue was advertised in the back of men's interest magazines, including fitness publications. Mizer soon found that he couldn't keep up with orders for copies of the catalogues, even though the agency itself was failing to take off. He realized that his customers, mostly men, were buying the magazine for the *pictures*, not in order to hire the models. He began offering the catalogue as an independent publication, re-titled *Physique Pictorial*, on newsstands in Hollywood starting in 1951. He was soon shipping to magazine dealers across the country.¹⁶

Physique Pictorial was different from other physique magazines, but more in style than in substance. Rather than posing men simply for the display of muscle, Mizer posed men in positions that invited the erotic gaze. If there was any question what the men in the photos were up to, early *Physique Pictorials* also included artwork by George Quaintance, who posed his drawn and painted men in positions of playful nudity, or in perilous erotic restraint. (A particularly daring early cover in 1952 was called "Aztec Sacrifice," and included a nude Meso-American—crotch barely covered—chained spread eagle on a giant sun medallion.) "What *Physique Pictorial* did was to strip away all that obfuscation," Hooven writes. "A glance through the magazine made it instantly clear that it celebrated the male body with a directness that had not been seen since the collapse of the Roman Empire."¹⁷

The success of *Physique Pictorial* led to a growing industry of physique magazines published primarily for the enjoyment of the male figure, including titles like *Tomorrow's Man*, *Adonis*, and *Vim*. Here for the first time, gay men could see their desires illustrated on the page, without the distracting charade of barbells and nutritional supplement ads. More

importantly, the fact that this magazine that appealed so explicitly to their desires was *mass-produced*—subscribed to, purchased, or stolen from the local newsstand—led to the implication that there was a *mass audience* for this kind of publication. And a mass audience suggested the possibility of a community. Gay writer Paul Monette describes this moment of realization, stumbling upon a copy of *Tomorrow's Man* as a fifteen-year-old in the general store of his small town in 1950s Massachusetts:

It wasn't just the beauty of the specimens, ripe but not overmuscled, squeaky clean as surfers. It was an attitude of showing off, a sassy wink of something I'd never seen before. When they were shot from the back, they shucked the strap and posed butt-naked, sometimes almost shaking it in your face. I was staring at men who wanted to be admired. And who clearly got down and did it as soon as the shutter stopped clicking. It was the first clue I ever had that being queer existed out there in the world.¹⁸

Another way to put it is historian of gay pornography Thomas Waugh's apt phrase: the mass production of male erotica got gay men "together and off."¹⁹

GRECO-ROMAN CULTURE AS QUEER TROJAN HORSE?

The celebration of Greco-Roman culture was an important part of this emerging subculture of gay male erotica. In his extensive history of modern male erotica, Thomas Waugh refers to three "alibis" for the production of gay male pornography: the study of "fine art," which included references to the classical male beauty in the mode of the Greeks and Romans; the development of "healthy living" and the male physique; and "nude" or "nudist" culture, which stressed the relationship between the naked body and the natural world. These "alibis" were useful in creating "an entire erotic culture without acknowledging its basic nature."²⁰

In the 1960s, the physique publications became more explicitly an industry producing gay erotica, and the "cannibalization of other domains of popular culture" became part of the production of the pornography.²¹ This extended to the production of short narrative films that allowed viewers to enjoy the beautiful male bodies with the addition of motion and sound. These films were sent by mail order to men around the world, and were fairly pricey (\$25 for a 16 mm print with sound, \$15 for an 8 mm silent, which would

translate to a range of \$120 to \$200 in 2014 dollars). The audience would therefore be narrower and more self-selecting, perhaps more "in on the joke" than those who might pick up *Physique Pictorial* for 35 cents at the newsstand.

Waugh cites one film in this popular culture mode, directed by Richard Fontaine, released by AMG in 1960, as an important record of the evolution from physique film to pornography. The film takes the homoerotic suggestiveness of the Greco-Roman aesthetic and combines it with the cultural juggernaut of the grandest biblical film of that year. The film is called "Ben-Hurry."

"Ben-Hurry" is introduced with a title sequence spelled out on a chalkboard with magnetic letters. The action starts as two fit young men enter dressed in nothing but some ridiculously short Roman leather skirts and what appear to be tinfoil armbands, their hair perfectly Brylcreemed. They are carrying spears and approach a similarly dressed handsome blond buddy holding a sword and striking a "Thinker" pose. We are led to believe that these men are extras on the set of an epic film production. The scene, however, is clearly taking place around a backyard pool in California, with various mismatched columns and statuesque yard ornaments scattered around to invoke "ancient Rome."

"What's buggin' you, Ben?" one of the hunks asks his pensive blond friend.

"My wife's in the hospital havin' a baby." He stands up and drops his sword. "And I have to sit here dressed in a skirt!"

The other hunk places a fraternal hand on Ben's bare shoulder. "Gee, Ben, if that's all that's botherin' you. . ." He drops his hand and knocks the skirt off, leaving Ben wearing nothing but a posing strap. He playfully slaps Ben's tight abdomen. "Feel better now?" One very obvious film cut later, and the two hunks are guffawing at the nearly naked Ben.

The supposed heterosexuality of the models is part of the fantasy, the verbal "straight guy" joshing acting at odds with the obvious visual homoeroticism of the film. The film was somewhat subversive, however, in challenging the system of alibis for gay pornography that Waugh names. The playful undressing of these "Romans" was an important moment in the transition from the physique industry to gay pornography. When Ben's skirt was dropped, the entire system of alibis—Greco-Romanism, the male body as art, and the healthy cultivation of the body—fell away, too. What was revealed was unvarnished erotic interest. "The absorption of the ancient world into the formulas of pop movies, whether Cecil B. DeMille or the Italian peplums [sword and sandal films] ensured that classical references would never again rise above the level of camp. 'I feel silly wearing a skirt,' said one of Richard Fontaine's models of his classical tunic, aptly summing up the long overdue end of an era."²²

The straight guy fantasy continues in the next take, as one hunk grabs the prankster and holds his arms behind his back. After turning around and giving the audience a clear view of his exposed butt, Ben approaches with his sword and points it the "prisoner's" chest.

"When I was a kid, before I became a movie extra, you know what I wanted to be?" Ben asks.

"A missionary?" his pinned friend suggests.

"A surgeon," Ben answers. His friend's face falls. "Now, uh, what have you got that you can spare?" Ben takes the sword, and cuts off the skirt, revealing his friend's posing pouch.

"Nothing, I have a date tonight," his friend says.

"Then *she* can lick your wounds," Ben says.

Again the supposed heterosexuality of the dialogue both conflicts and plays with the implied gay sexual fantasy of the film: namely, the idea of "licking" this model somewhere in the proximity of his genitals.

The restrained and "threatened" friend appeals to Ben, suggesting he wouldn't want to put a "six-million dollar production" in danger by injuring him. "One spear-carrier more or less won't make much difference, right, Bruce?" Ben asks the man restraining his friend. "I'm with you, Ben," Bruce answers. (In some of the takes, Bruce is actually chewing gum.)

The restrained hunk then "escapes" from Ben and trips up Bruce, leading to a wrestling match between the scantily clad models. Ben picks up a spear and stands over them as though he is simply enjoying the match. Eventually Bruce is prone, and suggestively pinned, with the other model on top of him, bare buttocks exposed. "Okay, gladiators, don't wear yourselves out," Ben helpfully suggests. Eventually, the wrestling ends up with Bruce in the swimming pool, and, as it must, the final Roman skirt comes off, revealing three muscled men with their virility on display.

As Waugh writes, wrestling was essential to these early soft-core films, as the "privileged licit crypto-erotic formula" that allowed the nude men to end up in sexual poses, while keeping the "strap" of the heterosexual alibi in place. "Wrestling became [AMG's] trademark, the basic formula . . . of [its] narrative films, which had their wrestling interludes as predictably as Hollywood would have their musical numbers."²³

After some more horseplay that shows off the men's build, buttocks, and bouncing genitalia, a fully dressed man with a clipboard enters and says, "All slaves and gladiators report to the set." The three pick up swords and spears, and without the slightest rationale, pose with the weapons elevated in the air, their tips touching, showing off one last time their buff physiques. As they don their skirts and pick up Roman costume helmets, Bruce turns to Ben and says, "Come on, Ben . . . hurry."

The pun reveals all. It exposes an audience of erotic spectatorship not just for the soft core porn in "Ben Hurry," but also for the original biblical epic of *Ben-Hur*. It's a winking acknowledgment that some audience members were not watching *Ben-Hur* as "A Tale of the Christ," but enjoying the spectacle of male bodies on display. As Waugh writes:

Throughout every level of mass-distributed commodity culture, the individual is welcome to invisibly appropriate elements of that culture to his/her own fantasy and erotic use. . . . When individual appropriation becomes collective and visible . . . a turning point is reached. Fontaine's "Ben-Hurry" . . . mix(es) the activity of borrowing with the pleasure of creation out of whole cloth.²⁴

Compared to the stultifying two hundred and twelve minutes of *Ben-Hur*, "Ben-Hurry" is a film of no more than about five and a half minutes. (Presumably, whatever solitary organic activity a gay man might be engaging in while watching "Ben-Hurry" would only take about five and a half minutes.) It's still enjoyable to watch today because of its playful eroticism—the lack of production values or actual sex between the models only adds to its charm. But all the elements that made the original *Ben-Hur* appealing to gay men are there as well: the exposed sweaty flesh, the suggestions of leather and bondage, and the randy sexuality of "real" men, that might just lead to all kinds of sexual activities as long as the women are off-set and out of the picture.

GREECE AND ROME AS GAY IDENTITY FORMATION

As transparently pornographic as the physique magazines and films were, perhaps scholars like Waugh who have labeled the interest in Greco-Roman culture as a “mere” alibi for sexual license have missed some of their significance as part of the early formation of a gay male identity. If the postwar script assumed that gay men were perverse creatures who lived out their dark secret erotic lives alone and ashamed, the Greco-Roman fantasy provided another script. As Messala says to one of his aides-de-camp, “Sextus, you ask how to fight an idea. Well I’ll tell you how . . . with another idea.”

Perhaps the most explicit example of the Greco-Roman fantasy as budding gay identity is the publication *Grecian Guild Pictorial*, founded in 1955. In addition to posing-strap-clad youths, the *Pictorial* included extensive essays on Grecian culture, often accompanied by photos of classical sculptures of naked men. The publication also featured homilies on spiritual development by a National Chaplain—a handsome “bachelor” Presbyterian pastor named J. A. M. Hanna, of Oak Hill, Ohio—as well as the Reverends Robert W. Wood, Thorman Alderson, and Lorenzo Joseph Morrow.*

The magazine offered more than just a subscription, however; it offered membership in a nationwide organization. Included in membership was the expectation that members would live up to the “creed” of the Grecian Guild. Explaining itself as a “brotherhood of bodybuilders, artists, and physique students” (most of the readers probably fit into that ambiguous latter category) men of the “order” were pledged “to the accomplishment of the best of which each man is capable; to the love of purity, truth, honor, beauty, God and native land.”³⁹ Even Eisenhower couldn’t have objected to such an imprecise and noble creed.

* The LGBT Religious Archives Network lists Robert W. Wood’s contributions to LGBT rights in Christian congregations as a pastor living openly with his male partner from the early 1960s, and as the author of the first book on Christianity and homosexuality, *Christ and the Homosexual*, published in 1960. <http://www.lgbtran.org/Profile.aspx?ID=28> (Accessed February 23, 2015).

The Guild attempted to set up individual chapters in major metropolitan areas, and even held national conventions in New Orleans in 1958, and in San Francisco in 1959. Most ingeniously, the Guild developed a fraternal pin that could be worn in order to identify other members. As the magazine admonished, this primitive gay-dar pin would work only if the membership promised to wear it *every day*.⁴⁰

As with all of the camp and queer texts and artifacts I have been examining in this study, there are examples that define and undermine the ideology the Guild attempted to establish. For every page of high-minded talk of Greeks and Romans, there are multiple pages of nubile young men in sensual poses and fetish costumes. If these posing strap boys peaked the reader’s interest, he could always turn to the back of the issue and order copies of photos directly from the photographer, with a strong understanding that these photos would *not* include the posing strap. *Pictorial* included ads for what had to be some of the first sensual wear marketed to men, including togas and loin-cloths (in red stripe, blue stripe, or leopard print), and as one ad put it, “The best—and *briefest*—in male attire.”⁴¹

More “orthodox” bodybuilding magazines like *VIM* caught onto the Grecian Guild alibi instantly, deriding the plans for a national convention as giving members the opportunity to “indulge in the various activities that bound members together, whatever those activities may be,” and printing a mock application for Grecian Guild membership that changed the categories “married” and “single” to “married?” and “whatever for?”⁴²

Nevertheless, as a not very well-disguised gay magazine, *Grecian Guild Pictorial* seems to have been dedicated to building an ideal around members’ interests in male beauty, and even something resembling “gay pride.” One page in the January 1960 issue featured a section called “Great Thoughts,” which listed quotes from famous thinkers. Along with typical Shakespearian quotes like “To thine own self be true” and “There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so,” there was a line from Andre Maurois: “A complete solitude is inhuman and is likely to lead to insanity. Unspoken things poison the minds of introspective people, as foreign bodies enclosed in a wound poison the tissues. Secret and rebellious emotions must be given expression; they must be discussed with intimate friends.”⁴³ This sounds like important

* Of course, these edifying quotes were accompanied by a picture of a muscular man in briefs, a rising star in the physique industry named “Dick Moore.” This suggests a reversal in which the erotic imagery was acting as an “alibi” for the cultural/literary element of the magazine.

advice for a persecuted minority beginning to have an inkling of self-awareness and community. Later in the gay rights movement, confronted with the specter of AIDS, this quote would be shortened to "Silence = Death."

It would be easy to dismiss the spiritual exercises from ministers, the literary quotes, the idealized classical past, as a mere fig leaf, an alibi for what the subscribers to the magazine *really* wanted, which was naked men. But sometimes you need a spiritual alibi as well. The Greco-Roman fantasy offered a different spiritual paradigm from "Judeo-Christianity"—at least the puritanical form that it had taken in the 1950s—and the possibility of an alternative construction of masculinity from the repressed, anxious, heterosexual breadwinner beholden to the capitalist economy and the national security state.

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Magazines like *Grecian Guild Pictorial*, for all their campy and transparent fetishizing of naked men, also exhibited a desperate desire for a more compassionate society that allowed for the full expression of the sexual, physical, and emotional range of the masculine body and spirit. This was beautifully expressed in a speech delivered by the Reverend Thorman Alderson, an Episcopal priest, to the first national convention of the Grecian Guild in August 1958 in New Orleans. The speech was published in *Grecian Guild Pictorial* in February 1959.

Alderson started by acknowledging the group's "alibi" of classical beauty: "Why are we so anxious to awaken modern minds to the ideas of Greek art and philosophy? Some, I expect, think that this appeal to the Greeks is simply a piece of antiquarianism invoked as an excuse for publishing a magazine with photographs of handsome models."⁴⁵ Considering the nude Greek statue that accompanied the article, marble genitals prominently displayed, the thought had probably occurred to more than a *few* readers.

Alderson went on, however, to laud the Greek ideal of the body, mind, spirit, and emotions in balance, and made quite a touching appeal for a fuller expression of masculine physicality and emotions. He contrasted his perception of the Greek ideal to what he assumed was the operating ideal of the 1950s: Puritanism.

The puritan believes that the body and the feelings are the lower parts of his nature, that they should be denied expression, and severely disciplined. The puritan does not want to yield to any desires of the body or of the emotions . . . We find much of this kind of thinking in American life. Where you find the body neglected, despised or considered an object of shame, there you have Puritanism. Where you find human emotions beaten down, stifled or scorned as signs of weakness, there you have Puritanism.⁴⁶

Here among the naked boys and grand talk of Grecian ideals came a cry for recognition of the body, and the acceptance of emotion, particularly among men. Under the pressure of empire placed on men, it was gay men, in their

transparent ogling of “Roman” male bodies, who resisted the panopticon state that restricted desire and deep feeling.

For the gay audience that saw their sexuality reflected, or refracted, queerly in *Ben-Hur*, the machinery of empire led to a personal struggle of identity as perilous as that of the film’s protagonist. In Chapter Four, I recounted the very real consequences the Cold War American Empire had on gay men, including their vilification in the sex-crime panic of the early 1950s, and their being named as a menace to national security during the State Department purges and the Lavender Scare. In the political/religious equation of the spiritual-industrial complex, gay men’s very existence put into peril the idea that America was God’s chosen nation. Surely God would not bless a nation that allowed such perversity within its borders. For gay men of 1950s America, the “non-imperial empire” had deep personal consequences. It was indeed a “Roman world,” in the sense of being an empire in which one must blend in or be destroyed.

And yet, in many of these men’s fantasies, as suggested by the Greco-Roman appeal of the physique magazines, it was also a “Roman world” which allowed for donning togas, nude wrestling, and bathing with other men. Seen in this light, the campy, erotic spectacle of “Ben-Hurry” and the physique magazines resisted the machinery of empire that threatened to crush the queer body and spirit. If early gay rights movements of the 1950s, like the Mattachine Society and *One* magazine, were creating overt community and political power through identity politics, male erotica created covert community through the unapologetic display of same-sex desire. Here, gay men could come together, albeit secretly, around what interested them most—the erotic possibilities of the male body. ¶

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