

Homosexuality in the Middle Ages

by

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Homosexuality in the Middle Ages long remained virtually unexplored. All that the pioneer investigators of the pre-Hitler period, Xavier Mayne [pseudonym of Edward Irenaeus Prime-Stevenson], The Intersexes (1907), Magnus Hirschfeld, Die Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes (1914), and Arlindo Camillo Monteiro, Amor sáfico e socrático (1922), had to

say on the entire period from the death of Justinian the Great in 565 to 1475 could have been contained in two pages. The first to venture into this "blind spot" in history were Canon Derrick Sherwin Bailey, Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition (1955), who sought to exculpate Bible and Church from blame for homophobia, and J. Z. Eglinton, Greek Love (1964), who devoted a section to the continuity of pagan pederastic tradition into the Middle Ages. More recently, Vern L. Bullough, Sexual Variance in History (1976), consigned 100 pages to unconventional sexuality in Byzantium and the Latin West. Michael Goodich, The Unmentionable Vice

(1979) and John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality (1980), offered the first book-length studies. Taking advantage of the lack of documentation and of organization itself during the Dark Age 500-1000, Boswell expanded Bailey's efforts with the original thesis that Christians were not particularly homophobic before the 13th century - in spite of the death penalty imposed by Christian Roman and Byzantine Emperors and the anathemas hurled at sodomites by the early Church Fathers. He claimed that the secular governments, far more than Inquisitors, and without direct Christian inspiration, carried out most of the arrests, trials, tortures and executions of sodomites during the 14th and 15th centuries, a period little treated by him, but which Goodich had emphasized in part because documentation is so much more plentiful for it. David F. Greenberg, The Construction of Homosexuality (1987), has 60 pages in a slightly Marxist framework while Wayne L. Dynes (ed.), Encyclopedia of Homosexuality (1990), with well over 100 pages, is in the liberal mold. The least sound, if longest monograph, is Boswell's Same-Sex Unions in Pre-modern Europe (1994) which seeks to identify orthodox liturgical precedents for gay marriages in a society that normally prescribed death for sodomites. The best is Michael J. Rocke's

dissertation, "Male Homosexuality and its Regulation in Late Medieval Florence" (1989).

Articles are pouring forth, some more significant, like those of Giovanni Dall'Orto on Italian cultural figures in the Encyclopedia of Homosexuality, than some burdened by social constructionism.

Terminology: Did homosexuals (or gay people) exist in the Middle Ages? This question

is not fanciful; rather, it needs a precise answer. "Homosexual" and "gay" are concepts created by the clandestine subculture that had been driven underground by Christian intolerance and Victorian prudery. Károly Mária Kertbeny invented the former and first used it in print in an anonymous pamphlet of 1869; the latter with our meaning belongs to the slang of the American homosexual underworld (first attestation OED2 1935). "Homosexual" has (erroneously to be sure) acquired in the minds of many a (pejorative) medical connotation, while not a few speakers since 1969 restrict "gay" to politically self-conscious activists. Nowadays some radicals prefer "queer". In these contemporary acceptations no one in the Middle Ages was or could have been "homosexual," "gay," or "queer."

Medieval theologians and jurists applied yet another term to those "sinning against nature", namely sodomite. Latin Christians classified homosexual behavior under the deadly sin luxuria, "lust" or "lechery," and assigned it to the worst form, namely the peccatum contra naturam "sin against nature." It had three subdivisions, ratione generis "by reason of species," that is to say with brute animals, ratione sexus, "by reason of sex," with a person having the genitalia of the same sex, and ratione modi, "by reason of manner", namely with a

member of the opposite sex but in the wrong orifice, any one that excluded procreation, which was thought the sole legitimate motive for sexual activity.

It was widely believed that anyone could be tempted into sodomy, although some casuists were dimly aware of habitual or inveterate if not of exclusive sodomites. This theological definition of peccatum contra naturam underlay the definition of "homosexual" in late nineteenth-century Germany, belonging to a third or intermediate sex and as one

exclusively and involuntarily attracted to others having the genitalia of the same sex. All the other dimensions of the physique and personality of the partners—and even the active-passive dichotomy that had dominated the Greco-Roman conceptualization—were simply disregarded. Hence it is not surprising that more than a century of medical and biological research have failed to find any common denominator in those labeled "homosexual."

The origin of this medieval notion of sodomy cannot be understood without some cultural archaeology. The account in Genesis 19 of the destruction of the city of Sodom on account of the wickedness of its inhabitants cannot alone explain the semantic development of Jewish Hellenistic Greek Sodomites, Christian Latin Sodomita, into the medieval notion of the "sodomite"—a far broader concept. The depravity of the Sodomites took the form of attempting to rape the male strangers (supposedly "angels") who were visiting Lot.

Significantly Lot, following the literary example of the host at Gibeah in Judges 19 (perhaps an older version), offers the townsmen his daughters instead of the male that they clamored to know, a fact that implies their bisexuality as well as the low esteem in which females were held. This view, rather than the one that Bailey and Boswell argued, namely that the

Sodomites were punished for inhospitality, although it too was a component of the iridescent myth, circulated as early as the First Commonwealth (established under the Persian Empire) and was reinforced by the antagonism between Judaic and Hellenic sexual mores.

Further, "to know" in Genesis and in Judges, as in numerous other examples in the Jewish scriptures, means to have sex with - to know in the Biblical sense - not to become acquainted with (unknown and therefore potentially threatening strangers) as

Bailey and Boswell claimed. Lot's daughters had not "known" men. The reworking in the Hellenistic period of the homosexual aspect of the episode into the legend that the Sodomites were one and all similarly and specifically depraved—making the city's destruction the aition of the taboo on homosexuality—did not obliterate other mythopoetic elements. Sodomites were equated with satyrs, beings allegedly endowed with insatiable, and what we should now call "polymorphously perverse" sexual appetites. The prohibitions in Leviticus 18:22-23 concern only two categories of offender: males who have intercourse with other males, and males and females who copulate with animals. Both were excluded from the sacral community of Israel, as were subsequently all sodomites—in the wider definition—from the Christian Church.

The Christian concept of the sodomita, and then of sodomia (which appears in medieval Latin about 1175, possibly in the Iberian peninsula on the model of Arabic liwāt < It "sodomite"), has as its ideological substratum the mythical archetype of the satyr. Satyrs embody male sexual desire by virtue of their enormous virile members and more or less permanent erections, but they are unsuccessful in their pursuit of women. For this reason

they prefer to assault sleeping women or boys who are taken unawares, but frustrated in their search for pleasure they often turn to one another or even to animals. This assumption explains the manifest expansion of the Biblical tradition and the multiplicity of referents of the term sodomy. The legal definition, it is true, may often be a narrower one, restricted to anal intercourse with man or woman or vaginal penetration of an animal. But the psychological understanding, the moral reprobation, rests upon the implicit belief in an uninhibited sexual appetite. In medieval Greek and Latin, variations

of the root (sodom) normally meant buggery.

The second aspect of satyrs' behavior that shaped the Christian definition of the sodomite is sacrilege. While (perhaps reluctantly in the case of many "fathers" as of St. Paul himself) sacralizing heterosexual activity within marriage, mainstream Christians demonized all other forms of sexual expression. They even condemned as sacrilege violation by a religious of the vow of chastity. This part of the mythopoetic legacy of the ancients completed the negative image of the sodomite as one who has placed himself outside the pale of Christian belief and practice. In a sense this hypothesis also gives the rationale for classifying as sodomy intercourse with Jews and Saracens, or even, in a case from rural Poland in the eighteenth century, of so labeling a liaison between the daughter of a noble family and a young serf trained as a musician. The sodomite is driven by lusts so bestial, demonic and blasphemous as to make him trample upon every law of God and man in quest of pleasure.

Another term that came into use in the twelfth century but gained ground after 1235, is Bulgarus "Bulgarian," whence French bougre and English bugger (from which the nouns of action bougrerie and buggery were subsequently derived). It was the merit of a heresy hunter

Robert le Bougre to have confounded all the heretical sects under one name, which became synonymous with "heretic" and then "sodomite" and "usurer." Catholic inquisitors accused adherents of dualist sects of practicing the detestable vice, in part because of their unconventional views on sexual morality. English "buggery" is not, however, unambiguously attested in the sexual sense until the penal law of Henry VIII in 1533; it is nowhere found in Middle English. This term is the semantic reflex of the

equation sodomite = heretic in late medieval Latin Christendom paralleled by such phrases as Ketzer nach dem Fleisch alongside Ketzer nach dem Glauben.

Pederasty vs. Androphilia: A question that must be addressed here, if only because Boswell

has so insistently raised it, is whether medieval (and Roman) homosexuality was

predominantly pederastic or androphile? The homosexuality of the ancient world was

predominantly age-asymmetrical. In ancient Greece, approved sexual interplay normally

took place between an (active) adult male and a (passive) adolescent between the ages of 12

or 13 and 17 or 18. Theorists praised such erotic relationships (which some maintained

should not lead to penetration) as strengthening male bonding and fostering civic virtue and

courage on the battlefield. On the other hand, Hellenes and Latins interpreted effeminacy —

gender-inappropriate behavior in their eyes, such as an adult male being penetrated — as

want of male strength of character and as indicative of cowardice and baseness.

Without social disapprobation, Romans, provided that they were the penetrators, could do as

they wished with slaves and freedmen. The opposition heterosexual/homosexual though not

unknown was, depending as it does exclusively on object choice, usually not emphasized in part because the Judeo-Christian taboo on sexual relations on persons having the genitalia of the same sex was unknown to Hellenic culture. The phenomena which the modern mind collects under the rubric of homosexuality fell then into distinct and more or less watertight compartments. Pagan Romans, who never approved the penetration of freeborn Roman youths much less adult citizens, neither knew

nor cared about the legends of Genesis and the statutes of Leviticus. These texts were sacred to medieval Christians, as they are to our contemporary fundamentalists despite all that critical scholarship has since learned about their real date and authorship. Sodomy remains a sin amongst almost all Christians in spite of gay Christian activists.

A further obstacle to reducing homosexuality to a single category was the pederastic mindset, a psyche aroused not so much by the masculinity as by the androgyny of the male adolescent. Many modern commentators neglect this crucial difference between pederast and androphile. Hellenistic and Roman artists were fond of androgynous youths, and assimilated the eunuch to the adolescent as passive sexual partner. All that those who are today defined as homosexual had in common or have now is a "propensity to sin"—the urge to violate a prohibition of the law of Moses. In spite of Plato's "against nature" (Laws), Greeks and Romans did not as a rule think in terms of object choice rather than of role (insertee vs. insertee). The condemnation of all male-male sex was thus more Judaic than Greco-Roman. "Homosexuality", an umbrella concept, covers a multitude of constitutional and personality types. The census of those standing under it has varied through the centuries—for reasons

that have still to be elucidated. Plausibly the same-sex sex of upper-class Greeks was nine-tenths pederastic and one-tenth androphile, while that of modern Americans seems to be nine-tenths androphile and one-tenth pederastic. The type predominating in medieval society need not have been the same during all centuries or in all areas, but fifteenth-century evidence from Florence and Venice, far more detailed than for any previous society, indicates that the classical, age-asymmetrical variant remained

normative, though mostly shorn of its pedagogical aspect so touted by the Greeks. Modern androphilia may indeed have first flourished or predominated in areas with Germanic or Celtic populations before 1869 or even 1893 or before 1700, dates debated by social constructionist enthusiasts such as Halperin and Trumbach for the birth of the modern homosexual identity but they fail to perceive how much the concept of the homosexual derived from that of the sodomite, especially of the habitual sodomite.

Persecution of Sodomites: Defined by theologians as "sinful behavior," all homosexual activity, as well as other forms of sodomia, could only be the object of mounting condemnation and repression by clerical and civil authorities. To what extent does the Roman Catholic Church and its clergy bear responsibility for this intolerance? Bailey's pioneering Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition pleaded that "the prejudiced defenders of the invert" had "mischievously cast slurs on the Church," which he would have reduced almost to an innocent bystander. This is as good a time as any to set forth our objections to those gay scholars—including even some self-styled "gay Marxists"—who opt,

often out of expediency (there are more Christians than gays) to evade the religious issue.

Some even maintain that "sexism", like "prejudice against otherness" objectively existed and in fact served as an underlying (biological) cause of the stance adopted by the primitive and inherited by the medieval Church.

We focus upon the question of responsibility for the genesis of medieval intolerance. Both natural and juridical persons are morally and legally responsible for their actions. Whatever motives, conscious or unconscious, overt or covert, may have

determined their behavior, they cannot evade or disown that responsibility, anymore than the heads of state that conceived and executed the criminal policies of the Third Reich and the Japanese Empire. Greeks favored decorous pederasty and Romans tolerated most consensual homosexual acts. Hellenistic Jews abominated both. The main difference that the Christians made when they converted those pagans was in sexual views. After converting, Teutons and Slavs, who like Greeks and Latins had scorned only effeminates, also adopted Christian homophobia. Sex-negative as they were in general, Catholics and Orthodox of whatever background became rabidly homophobic.

Those who would exonerate medieval clerics by indicting sexism and prejudice against otherness have missed the point. It is not as if theologians and priests secretly detested the condemnation of sodomites but had it forced on them by an intolerant hierarchy. They themselves created the "sodomy delusion" and inculcated it effectively. We gays are still struggling, often vainly, against it. Christian institutions and authorities were implicated in every policy-making process of medieval society. When the Church was not the instigator, it was the accomplice; when it was not the accomplice, it was the beneficiary. Those gay

Christians who want to pretend that the "true Church" was guiltless of the terrible wrongs which resulted from these premeditated and purposeful crimes are simply deceiving themselves. Responsibility of natural and juridical persons as a necessity of the legal order exists precisely to the extent that it is prescribed and defined by law. No evidence will ever make the Church an "innocent bystander" in regard to the intolerance of homosexuality.

From St. Paul onwards Christians deemed sodomy sinful and, once they gained hegemony over governments, criminal as well.

Roots of Homophobia: The sources of Christian intolerance were manifold. First, there was the legacy of paganism. Greco-Roman (and primitive Germanic) culture strongly reproved any type of homosexual (and any other) activity that was perceived as gender-discordant.

The passive-effeminate male, designated as cinaedus in Latin and argr in Old Norse, bore the brunt of overpowering contempt and hostility, but only social—not legal—sanctions.

Ironically enough, to call another male an argr was itself an offense under Lombard law.

Judaism bequeathed to Christianity the model of the Levitical clergy, which was heterosexual but not abstinent. Never in all of its 2500-year history has Judaism had celibate priests or virginal priestesses, never any other ideal for its religious elite or for its laity than marriage and fatherhood. From Magna Mater religions of Asia Minor and/or Zoroastrianism,

Christianity had adopted a different tradition, one that deferred to the Jewish prohibition of self-castration (in rejection of Origen and other fanatics who made themselves eunuchs "for the sake of Christ") but still embodied an androgynous norm into which those oriented

toward their own sex conveniently fitted.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, alongside Deuteronomy 22:5 and 23:18, expressly forbade male homosexuality and cultic cross-dressing and prostitution. Furthermore, the account of the destruction of Sodom in Genesis 19 gave quasi-historical example and sanction to the death penalty prescribed in the Priestly Code. All these texts, read in the Vetus Latina and then in St. Jerome's translation, gave divine sanction to intolerance. To this day they remain the ineluctable "bottom line" in the arguments of the foes of gay rights, cited by the Supreme Court in Bowers v. Hardwick. Even if at the outset the scope

and purpose of these provisions of the Mosaic Law was narrower than the blanket condemnation that later became normative, the Judaic tradition was unambiguous; in Hellenistic Judaism, perhaps as an abreaction to Greek paiderasteia, male homosex was made tantamount in gravity to murder. Palestinian Judaism did not lag behind: the Talmud (b.Sanhedrin 73a) went so far as to ordain that one had the right to kill another male to prevent his committing this crime, a plea still entered as "homosexual panic" in certain gay-bashing cases in the guise of a justly enraged "victim" approached for homosex.

Early Christians adopted and ratified Hellenistic Jewish homophobia. Such passages as Romans 1:18-32 and I Corinthians 6:9 merely reiterate the Judaic rejection and condemnation of love for one's one sex. In addition, from Gnostic speculation on the role of sexuality in the cosmic process, Christians acquired a profound malaise with sexual dimorphism (as an imperfect human condition) and the ideal of an asexual humanity. From this standpoint heterosexual intercourse even for reproduction within Christian marriage could be little more than a necessary evil; homosexual intercourse of any kind a wholly unnecessary one.

The Christian emperors, who became the head of the Church and remained so in Orthodox lands - Caesars and popes - instituted the death penalty at first perhaps only for certain, then for all, homosexual acts. The sons of Constantine the Great decreed an anti-sodomy law in 341, and the decree of Theodosius the Great in 390, followed by Justinian's novellae 77 and 141 in the sixth century, ordained death by burning for the "sin against nature". Moreover, Justinian initiated a long tradition of making tabooed sexuality the scapegoat for society's ills, asserting that God sent plagues, famines and

earthquakes as punishments for sodomy. Hence at the outset of the Middle Ages Imperial law, inspired as it was by theologians, prescribed death.

Church Fathers: The Patristic writings, most of which presume canonical the New Testament if not its Apocrypha, are Christian texts from the second century until the seventh century or even until the thirteenth, when Scholasticism took hold. A Secret Gospel of Mark may have treated Jesus' implied homoerotic relationship with a catechumen before the theme was expunged from the canonical Mark. As we know them, the gospels are so reticent that disputes still rage over whether Jesus recommended the chastity he apparently practiced over the marriage he praised.

More than any other evangelist, Luke portrays Jesus, who criticized those who followed the letter of the law instead of the spirit of love, as contradicting rabbinical conventions on sex, for example by teaching that to follow him a man must reject his wife's love and abandon his parents and that celibacy might be necessary for salvation. In the early church, before tradition or texts became fixed, though a few praised and practiced every variety of sexuality

from virginity to promiscuity, most, conscious of standing apart from and above pagans in sexual mores, accepted the Judaic view that homosexuality, like infanticide, was a very grave sin.

Deemed the second founder, St. Paul, whose epistles comprising one third of the New Testament are the earliest of preserved Christian writings, was explicit. He prescribed marriage only for those too weak to remain chaste, but forbade divorce, available at the whim of Jewish, Greek, and Roman husbands. Influenced by Jewish Scripture, by

pharisaic Judaism, and by the melange of ascetic Platonism and theosophical Judaism best exemplified by Philo Judaeus, he categorically forbade all sex outside marriage. He singled out homosex, even between females, for special condemnation, as well as transvestism of either sex, long hair on males and other signs of effeminacy or softness, and masturbation.

Romans 1:18-27, Titus 1:10, Timothy 1:10, and I Corinthians 6:9 all emphatically condemn male homosex.

All of the Fathers were explicitly or implicitly (in their advocacy of virginity, chastity, etc.) homophobic. The earliest post-Biblical (non-canonical) Christian homophobic writing that has been preserved, the anti-Jewish Epistle of Barnabas, known in a fourth century Alexandrine manuscript, explained that the Mosaic law declared the hare unclean because it symbolized sodomy. The Acts of Paul and Thecla claimed that Paul demanded total renunciation of sex. The Acts of Andrew the Apostle assured a lady that her renunciation of sex with her husband would repair the Fall. In the Acts of John Christ thrice dissuaded the apostle from marrying. By the mid-third century, the Acts of Thomas were enthusiastic about the sexless life. The Gnostic Gospel According to the Egyptians argued that Adam and Eve

by introducing sex brought about death.

On returning to the Near East from Rome in 172, Tatian, a student of Justin Martyr (who had even approved another pious young man's wish to be castrated), enjoined chastity on all Christians. Some Syrian churches only baptized celibate males. Certain second and third century heretics argued that marriage was Satanic. Marcionites described the body as a nest of guilt. The Coptic Gospel According to the Egyptians had Jesus speak of paradise before the sexes had been differentiated. Among libertine sects,

however, the second-century Alexandrian Carpocrates' teen-aged son Epiphanes, who succeeded him as head of the heretical sect, advocated holding of women and goods in common.

As early as 177, Athenagoras, characterizing adulterers and pederasts as foes of Christianity, subjected them to excommunication, then the harshest penalty that the Church, itself still persecuted by the Roman state, could inflict. The Council of Elvira (305) severely condemned pederasts. Canons 16 and 17 of the Council of Ancyra (314) inflicted lengthy penances and excommunication for male homosex.

Head of the catechetical school in Alexandria until he fled persecution in 202, St. Clement combined Gnostic belief that illumination brought perfection with Platonic doctrine that ignorance rather than sin caused evil. Borrowing from neo-Platonism and Stoicism, Clement, who idealized a sexless marriage as between brother and sister, like Philo, condemned homosexuality as contrary to nature. Pseudo-Clement opined that one had to look far away to the sinae (to China) for people who lived just and moderate lives (Recognitions, 8, 48).

The learned enthusiast Origen, prevented from seeking martyrdom by his mother in 202,

reinforced fasts, vigils and poverty with self-castration, which he understood Matthew 19:12 as recommending. In 257 another fanatic, St. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, opined that the plague had the merit of letting Christian virgins die intact, but no Christian invoked medical arguments about the benefits of virginity or (as late pagan physicians did) of caution and moderation, which was not at all the same thing. Syriac third-century forgeries ascribed to St. Clement, bishop of Rome, worried about the celibate male virgin

traveling from one community to another, beset by unmarried females.

The Coptic Father of Christian monasticism, St. Anthony at 20 gave away his inheritance and devoted himself to asceticism, retiring first into a tomb and then into the desert, in both of which he fought with hordes of demons. Failing to seduce him in the guise of a woman, the Devil reappeared as a black boy. Around 305 Anthony organized the hermits that he had attracted into a community under a loose rule. The end of the persecutions gave such ascetics the glory formerly gained by martyrs. Like St. Anthony, other anchorites found sexual desire the most difficult urge to control and ordained severe fasts to weaken it. The Desert Fathers increased sexual negativism of other Christians just as monasticism emerged and heightened the temptations of homosex for the cloistered. Converted after being discharged from the army in 313, another Copt St. Pachomius founded a monastery in the Thebaid where he eventually presided over nine such institutions for men and two for women as abbot general. His rule, the first for cenobites, influenced those of St. Basil, John Cassian, Caesarius of Arles, St. Benedict, and that of "the Master." Pachomius said that "no monk may sleep on the mattress of another" (Ch. 40) or come closer to one another "whether

sitting or standing" than one cubit (about 18 inches) even when they took meals together.

Most famous of pillar ascetics, St. Simeon Stylites (ca. 390-459) lived on a column for about four decades near Antioch working miracles. Such "athletes for Christ" mortified their bodies more than Olympic athletes had ever improved theirs, but the lack of external discipline and scandals of other hermits encouraged the proliferation of monasteries, where the repression

of sodomy became an obsession. Much influenced by the Desert Fathers, with whom he long sojourned, the Patriarch John Chrysostom, the most eminent of the Greek Fathers, raved "How many hells shall be enough for such [sodomites]?" in Homily IV on Romans 1:26-27.

The long struggle against the synagogues, begun by St. Paul in Asia Minor, the heartland of Christendom, which continued in Rome and North Africa, stained Christianity with anti-Judaism. Just as Latin Christians borrowed anti-Judaism from Greeks, who had long clashed with them in Alexandria, they also borrowed homophobia from the Jews which they reinforced with Roman hostility to effeminacy. Catholics may have become even more homophobic than the Orthodox, who were after all living among the occasionally still somewhat pederastic Greeks.

Becoming bishop of Lyons in 177 after the martyrdom of Pothinus, St. Irenaeus attacked gnosticism. Perhaps the most influential gnostic, Valentinus was said to recommend free love for the "pneumatics," spiritual men freed from the Law by gnosis. Unlike his Alexandrine contemporary St. Clement, who condemned sodomy as "against nature" and brandished other Platonic arguments, Irenaeus emphasized tradition, Scriptural canon and the episcopate in his

struggle against the Gnostics.

Educated in liberal arts and in law at Carthage, Tertullian, father of Latin theology, who converted in 197, eventually joined the Montanists. In apologies and controversial and ascetic tracts in Latin and occasionally in Greek, he rebutted pagan accusations that Christians practiced homosex and cannibalism, charges ironically which Christians were soon to hurl against heretics. Tertullian demanded separation to escape

from the immorality and idolatry of pagan society. He may have edited the Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas, whose virginity he made central. Following Irenaeus in stressing tradition and attacking the Valentinians, he pessimistically dwelt on original sin and the Fall. Eschatological expectations led him to asceticism and perfectionism. In De Pudicitia, he condemned the laxity of Pope Callistus and of a bishop of Carthage toward sexual sinners, urging a legalistic system of rewards and punishments. Though influenced by Stoicism, he stressed the literal and historical interpretation of revelation. About 250 another Latin author, probably Novatian, wrote: "Virginity makes itself equal to the angels."

One of the four Latin "Doctors of the Church", St. Ambrose in his treatise on clerical ethics, De Officiis, encouraged asceticism and Italian monasticism. After studying at Rome, another of the "Doctors", St. Jerome urged extreme asceticism in Against Helvidius and Against Jovinian, asserting that "Christ and Mary were both virgins, and this consecrated the pattern of virginity for both sexes". The greatest "Doctor", St. Augustine, who towered over all the other Latin fathers, developed doctrines that held sway throughout the Dark Ages, that Thomas Aquinas challenged and modified in the thirteenth century, but that Protestants

revived again. Leaning heavily on the "Old Testament" and on the doctrine of original sin while rejecting Manichaeism which he had once accepted, he insisted that all non-procreative modes of sexual gratification were wrong because pleasure was their sole object and his condemnation prevailed throughout the Dark Age and indeed the rest of the Middle Age.

Withdrawing from the licentiousness at Rome, where he was educated, to a cave at

Subiaco, St. Benedict of Nursia organized those monks attracted to his hermitage into twelve monasteries but in 525 moved to Monte Cassino, where this "Patriarch of Western Monasticism" composed his rule by altering and shortening "The Rule of the Master" and also drawing freely upon those of Sts. Basil, John Cassian, and Augustine. His chapter 22 prescribed that monks should sleep in separate beds, clothed and with lights burning in the dormitory; the young men were not to sleep next to one another but separated by the cots of elders. From a noble family that fled Cartagena when it was destroyed by the Arian Goths, St. Isidore, who entered a monastery ca. 589, succeeded his brother as Archbishop of Seville. Presiding over several councils in Visigothic Spain, the only Germanic realm whose laws punished homosexual acts, he founded schools and convents and tried to convert Jews. His often fanciful Etymologies (such as miles quia nihil molle faciat, "miles [soldier] because he does nothing [effeminate]") became the encyclopedia of the Dark Ages. Borrowing from Augustine, Isidore condemned nonprocreative sexuality, approving marriage hesitantly and solely for the begetting of children. Adopted in toto from such Hellenistic Jewish authors as Philo Judaeus and Flavius Josephus, the homophobia of the early Fathers, reinforced with a

sex-negativism peculiar to Christianity, was never contradicted or even questioned by any thinker accepted as an authority by later generations of Christians until the 1950's.

Dark Age Laxity: The criminalization of homosex by Christian Emperors became unenforceable when barbarians overwhelmed the Western Empire. Over time Germanic codes replaced Roman law there. Except in Visigothic Spain where its source in

Christian doctrine is evident, they did not refer to the crime against nature. But at a time when the legal order and society itself were fast disintegrating, gratified (or ungratified) homosexual urges little interested the new, still essentially barbarian rulers.

As Pope Gregory the Great (590-604), the last of the "Doctors of the Church", inaugurated the missions to convert Germans and Celts, the Church developed new modes of enforcing its reprobation of the sin against nature. Beginning in Wales and Ireland, newly won for the faith, this role fell to the penitentials, manuals to aid priests in giving spiritual guidance to laity by enumerating the various categories of sin and prescribing appropriate penances.

They are striking for their broad, detailed treatment of sexual behavior. All of the several dozen that survive have at least one condemnation of sodomy, and several offer a relatively extended analysis of it with typically a penance of seven to twenty years for sins specifically ascribed to Sodom, three to seven years for oral-genital contacts, three to fifteen years for anal intercourse, one to three years for intercrural relations, and a mere 30 days to two years for masturbation. Monks were often disciplined more lightly, at least in practice and allowances made for youth. Lesbian relations are scarcely mentioned. None of the

penitentials even implies that the secular arm should prosecute or punish culprits but most treated homosexual offenses more severely than heterosexual ones, prescribing greater severity for anal than for oral sex - whether with a partner of the opposite or of the same gender. The early canons followed the penitentials, some of which were invested with canonical authority, in prescribing various penances despite Leviticus' death penalty and St. Paul's fulminations.

Arguments that saints' lives showed hatred for homosex are convincing as well as

that monks were tempted by female transvestites whom they assumed to be beautiful young males. The claim that this undermines social constructionism by positing a homosexual to hate is, however, poorly construed because sodomy was feared and condemned in these episodes, not the "homosexual" personality. Under Charlemagne (768-814), a secular enactment assigned penances for sodomy and a capitulary condemned sodomy among monks, remarking that it had become common.

The ninth century verses of a Veronese cleric to a youth whom a rival had stolen show true feeling:

O thou eidolon of Venus adorable,

Perfect thy body and nowhere deplorable!

The sun and the stars and the sea and the firmament,

These are like thee, and the Lord made them permanent.

Treacherous death shall not injure one hair of thee,

Clotho, the threadspinner, she shall take care of thee.

Heartily, lad, I implore her and prayerfully

Ask that Lachesis shall treasure thee carefully,

Sister of Atropos - let her love cover thee,

Neptune companion, and Thetis watch over thee,

When on the river thou sailest forgetting me!

How canst thou fly without ever regretting me,

Me that for sight of my lover am fretting me?

Stones from the substance of hard earth maternal, he

Threw o'er his shoulder who made men supernally;

One of these stones is that boy who disdainfully

Scorns the entreaties I utter, ah, painfully!

Joy that was mine is my rival's tomorrow,

While I for my fawn like a stricken deer sorrow!

The dissolution of the Carolingian Empire begun in 817 and new waves of invasions ended the brief renaissance that it had encouraged. In the mid-ninth century, Hincmar of Reims asserted that lesbians are "reputed to use certain instruments of diabolic function to excite desire." Even in later centuries, only the use of a dildo (single or double) warranted the intervention of the authorities. Chaos during the ninth and tenth centuries again derailed the

Christian attacks on Sodom which had revived somewhat, as we have seen, when Charles the Great and his immediate successors had restored order and tried to create a Christian commonwealth.

The Church's Crackdown: As soon as the Church reorganized itself after the invasions and other disruptions of the late Dark Age, fervent clerics assailed sodomites. About 1051 Saint Peter Damian, a member of the circle of papal reformers, in the Liber Gomorrhianus, bitterly denounced male homosex, particularly among the clergy where it

deemed it rampant and asserted that whoever practiced sodomy was "tearing down the ramparts of the heavenly Jerusalem and rebuilding the walls of ruined Sodom". His denunciations presaged the attitude of later councils and canonists. He charged that such sins were not only common, but escaped attention because those guilty of them confessed only to others equally compromised. But the response of Pope (later Saint) Leo IX (1049-54) was no more than a polite acknowledgement that Damian had shown himself a foe of carnal pollution. The ardent reformer had not convinced the pontiff that sweeping measures against sodomitic clergy were necessary. Leo was quite willing to let the moral status quo in the Church remain, perhaps sensing that a campaign to identify and oust transgressors would only amount to a self-inflicted wound. That so many individuals with unconventional sexual preferences should have over the centuries served a religion that uncompromisingly forbade their sexual self-indulgence is, in retrospect, a political as well as a psychological problem. The sexual abnormality of the clergy has so far unfortunately been the object of sectarian or anti-clerical polemics rather than dispassionate study.

A new phase in the evolution of attitudes toward sexuality began with Hildebrand (Gregory

VII, 1073-1085), the most revolutionary of all popes. He demanded clerical celibacy; that priests put away their wives and concubines. Although not completely successful in enforcement, the relentless drive against clerical sexuality gave rise to a sort of moral purity crusade which also assailed Orthodox, Muslims, and Jews as well as heretics and sodomites.

The intensified emphasis upon asceticism and clerical celibacy was to mark Roman Catholic morality ever after. Priestly sexual abstinence was never again doubted and condemnation of "unnatural vice" even among the laity inevitably became

more strident and imperative.

Canon law, previously rather unarticulated in private collections, developed rapidly and homophobically after 1000. "The canonical compilations demonstrate that the reformers favored moral vigorism: as a group they considered sex and other pleasurable experiences tainted by evil and a potent source of sin". Following Burchard of Worms (d.1025), Ivo of Chartres (d.1115) had canons in his Decretum that prescribed severe penalties for fellation, bestiality, pederasty and sodomy. In the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the Council of Nablus decreed in 1120 that those guilty of sodomy should be burned. Gratian's collection, Concordia discordantium canonum, in five books, completed shortly before 1150, superseded earlier compilations, becoming the text for scholastics. Updating principles of Roman Law, Gratian introduced "natural law", which became important for sodomy. In 1234 Gregory IX expanded the collection, creating the Corpus juris canonici, to which the Liber Sextus was added in 1298 and the Clementines in 1317. These seven books, and the two extravagantes added later, were glossed. Increasingly homophobic theologians, including fanatic friars from Thomas Aquinas to Luca da Penne, influenced the glossators. They and

Inquisitors inspired feudal, royal, and municipal laws to ordain the fining, castrating, and even burning of sodomites—all penalties that remained foreign to Canon law itself even when revised by The Council of Trent (1545-1563).

Although Gratian devoted little space to "unnatural" sexuality, Peter the Chanter devoted a long chapter of his Verbum abbreviatum to it. His circle seems to have originated a fantasy that they ascribed to St. Jerome: at the moment when the Virgin Mary was giving birth to Jesus, all sodomites died a sudden death. Thenceforth canonists

regularly cited Justinian's Novella 77 that famine, pestilence, and earthquake, to which many added floods and other natural catastrophes, are God's retribution for unpunished "crimes against nature." The Third Lateran Council (1179) ruled that clerics guilty of "that incontinence which is against nature" leave the Church or be perpetually confined in a monastery. Somewhat paradoxically, Bernard of Pavia (d.1213) held that sodomy did not create affinity and thus constituted no impediment to marriage.

After 1250, savage penalties were ordained. A convenient political invective that the popes hurled against dissidents, sodomy was also repeatedly linked with heresy. Many ascribed this vice to clerics — probably justifiably. Like scholastics, canonists treated homosexuality, bestiality, and masturbation as "contrary to nature," because they excluded the possibility of procreation, a touchstone of sexual morality. Such crimes by clerics constituted sacrilege, because his or her body was a vessel consecrated to God. These offenses if notorious brought infamy (infamia), a deprivation of status, unfitness for public office and loss of the right to be a plaintiff or witness in court. Ironically, the canonist Pierre de La Palud (ca. 1280-1342) explained at length why two males could not marry each other to legitimize their

relationship.

Beginning at least as early as Gregory IX's commission to the Dominicans in 1232 to ferret out heretics in southern France, Inquisitors in certain regions extended their jurisdiction to sodomites as well, now viewed as allies of demons, devils, and witches. Those convicted were handed over for punishment to secular authorities, which in time were independently to prescribe and enforce death. Before execution, torture wrung confessions from victims, and often the trial records were burnt together with them.

In the Latin and vernacular literature homosexuality played a role, if only at times perhaps as an afterglow of classical antiquity. It should always be remembered that almost until the end, medieval literature when written at all circulated in manuscript among highly elite audiences who often read and appreciated classical Latin poetry. Neither the Latin nor indeed the vernacular texts, which were often composed for ladies and laymen ignorant of Latin, treated much about homosex. They were not much subject to the formal and informal censorship that set in once the printing press had made possible a literature aimed at mass readers of the vernacular. The Latin classics - virtually the sole "exotic" literature accessible to medieval readers - were rich enough in homoerotic language and themes to inspire any poet or prose author. The twelfth century Cistercian Aelred of Rievaulx beautifully praised novices in Latin. Youths in many of these medieval poems, "as in some classical poems, are often not responsive toward their older lovers but haughty and aloof". In addition there were numerous Arabic and, from Muslim Spain, some Hebrew pederastic poems. Stories of the knights and squires living without ladies in castles, where the only women other than the lord's lady was

likely to be a serving wench, who bonded and doubtless had homoerotic feelings towards each other, sometimes reflected, often obliquely, in vernacular poems and romances. Clerics routinely denounced English royals and courtiers for sodomy from William I and the son of Henry I to Richard I and Edward II as well as the German Emperors and their courtiers from Henry IV through Frederick II and Conradin.

Four major themes can be discerned in the medieval literature dealing with love for one's own sex: 1) glorification of the physical beauty of the adolescent boy; 2) praise of

male bonding and fidelity — now often coded as self-sacrificing friendship - romantic love now being restricted to females who, the romances put on a pedestal as did the new cult of the adoration of the virgin; 3) treatments in which increasingly ambivalence, aversion, and reprobation come to the fore; and 4) reworkings of Biblical or Christian themes that are by their very origin negative and condemnatory, such as the much discussed passages in Dante's Inferno.

There was more homosexual verse during the brief renaissance of the twelfth century than before or after, which Curtius deemed more of a convention (modelled on classical Latin) than, as Boswell supposed, an indication of real life loves whether pederastic or gay. Alan of Lille (c.1128-1202), known as doctor universalis, in the Complaint of Nature, portrays nature as a figure ignorant of theology, teaching not contrary, but different things but man alone of all beings does not obey her and reserves the law of sexual love. Baudri of Bourgueil (1046-1130) like his contemporary Marbod, wrote love poems to both women and boys:

This their reproach: that, wantoning in youth,

I wrote to maids, and wrote to lads no less.

Some things I wrote, 'tis true, which treat of love;

And songs of mine have pleased both he's and she's.

Also neither of the two most influential works of the mid-twelfth century, Gratian's

Decretum, the text for canonists, and Peter Lombard's Sententiarum, that for theologians,

was particularly harsh on sodomites which Boswell mistakenly believed to be evidence of church tolerance.

Baldwin (1994) whose "Five Voices" from Northern France around 1200 though disagreeing on a variety of sexual topics, "unequivocally agreed on one common conviction: in accordance with traditional Hebraic-Christian antipathy, they judged all homoerotic relations to be the most reprehensible of sexual behaviors. Because of a universal presumption of heterosexuality the issue of gender was implicit in all five discourses". He drew on three Latin sources written for clerics; Peter the Chanter who composed in the Augustinian mode, the Prose Salernitan Questions, a physician's guide in the mode of Galen, and Andreas Capellanus' exposition of love à la Ovid. He also analyzed Old French sources of two types, one refined for lords and ladies in Jean Renard who developed the Romantic view of Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France (the only significant woman writer) and one bawdy for bourgeois: the fabliaux as exemplified by Jean Bodel. Thus every literate order was represented in his samples and at a time just before the reception of Aristotle and the logic of the scholastics increased homophobia and "spawned legislation that sought to obliterate

homoerotic practices from Western Europe". Even so it was then believed that "God instituted holy matrimony to constitute the exclusive domain for sexual relations... the procreation of children was one of the two unproblematic goals which the theologians assigned to the institution of marriage. Once again... the reproduction of children was the primary justification for intercourse". Even married women were urged to volunteer to remain chaste henceforth as a mulier sancta, not from the current medical theory but from religion as increasingly priests and

deacons were required to be celibate despite protests as early as 1074 in Paris.

Mostly, it is true, however, our theme succumbed to the Christian taboo, which was not simply a prohibition of homosexual behavior, but also a banishment of the subject from realm of polite discourse. It was only in the twentieth century that the topic openly and positively returned in world literature. The late Middle Ages however, saw another phenomenon that was to last down to the twentieth century, namely the formation of a linguistic code that enabled insiders to communicate their homoerotic feelings and reveal their true sexual orientations to one another without being intercepted by a hostile Church and society. This innovation marked a radical break with the explicitly homoerotic literature of antiquity, whose authors and public had no need of such concealment. Much more needs to be done to collect and interpret whatever survives of the clandestine homosexual literature of the late Medieval period. The positive legacy of the Middle Ages included Edward II and Piers Gaveston; the sole unequivocally positive homoerotic model of adult male liaison and commemorated as early as the Elizabethan era in Marlowe's Edward II. The survival of a precious body of literature about the pederasty of the ancients, for the most part in late

medieval manuscripts, inspired Renaissance pederasts. The Greek Anthology is known from a manuscript of the late tenth century, Athenaeus and Hesychius from ones of the early fifteenth, Catullus from three of the fourteenth. The gay-positive heritage of antiquity barely survived Christian neglect, censorship and destruction, thanks only to editors and copyists who merit closer investigation.

We have two "debates" from the thirteenth century, between Helen and Ganymede and between Hebe and Ganymede (Stehling 114 & 115) about the relative merits of each

type of lover. Although heterosexual love, in accord with nature, wins, the beautiful innocent boy puts up a good argument in each discourse.

Demonization: Before 1200, sodomy was not normally linked with apostasy; the role which male homosexuality had played in the sacral prostitution of the Ishtar-Tammuz cult or other religions of pagan Asia Minor had long been forgotten and prejudice against argrs had mostly become dormant. The Crusades whipped up prejudice against Muslims, believed to be given over to homosexual vices and against Jews, assumed to be lustful. Westerners now associated sodomy with the dualist heresy of the Bogomils in Bulgaria and the Cathars in Provence.

Toward the mid-thirteenth century the very word Bulgarus acquired the meaning of sodomita. But most important, the earlier reprobation was now magnified into a full-fledged obsession, which Warren Johansson in 1978 defined and labeled as the sodomy delusion. In its fullest formulation, it is a complex of paranoid beliefs invented and inculcated by the Church, and prevalent in much of Christendom to this day, to the effect that non-procreative

sexuality in general, and sexual acts between males in particular, are contrary to the law of Nature, to the exercise of right reason, and to the will of God and that sodomy is practiced by individuals whose wills have been enslaved by demonic powers. Furthermore, everyone is heterosexually oriented but everyone is susceptible of the demonic temptation to commit sodomy, and potentially guilty of the crime; everyone hates and condemns sodomites but the practice is ubiquitously threatening and infinitely contagious; everyone regards the practice with loathing and disgust, but whoever has

experienced sodomitic pleasure retains a lifelong craving for it; a crime committed by the merest handful of depraved individuals, but if not checked by the harshest penalties, it would become so rampant as to occasion the suicide of the human race. A source of eternal damnation for the individual sinner, it impairs and undermines the moral character of those who practice it; it is so hateful to God as to provoke his retaliation in the form of catastrophes that can befall an entire community for the unpunished crime of a single individual in its midst. For its own self-preservation every Christian community must be eternally vigilant against its occurrence and spread and the parties guilty of such abominable practices should be punished with the utmost severity and—if not put to death in accordance with Biblical precept—then totally excluded from Christian society.

This delusion persisted after every other form of medieval intolerance (such as the condemnation of adultery in Leviticus and the New Testament) had been abandoned or at least so discredited that it could no longer enter into official policy, even if some lingered in private attitudes. This tenacious survival of the medieval Christian heritage remains the chief obstacle to gay rights, but it also challenges students of medieval society and power

structures. In one respect it is even fortunate that the sodomy delusion survived virtually intact into the enlightenment, if modified somewhat since then, because it can be examined in vivo with all the tools of the cultural historian and the depth psychologist, not just from yellowing documents of the sixteenth century couched in a language that often obscures what the modern scholar would like to know. Future study of its dynamics and of the social forces that still uphold it can afford precious insight into psychopathology.

In the wake of the adoption of these beliefs, highly questionable if not absurd

notions find their way into texts on sodomia ratione sexus. Although St. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury in 1100, made some excuses for younger clerics who committed the sin of Sodom, the new hard line prevailed. In his Legenda aurea (1290), Jacopo da Varagine repeated Peter the Chanter's fantasy that all the world's sodomites had died at Jesus' birth, adding that, according to Saint Augustine, because human nature was defiled with this vice, the Son of Man repeatedly postponed his incarnation and even thought of renouncing the project altogether. Hugh of Saint-Cher, in his commentary on the Vulgate (Paris, 1232), solemnly asserted that grass will not grow on a place where sodomy has so much as been mentioned, and that while an incubus may assume a man's shape, and a succubus a woman's, a succubus would never take on male form because even devils would be ashamed to take the passive role in sodomy. In the emerging law codes, to be sure, the active (normally the older) partner often received harsher penalties.

Christian intolerance enveloped homosexual behavior in a nexus of unprovable but credible fantasies. Toward 1360 a South Italian jurist, Luca da Penne, wrote in his Commentaria in Tres Libros Codicis, Book XII, 60(61), 3:

If a sodomite had been executed, and subsequently several times back to life, each time he should be punished even more severely if this were possible: hence those who practice this vice are seen to be enemies of God and nature, because in the sight of God such a sin is deemed graver than murder, for the reason that the murderer is seen as destroying only one human being, but the sodomite as destroying the whole human race. . . .

Guy de Roye [Guido de Monte Rocherii], archbishop of Tours and of Reims, in 1388 in Manipulus curatorum (of which a French version from Troyes in 1604 under the title Le Doctrinal de Sapience added that the reproach of sodomy is so vile that even the enemies of Jesus did not dare to accuse him of it at the time of his Passion, although they heaped every other kind of abuse on him) opined:

Of the vice of sodomy Augustine declares how detestable it is, saying that the sin is far greater than carnal knowledge of one's own mother, as shown by the punishment inflicted on the Sodomites who perished in fire and brimstone from heaven. This sin, moreover, cries spiritually unto the Lord, whence in Genesis the Lord says: The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah has come unto me, for as Augustine says, by this sin the society which should be in us with God is violated when the very Nature of which he is himself the prime mover is polluted by the perversity of lust.... It is indeed of such accursedness that not the act alone but the

mention of it pollutes the mouth of the speaker, the ears of the listeners, and the very elements in general.

Thomas Aquinas played a distinctive role in the onset of the sodomy delusion. In a crucial passage of the Summa Theologiae (I-II, q. 31, 7) he falsified the material which he borrowed from Nicomachean Ethics (VII v 3-4, 1148b). There Aristotle had explicitly stated that sexual attraction to males (venereorum masculis) could be motivated either by nature (natura) or from habit (ex consuetudine). In his commentary on the Latin text of

Aristotle, Aquinas dutifully admitted that such unnatural pleasures could be sought and experienced "from the nature of the physical constitution which [certain people] have received from the beginning" (ex natura corporalis complexionis quam acceperunt a principio). But in the Summa Theologiae he suppressed this concession to assert that what is contrary to human nature (id quod est contra naturam hominis) may "become connatural to a particular human being" (fiat huic homini connaturale). "Connatural" here does not mean not "inborn" but is applied to feelings that have so fused with the personality of the subject as to become "second nature." Later he adds what Aristotle had nowhere said, that "such corruption can be...for psychological causes" (quae corruptio potest esse...ex parte animae) and exemplifies it with "in intercourse with animals or males" (in coitu bestiarum aut masculorum) to paraphrase the Christian notion of sodomia.

Like Philo Judaeus, Aquinas illegitimately paired the Hellenic conception of the "unnatural" with a Zoroastrian-Judaic commandment to produce the scholastic condemnation which the psychoanalytic school has served to rationalize by implicitly adopting the logic of Aquinas and his epigones as if it were scientific—and echoing the Biblical prohibition as if it were

some universal law. His formulation could serve as the motto of homophobic psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, who insistently deny any genetic or constitutional basis for attraction to one's own sex to maintain that it is acquired by psychosexual development in childhood.

Catholic authorities frankly admit that Aristotle does not condemn homosexual behavior as such and that Aquinas superimposed the moral sanction from a wholly independent source: the Biblical tradition adopted by the Church as a "mystical body." Because "The Philosopher's" acknowledgment that homosexuality

could be innate was suppressed by Aquinas, and by the Church generally, we have

designated the late nineteenth-century reassertion of it as neo-Aristotelian.

From the late thirteenth century onward, statutes against sodomy, with penalties ranging from mere fines to castration, exile and death, enter secular law. The sacral offense moved from canon to civil law. Times and places varied, but the language and motivation are everywhere the same. The first documented execution in Western Europe is from 1277.

Illegality became the norm and remained so until the Enlightenment began its work of criticizing and dismantling the Old Regime's criminal law, believing that sodomy, like witchcraft, had been criminalized by superstition and fanaticism.

A further weapon of the Church in its repression of sodomy was the ascription of infamy of fact. This was the stigma attached to those who violated specific canons and other clerical ordinances, and in the case of the sodomite it entailed perpetual infamy, which is to say lifelong exclusion from the Christian community. Those found guilty of unnatural vice, or even suspected of it, suffered a civil death: even if not prosecuted, they and their families could be completely ostracized and economically boycotted, they could be assaulted or even

murdered with impunity, because civil authorities felt no obligation to prosecute assailants—
a mentality that has lasted in police and court practice to this day.

The persistence of medieval infamy into modern times, not some "instinctive aversion" to
homosexual activity, underlies the ostracism and persecution which lovers of their own sex
currently encounter. Infamy is a subject remarkably neglected by medievalists; recent works
have chiefly dwelt upon obscure technical points of canon law rather than upon its social
impact, which badly needs to be investigated in connection with

the status of sodomites.

Paranoid Delusions: Subsumed under the "crime against nature," sodomy became invisible to the Christian mind, yet the object of a thousand obscene fantasies. It was nowhere, yet everywhere threatened society with destruction. It was blotted out of the annals of the past, unrecorded in the present, forbidden to exist in the future. Trial records were burned along with culprits, so that no trace should remain. Yet enveloped in the impenetrable darkness of ignorance and superstition, it existed silent and unseen, a phantom eluding the clutches of an intolerant world. This shift from the explicit but not obsessive condemnation of earlier centuries to the frantic intolerance of homosexual expression has been a hallmark of Western civilization since the late thirteenth century.

Just recently the Stanford historian Gavin I. Langmuir, particularly in his Toward a Definition of Antisemitism (1990), has noted a similar evolution of Westerners' attitude toward the Jews following the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), when under Innocent III the Church achieved the zenith of its power and influence. The delusion took the form of

accusations that Jews profaned the Christian host (the consecrated wafer in the Eucharist) and that they murdered Christian children to use their blood in unleavened bread for Passover, along with notions such as that on Good Friday Jews bleed through the anus in fulfillment of the cry "His blood be on us and on our children!" The long-standing (and perhaps unresolvable) ambivalence of theologians toward Judaism allowed authorities to canonize supposed victims of Jewish ritual murder and to erect shrines in their honor.

In the same way the Biblical condemnation of sorcery which Christianity had

inherited ("Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live") was in the late fifteenth century magnified into the witchcraft delusion—the paranoid belief that witches had the power by their magical rites and practices to inflict infinite harm on society. Because of this delusion hundreds and thousands of deranged or old women, often themselves in the initial stages of senility, were cruelly tortured to extract confessions and then brutally executed.

Some hold that witchcraft represented a survival of pre-Christian fertility cults or other forms of paganism that had survived from the mists of prehistoric ages; others that proceedings were purely and simply invented by the inquisitors for motives to be found within the politics of the Church itself. The modern investigator presumes that the rites of the "witches" had no efficacy, hence the causal nexus accredited by their Christian persecutors was an example of paranoid reasoning. But the sodomy delusion represented a purely imaginary construction of real behavior that indeed occurred, but was undertaken for the mutual pleasure or sexual relief of the participants, with no thought of harming anyone. The catalogue of misfortunes which the sodomy delusion compiled was solely the paranoid invention of Christians.

If, however, sodomy occurred everywhere in medieval Christian society, accusations brought

against a particular individual or sect need not have been grounded in reality. This is the crux of the century-long debate over the alleged guilt of the Knights Templar, who were accused of sodomy and in many cases tortured into confessing it so that their order could be abolished and its property confiscated. The most painstaking investigators have often come to negative conclusions, even pointing out that the charges

failed to convince contemporary public opinion that the trials had any other motive than the greed of the French king Philip IV. However, others, perhaps less critical, starting from some such premise as "there are always homosexuals in an all-male organization," or that "male bonding usually involves some form of homosexuality" have freely accepted the charges and even elaborated on them. It is pertinent, however, that the execution of Piers Gaveston—against whom the evidence was far more substantive—occurred a mere two years after the trial of the Templars and Edward II, his lover, had married Philip IV's daughter who afterwards helped encompass her husband's deposition and brutal murder.

The witchcraft delusion held sway from the end of the fifteenth century to the middle of the eighteenth, by which time it had been discredited in all but remote backwaters. The Judeophobic delusion lasted much longer, certainly down to the middle of the twentieth century, when revulsion at the active or passive complicity of many Christians with the Holocaust inspired profound guilt on the part of theologians because Christians defamed Jews over the centuries. In the nineteenth century, it is true, older, religiously motivated anti-Judaism gave way to economic and then racial anti-Semitism. Only in the wake of the

Holocaust did the Roman Catholic Church formally absolve the Jews of the charge of deicide. But the sodomy delusion was in full vigor longer. It explains why the homosexual victims of National Socialism received no sympathy or reparations, why as late as 1957 the Federal Constitutional Court in West Germany, without a trace of remorse, not merely upheld the Nazi laws but even suggested that the penalty be doubled—from five to ten years imprisonment. Even in its last decade this baleful legacy of the Middle Ages allows the Religious Right, or if you prefer, the radical

right, to win votes by their denunciation of gay rights. It metamorphosed into the belief (almost as tenaciously voiced as the previous one) that homosexuals are mentally ill, or are a source of social conflict and disorganization, or cause the decline of civilization.

All three of these belief systems, the sodomy delusion, the Judeophobic delusion, and the witchcraft delusion, were conceived and propagated by the clergy. Theologians and jurists invented them and disseminated among the laity. None of them can simply be attributed to "sexism," to "prejudice against otherness" or some other abstraction dear to the hearts of social psychologists. Over the centuries, Christian homophobia has blighted millions of lives.

The Closet and Clandestine Subculture: A crucial difference, however, separates the policy of the Church in regard to the Jews and its sanctions affecting those oriented toward their own sex. Down to the last third of the eighteenth century, Western and Central European Jews lived visibly in separate ghettos. This status was not only desired by their members but reinforced by the Jew badge instituted by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215

and by the ghetto first formally established at Venice in 1516. Both of these institutions had as their object the prevention of sexual intercourse between Jews and Christians. The ghetto was not simply a quarter in which Jews were compelled to reside by the collusion of real estate agents (such as are alleged to conspire to put all the Blacks in "ghettoes" in American cities), it was a walled area in which every Jew was curfewed. However, these communities had an officially recognized political and legal status, with a leadership that could negotiate on their behalf with the Christian authorities. The sodomy

delusion, on the other hand, forced homosexuals to live in a state of outward assimilation and invisibility. The only social organization which they could devise was that of a criminal subculture that hoped for and desired to be invisible to the authorities of an intolerant church and state, and not everyone could discover or gain access to this underworld. Less than a ghetto, they had at most, known solely to initiates, clandestine rendezvous for furtive sexual encounters, attested from London, Cologne, and many Italian cities, particularly during the fifteenth century. Forced separatism on the one side, forced assimilation on the other: these were the political strategies which the Church adopted.

A further problem is the failure of resistance by sodomites to the Judeo-Christian condemnation and its intensification in the thirteenth century. At least four factors were involved. Atomized individuals could not normally make contact with the underground subculture, and were doomed to frustration and helplessness. The "initatory rebirth" of those who were introduced into the freemasonry of forbidden pleasures made them unwilling to reveal its secrets to a hostile and intolerant world. The ideology ground them between two millstones: the substratum of aversion and contempt for those who inverted the norms of

gender-appropriate behavior, and the superstratum of Judeo-Christian condemnation of sexual activity between persons having the genitalia of the same sex. Finally, the absence of any positive religious sanction for homosexual activity prevented appeal to any religious tradition other than the Christian one, and this was uncompromisingly negative.

In response to the onset of the sodomy delusion, lovers of their own sex were

forced into dissimulation as the only way of survival. Marginalized by the dominant culture, they could only take refuge in a subculture that hid not just from the authorities but from Christian society as a whole. A proto-homosexual personality type resulted for which deception and hypocrisy were second nature. The conversion of the religious taboo into an administrative process of repression required the innovation of police procedures—and here the delusional world of the religious mind collided head-on with the real world. The enormity of the offense was matched only by its ubiquitousness.

The stunning dissertation by Michael J. Roche, "Male Homosexuality and its Regulation in Late Medieval Florence" a sort of Kinsey Report for the fifteenth century, concluded that as in other Italian cities at least, if not elsewhere, it remained "an integral and apparently ineradicable part of the society of late medieval and early modern Florence." Efforts to suppress homosexual activity were to no avail, even though in fifteenth century Florence, up to a third of males were accused of sodomy, because the belief system could not suppress the cultural traditions (and biological forces) underlying it. The officials charged with policing sodomy quickly became aware that to inflict the death penalty upon every sodomite would

wound society. When the penalties were too harsh, magistrates simply refused to convict very often, as in Venice which imposed the death penalty occasionally but spectacularly. In Florence they were gradually reduced as the number of those convicted rose. Other north Italian and Tuscan communes had policies somewhere between those of Florence and Venice.

Italian and to a lesser extent Northern communes developed a strategy of repression. It hovered between two poles: toleration in the sense of not prosecuting

activity which the police kept under surveillance, and sporadically rounding up offenders in droves to punish them with death, mutilation, exile, fines or other less drastic sentences.

With all the vagaries of police administration over the centuries, this remained the pattern, even in modern times, even in Nazi Germany. Monter (1974) documented a wave-like pattern of several dozen trials for sodomy in Switzerland from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century and Carrasco (1985) detailed the ubiquitous actions of the Inquisitors in Valencia from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. Moral crusaders could, of course, make life wretched for sodomites and other denizens of the sexual underworld, but after their usually brief campaigns, life went back to normal or, if you prefer, abnormal. Hypocrisy, corruption, and moral ambivalence became the norm, while homosexual activity became the invisible one—the screen behind which forbidden urges enacted their dramas of lust and gratification.

It was theologians and clerics, often rabid friars like St. Bernardino of Siena, who denounced homosexual desire as a form of madness, and Savonarola, who inspired municipal laws and administered the Inquisition. Clandestine homosexual subcultures such as those in London and Cologne arose that survived more than six centuries of repression and defamation to

become the basis of our modern movement. Police developed procedures for surveying and repressing sodomy. (None had been needed in classical antiquity, because homosexuality as such was not then illegal). They continued refining them in metropolitan areas down to the twentieth century with regular if capricious harassment. A homosexual personality type evolved and survived in a hostile milieu by virtue of dissimulation and hypocrisy ("the closet"). All the efforts of Church and state failed to eradicate the forbidden tendencies and the

outlawed behavior, even if they could drive these underground. Old French literature which effectively began around 1100 with the Chanson de Roland has almost nothing explicitly homoerotic, while Italian, which began over a century later at the court of the Hohenstaufen with the Sicilian poets and then the Tuscans, long before the Renaissance encouraged admiration for and imitation of classical pederastic models which did undoubtedly reinforce the trend, abounds with homoeroticism or allusions to sodomites from its start to the repression of the Counter Reformation during the later sixteenth century.

Antonio Becadelli's jocular Hermaphroditus (1425) and Pacifico Massimo of Ascoli's

Hecathalegium (1489) as well as the invectives that Italian humanists hurled at one another echo the frequent charges recorded in the police blotters. Domatello, Boticelli, Leonardo and Michelangelo, homosexuals themselves and admirers of the antique, restored homoeroticism and nudity in art which had been virtually absent except for St. Sebastian and Jesus and St. John since the fall of Rome. Beginning with that of the neo-Platonist Marsilio Ficino, in numerous treatises on love, discussed the permissibility of love between males, include one by Girolamo Benivieni (1453?-1542) and Giovanni Picodella Mirandola (1463-1494).

Finally, then Western society adopted the sodomy delusion, a complex of irrational beliefs that made sodomites scapegoats for society's ills—and implicitly for the failure of the Church's own prophylactic and apotropaic rites.

Byzantium and Orthodoxy: Byzantium, like China and Egypt known for its stability and

conservatism, remained faithful to Orthodox Christianity and Roman Law as well as to the Greek language. Though declining and shrinking over eleven centuries, losing provinces to Islam, it preserved until its fall in 1453 significant portions of classical literature and culture in spite of bitter quarrels between monks and heretics. From first to last however, Byzantine authorities outlawed sodomy and excoriated sodomites, usually prescribing death.

Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor, founded his new capital, Constantinople, on the ancient site of Byzantium (now Istanbul) and summoned the first Ecumenical Council.

Like his successors he ruled the Church as well as the state. Latin remained the official language until Justinian (527-565), but from the start, Greek was used for commerce as well as religious and intellectual life. The administration never wavered in its policy of antihomosexual repression, beginning in 340's with Constantine's sons and managed to drive same-sex love underground, a major cause of the dearth of our current knowledge.

Monks and scholars did occasionally copy ancient pederastic texts, a few even being composed as late as Justinian's reign. Lexicographers and antiquarians also recorded rare ancient terms for homosexual acts but from the time of Constantine himself, nude figures

disappeared from art, and nothing is heard of gymnasia after 380. Those who overthrew Constantine's son, Constans, alleged that he was an exclusive homosexual who surrounded himself with barbarian soldiers selected more for looks than for military ability (in spite of his concurrence in laws proscribing death).

Byzantine terms for male homosexuality included paiderastia, arrhenomixia

("mingling with males") and anhenokoitia ("intercourse with males"). Their general legal designation for sexual immorality was aselgeia ("lasciviousness"). Malakia, "effeminacy" in Classical Greek, came to mean "masturbation," so that Byzantines translated I Corinthians 6:9 as "masturbators . . . shall not inherit the kingdom of God." Homosexual behavior is also styled the "sin of the Sodomite" (e.g. the Desert Father, Macarius the Great (d. 391) Patrologia Graeca, (34:2243).

In the "First Golden Age of Byzantium", Justinian who recovered Italy and North Africa from the Germans, adorned his cities with splendid churches, above all the cathedral of Hagia Sophia in his capital, and reorganized Roman law in the Corpus Juris Civilis, the ultimate basis of the civil law tradition that today dominates legal systems in about half the world and from the eleventh century, became the basis of the legal curriculum in Western schools, fatefully because it prescribed burning sodomites. Even before assuming full power in 527, Justinian seems to have been implicated in an anti-homosexual trial of 521. The chronicler John Malalas described the trial of two bishops: Isiah of Rhodes exiled after being subjugated to cruel tortures and Alexander of Diospolis in Thrace castrated and dragged

through the streets in ignominy.

Not surprisingly, the Corpus retains the antihomosexual laws promulgated by Justinian's predecessors. Justinian shrewdly perceived, however, that like divorce, sodomy could not be extirpated by a stroke of the pen. Tenaciously, he issued new laws in 538-9 and again in 559 which reiterated the death penalty already ordained in 390 by the Theodosian Code 9.7.3. In the first of his novellae (no. 771), he ascribed homosexual lust to diabolical incitement and claimed that "because of such crimes there are famines,

earthquakes and pestilences," inferring that sodomy endangered the very physical basis of the empire. Such reasoning was a superstitious regression, a point conveniently ignored by Christian apologists who would have Justinian act only out of "sincere concern for the general welfare." The second (no. 141) was the first law ever to cite Sodom, a land supposedly still burning with inextinguishable fire. Mingling magnanimousness with severity, Justinian appealed to such sinners to confess themselves humbly and penitently to the Patriarch of Constantinople, consigning those not repenting "to the avenging flames."

With his consort Theodora he conducted a witch hunt, publicly disgracing several sodomites, whether penitent or not. The rulers alleged sodomy to persecute those "against whom no other crimes could be imputed," (Edward Gibbon, Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire) or whose fortunes offered tempting adjunct to the imperial treasury (Procopius, Secret History, 11:34-36).

The Eclogue of Leo III (d 741) reduced the penalty to castration but later codes such as the mid-ninth century Basilica reaffirmed death. Other emperors themselves were nevertheless reputed to have indulged. Theophanes the Confessor lists the "impious lust for males" among

the crimes of the iconoclast Constantine V (741-775), who sought to limit the monks' power.

A particularly tragic case was the alcoholic Michael III (842-867) who fell in love with a macho courtier, Basil the Macedonian, whom he made co-emperor in 866. Basil, a bold soldier, promptly murdered his patron and founded the Macedonian dynasty. Also deemed sodomites were Basil II (976-1025), slaughterer of the Bulgarians, Constantine VIII, joint ruler with his brother (976-1025) and sole ruler (1025-1028), and the Empress Zoe's husband, Constantine IX (1042-1055) Whatever their sexual proclivities

and acts, eunuchs played a major role at imperial courts, reaching their zenith under the Macedonians (867-1057).

Accusations of homosexual vice, long standard in Byzantine polemics, became rarer after the ninth century. After 1081, the Comneni created a much reduced state that the Latins ruled from the Fourth Crusade (which captured Byzantium in 1203-04) until their expulsion in 1261. Then Palaeologi restored a decentralized state ruled by "feudal" magnates on the Western model with commerce dominated by the Italian maritime republics. Cities shrank, Turks from the East and Bulgars, Serbs and Franks in the Balkans encroached and barbarized the provinces, and culture declined precipitously. In the last centuries of Empire, complaints about sodomy again surfaced (e.g., in the Patriarch Athanasius I and Joseph Bryennius). The vice flourished in both male and female monasteries. The typicon of Prodhromos (tou Phoberos, 80.31-82.1) denied access to the monasteries to beardless youths and eunuchs in an effort to shield monks from temptation. An eleventh-century text attests sodomitical clerics. The Penitential of pseudo-John IV, the Faster, instructed the confessor to inquire about the sin of arrhenokoitia, which in this text means "anal intercourse". Ecclesiastical law

punished the "sin of the Sodomite" with two or three years of epitimion, while the Eclogues prescribed decapitation by the sword. Among the Orthodox, "white clergy" (priests) could marry, but not the "black clergy" (monks or bishops). Today still staple reading for the Orthodox, the Cappadocian Fathers, whose admonitions to those who could not resist sex to marry young probably helped lower the age of marriage from the age of thirty common to upper class pagan Greek males, denounced sodomy as most heinous, but nothing could prevent it in the

monasteries. At the most renowned establishments on Mount Athos, from which even female animals were banished, sodomy must have flourished early on, becoming notorious there in later centuries.

Immediately on taking Constantinople in 1453, the Ottoman Sultan, Mehmed the Conqueror, purportedly requested the most beautiful Christian aristocratic youths for his harem. When he attempted to rape the fourteen-year-old son of the noble Licas Notaras, both father and son perished for resisting; the sons of the historian George Phrantzes were also killed for refusing to yield to the sultan's lusts. Interface with Islamic homosexuality must have begun centuries before. Officially, the greater vigilance of the Byzantine authorities against "the vice" would have served to distinguish them from their adversaries. In practice, there was undoubtedly a good deal of borrowing from Islamic pederastic customs in Greece as in Albania and Serbia where the blood-brotherhoods of the 19th century may have had Islamic rather than Byzantine roots and models.

Boswell's attempt to find medieval precedents for gay marriages is misleading. True, he has assembled neglected documents in Greek and Old Slavic tongues from various archives that

bleed male couples. Not one of his "many" Orthodox liturgies, however, sanctions carnal unions; in fact, they always specify "spiritual brotherhood" or "absence of scandal." This clearly implies that they are not, unlike heterosexual marriages, to be carnal. Churches which demanded celibacy for monks and bishops and allowed matrimony only for those too weak to abstain from sex altogether would hardly have sanctioned what they called "unnatural" sex or the "abominable sin against nature." In neither the Jewish nor the Christian scriptures is there a single endorsement of same-sex

sex. "The Old Testament", on the other hand, imposed death on "males who lie with males as with females" and St. Paul condemned not only men who slept with men, but lesbianism, thus going beyond the Jewish scriptures. Not a single Christian Father, Penitentialist, Scholastic or Canonist, Protestant Reformer or Catholic Counter-Reformer or even any Orthodox, Coptic or Nertorian ever wrote even a neutral, much less a kind, word about sodomites.

Boswell's new tome, Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe follows the same pattern as his Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality. Both have frequent, complex footnotes in numerous languages. Both exonerate Christians, particularly Roman Catholics, from guilt for persecution of gays, for which they have not apologized as they have for their anti-Semitism. Instead of detailing the denunciations, trials, tortures and executions of sodomites by the Church itself and by lay authorities inspired by Christian homophobia as Bullough, Compton, Goodich, Dynes, Lauritson and Johansson have done, Boswell has perversely tried to whitewash the homophobia of Christians who lived before 1200.

Christian marriage was designed to reduce concupiscence and to provide heirs, not to give

mutual pleasure or even to provide companionship. Boswell imagined that these same-sex unions, as he described them, that he found in Greek and Slavic had parallels in Latin for Catholics but that they have been lost. That may be, but such asexual brotherhoods can serve as precursors for modern (homosexual) gay marriage only by a wide stretch of the imagination and with blatant disregard for both scripture and tradition.

Boswell was honest enough to translate in one of his liturgies for spiritual

brotherhood a prohibition against sodomy but then he twisted the facts by claiming unconvincingly that sodomy was “not understood by Jews or Christians of the Middle Ages as a reference to homosexual love”. Despite Boswell's assertion that there was not much criticism of his earlier work, his tired old argument, following the disputed Ezekiel 16:49, that Sodom was destroyed for inhospitality has been amply refuted by all competent scholars, Christian, Jewish and atheist. In the battle of gays and lesbians for equality, distorting the past by “uncovering” liturgies for same-sex carnal unions will do no more good than blaming homophobia or even homosexuality itself on capitalist oppression as many Marxists have done. Instead of trying to rewrite history to justify their current desires, gay scholars must recognize Christianity and Judaism as sources of homophobia. Christian denunciation of sodomy has been continual.

All Boswell's erudition and hair-splitting can't make a gay marriage out of a spiritual bonding. The modern redefinition of marriage as primarily for companionship and as a source of mutual pleasure, support, or comfort which he discusses would have been incomprehensible to medieval (clerical) theorists. Boswell can't name a single pair, except

perhaps Basil I who assassinated his lover Michael III, blessed by the liturgies that he found.

Some couples, even those so blessed, may indeed have had homosexual relations, but the

Orthodox Church, which condemned sodomites to death, did not, as he implies, intend for

them to. Although some medieval Christians deemed the sins of the flesh - whether lust,

sloth or gluttony -less grave than those of the spirit - anger, envy, greed and pride - none ever

condoned any sexual act outside marriage and even within it permitted it only for

procreation. Even if one lusted after one's own wife, one committed

adultery. Churches with such anti-sexual attitudes did not conceivably authorize homosex of any sort, under any condition, much less construct liturgies to sanctify the joining together of two sodomites for sex.

Of course, Christians now eat pork and shellfish and disallow slavery, nowhere criticized in Scripture. We might argue that the time has come for gay marriages (especially in these days of AIDS) but it will not help to distort history in an over-enthusiastic attempt to find precedents.

Whether there were gays in the Middle Ages as Boswell stated in his earlier book and insisted in an article, or even homosexuals (understood as a type of person), as opposed to merely persons indulging in sodomy, is an ongoing debate. But that established churches condoned such “sins” and created liturgies to bless couples so engaged (the love so decadent and unnatural it was not even supposed to be mentioned among Christians) is an anachronistic twist not heretofore imagined and should not be taken seriously.

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