

DARKNESS DESCENDS

476–1049

• The Fall of Rome •

Rome fell in 476 when the Teutonic chieftain Odoacer deposed the last feeble emperor, Romulus Augustulus. Did the prevalence of homosexuality contribute to this collapse? The idea is, of course, a cliché endlessly repeated in speeches, proclamations, and letters to the editor, usually with the conclusion that our own society will perish “like Greece or Rome” if homosexuality is tolerated. So serious and commonplace an allegation—that homosexuality was responsible for the demise of two of the ancient world’s greatest civilizations—is surely worth some critical consideration, if only to demonstrate how completely the evidence fails to support it.

We must first ask: exactly what are we speaking of? If the Roman Empire formally ceased to exist in the late fifth century, it is far less clear what is meant by “the fall of Greece.” Admirers of the classical age might place this fall in 338 BCE when the Athenians lost their liberty to the Macedonians. But the defeat of southern Greece by its northern neighbor can hardly be attributed to differing views of same-sex attachments. If the most potent force on the Greek side at Chaeronea was the Theban Sacred Band, Philip, and Alexander, the Macedonian leaders who triumphed over them were themselves bisexual leaders of a bisexual society. With the establishment of the Byzantine Empire, later Greek civilization, now emphatically Christian, received a thousand-year lease on life, to be finally extinguished in 1453 when Muhammad II captured Constantinople. Here the circumstances are more ironic, for the strongly homophobic culture of Orthodox Byzantium fell before the more indulgent Ottoman Turks.

But what of Rome? We must first note that it was not the pagan Rome of Caligula and Nero—the Rome that looms so large in the imagination of Hollywood and evangelical moralists—that fell. Rome survived the worst of the Julio-Claudian emperors and flourished a century later under the Antonines. It was Christian, not pagan, Rome which fell—a Rome that had

been ruled by Christian emperors for more than one hundred and fifty years after the conversion of Constantine. They had, as we have seen, passed harsh legislation intended to impose new Christian norms of sexual conduct, not least in the case of homosexuality. Nor are the pictures of Roman society we find in writers of the late empire particularly lurid. The morality of the fifth-century has been compared by social historians to George III's England, that is, to an age neither notably licentious nor notably prudish. References to homosexuality in any form are rare. Only Salvian, writing of Roman Carthage about 400 CE, makes a special point of the matter. Identifying some transvestite street prostitutes, he is outraged that the civic authorities have not repressed this open display of vice.¹ All in all, we may say that Rome at its fall, far from being a city of orgiastic revels, was a relatively sober community where homophobia had long been the official policy of the state.

Rome's decay has been ascribed to many causes: military, political, economic, epidemiological, demographic, or ecological. The most famous analysis, in Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, made Christianity a major cause of the catastrophe.² Gibbon thought that its Christian rulers alienated Rome's sizable pagan minority (who saw their sacrifices forbidden and temples destroyed) and that Christian otherworldliness turned men from their social and military duties. Certainly the severity of Theodosius' legislation must have threatened citizens whose sexual lifestyles were nonconforming. With Rome's new Christian laws threatening public burning, it must have seemed that her barbarian enemies could hardly do worse. Considering these facts, one might perhaps argue with more plausibility that homophobia contributed to the fall of the empire.

• Visigothic Spain •

When the Roman Empire disintegrated, its parts fell under the rule of barbarian tribes, mainly Germanic. It would be of interest to know what views these non-Roman peoples held of homosexuality, but the evidence from their largely preliterate societies is fragmentary and confusing. The Germanic tribes, originally occupying the land between the Rhine and the Danube, were widely dispersed through migrations—as far as Russia and Asia Minor in the east, the Baltic in the north, and, ultimately, North Africa in the south. Over this wide territory it is not surprising to find widely different cultural patterns. Tacitus, in a famous essay, reported that among the Germans, “cowards,” “poor fighters,” and men who were *corpore infames* (passive partners) were “plunged in the mud of marshes with a hurdle on their heads.”³ But Ammianus Marcellinus, writing about 380, speaks of the Gothic Taifali, settled in what is today Romania, whose native traditions paralleled Sparta and Thebes: among the Taifali, boys had adult lovers until they killed their first wild boar or bear.⁴

Other writers were also at variance. Salvian described the Vandals as less prone to homosexuality than the North African Christians they conquered, but Quintilian in an imaginary speech has a German soldier named Marianus declare that male love was honorable among his people.⁵ Among the northern Teutonic tribes, to call a man *ragr* (effeminate, or given to passivity) was a crime that carried the penalty of outlawry.⁶ Yet in some Swedish cults men assumed female roles to perform a kind of shamanistic magic known as *seidr* which was both feared and despised. One ruler, hearing that his son had taken part in these rites, sent another son to kill him “together with eighty *seidmenn*, and this action was much praised.”⁷

Early Germanic legal codes lack prohibitions against male relations. These codes, which derived from pre-Christian customary law, exact fines for adultery and rape (seen as infringing on the property rights of a woman’s male relatives) but say nothing of sex between men. The oldest Anglo-Saxon code, dating from seventh-century Kent, follows this pattern, and the laws of Alfred the Great (r. 871–899), which do incorporate biblical sources, punish bestiality but not homosexuality. The ninth-century laws of the Bavarians, Burgundians, Alemanni, Saxons, Thuringians, and those Teutons who had crossed the Alps to settle in Lombardy are likewise silent.⁸

The exception was the Visigothic kingdom of Spain, which survived from the fall of Rome to the Arab conquest of 711. By 500 the Visigoth’s domain reached from the Loire to the Strait of Gibraltar, and was the largest and most powerful state in western Europe. The Visigoths were Arian Christians who converted to orthodox Catholicism in 589. Henceforth, church and king were closely connected so that bishops helped administer the state. In 642 a seventy-nine-year old noble named Kindasvinth seized the throne through a conspiracy. Fearing further revolts, we are told, he “demolished the Goths” by ordering the death of seven hundred officials and exiling others.⁹ In about 650 he also issued the first known Germanic law against homosexuality, which ordered that “those who lie with males, or consent to participate passively in such acts, ought to be smitten by the sentence of this law—namely, that as soon as such an offence has been admitted and the judge has publicly investigated it, he should forthwith take steps to have offenders of both kinds castrated.”¹⁰ Kindasvinth’s law also provided that the convict’s son might seize his property and his wife might remarry.

Forty years later another king, Egica, took further action. Quite as brutal as Kindasvinth, Egica was described by the chronicler of his reign as having “persecuted the Goths with bitter death.”¹¹ Accusing the Jews of conspiring against the state, he issued a decree depriving them of their property and enslaving them.¹² In 693, in his speech to the bishops at the sixteenth council of Toledo, Egica urged the council to take action against sodomites. “Among other matters,” he ordered, “see that you determine to extirpate that obscene crime committed by those who lie with males, whose fearful conduct defiles

the charm of honest living and provokes from heaven the wrath of the supreme Judge.”¹³ The council obligingly passed a canon degrading any guilty bishop, priest, or deacon and inflicting the punishment “concerning such offences,” that is, castration. Thereafter, the mutilated clergy were to be “excluded from all communion with Christians, . . . punished with one hundred stripes of the lash, shorn of their hair as a mark of disgrace, and banished in perpetual exile.”¹⁴

Egica also revised the secular statute on sodomy, adding a theological rationale:

We are compelled by the teaching of the orthodox faith to impose the censure of the law upon indecent practices, and to restrain with the bridle of continence those who have been involved in lapses of the flesh . . . Certainly we strive to abolish the detestable outrage of that lust by the filthy uncleanness of which men do not fear to defile other men in the unlawful act of sodomy [*stuprum*] . . . an offence against both divine religion and chastity. Although indeed both the authority of Holy Scripture and the decree of the secular law prohibit absolutely this kind of delinquency, nevertheless it is necessary to repeal that statute [presumably the law of Kindasvinth] by a new enactment lest . . . worse vices are seen to spring up.¹⁵

But Egica’s new law did not “repeal” Kindasvinth’s statute; it augmented it by adding to castration the penalties of the ecclesiastical canon of the sixteenth council of Toledo—lashings, shearing, and exile.

The parallels with Justinian’s legislation, in penalty and style, are striking. Once again savage brutality was touted as “clemency and piety.” But the harshly tyrannical rule of the Visigothic kings alienated their subjects and was their own undoing. In 711, nine years after Egica’s death, a Muslim general named Tarik landed at the rock that still bears his name and began the Islamic conquest of the peninsula.

• Church Councils and the Penitentials •

The stance of the early Christian Church toward same-sex relations was defined not just by the Bible and patristic teachings but also by the decrees of ecclesiastical councils, which later became the basis for canon law. The oldest collection of “canons” to come down to us are from the Council of Elvira, held by the Spanish clergy at Granada sometime between 306 and 309.¹⁶ Since the council met immediately following the last great persecution of Diocletian (303–304) and on the eve of the church’s triumph under Constantine, we might have expected the bishops’ concerns at such a moment to be political: instead, we find them preoccupied with questions of sexuality.

Almost half the eighty-one canons of the Council of Elvira deal with sex, far more than with any other topic, the church choosing to define its identity principally through a strict sexual code that even bade bishops and other married clerics to abstain from their wives. Other canons dealt with premartial relations, divorce, abortion, adultery, and marriage with Jews and heretics. Canon 50 forbade Christians to eat with Jews, and Canon 67 declared: "It is forbidden for a woman, whether baptized or a catechumen, to have anything to do with long-haired men or hairdressers."¹⁷ A hundred years earlier Clement of Alexandria had condemned beardless men with long hair as dangerously effeminate. In a chapter entitled "On the Companions We Should Associate With" he also inveighed against "women who delight in the company of perverts [and] are surrounded by loose-tongued catamites."¹⁸ Christian legislation usually fixed on sexual acts rather than classes of persons. But the first known ecclesiastical pronouncement on homosexuality forbade Christian women to befriend certain men because of their suspect lifestyles.

A more influential pronouncement came a few years later. The Council of Ancyra (modern Ankara) met in 314, a year after the passing of the Edict of Milan. The council was mainly concerned with prescribing penalties for Christians who had apostatized during earlier persecutions. But it also issued two canons—numbers 16 and 17—against certain persons called *alogueusamenoi*, literally, "those who are guilty of irrational behavior." This language of the canons is vague, but the offenses were apparently sexual in nature: "If they have sinned while under twenty years of age, [let them] be prostrators fifteen years [at the church door] . . . And if any who have passed this age and have wives have fallen into this sin, let them be prostrators twenty-five years, and then communicate in prayers; and after they have been five years in the communion of prayers, let them share the oblation [Eucharist]. And if any married men of more than fifty years have so sinned, let them be admitted to communion only at the point of death."¹⁹ Under Canon 17, those who had infected others with the "leprosy" of like sins were excluded from the church and "compelled to remain outside with penitents of the lowest class."²⁰

But who were the *alogueusamenoi*? Modern scholarship regards them as men who had intercourse with animals. Nevertheless, the early Latin translations of the Greek text interpreted the canons as referring to homosexuality as well as bestiality. Though the Council Ancyra was, strictly speaking, a local synod rather than an ecumenical council, its canons were regarded by later councils as ecumenical. As a result, in Western Europe at least, these very harsh penances came to be taken as definitive for same-sex behavior and were cited for many centuries.²¹

Very few parish clergy in this period would have had access to such documents. What did circulate widely for the use of priests who heard confessions

were the popular handbooks known as penitentials. These unofficial guides first appeared in Ireland in the late sixth century and reflect the influence of certain canons issued in Wales a century earlier. Canon 8 of the Synod of the Grove of Victory, for example, requires that “he who commits the male crime as the Sodomists [*ut Sodomite*] shall do penance for four years. But he who [has relations] between the thighs, [three] years. However, if by one’s own hand or the hand of another, two years.”²² The *Book of David*, dubiously ascribed to Wales’s patron saint (d. 588?), required that “those who commit fornication with a woman who has become vowed to Christ or to a husband, or with a beast, or with a male, for the remainder [of their lives] dead to the world shall live unto God,” that is, in monastic seclusion.²³

These works, which first appeared in the British Isles shortly after the fall of Rome, are among the most curious in ecclesiastical history, not least for their sexual specificity. The three most important Irish penitentials—the *Penitential of Finnian* (before 590), the *Penitential of Columban* (c. 600), and the *Penitential of Cummean* (c. 650)—all list detailed penalties for homosexual acts. The *Penitential of Finnian* decreed that “those practicing homosexuality [*in terga fornicantes*], if they are boys [shall do] penance two years, if men three; if, however, it has become a habit, seven.” It also makes specific mention of fellation: “Those who satisfy their desires with their lips, three years. If it has become a habit, seven years.”²⁴ Columban provided that a monk who “has committed the sin of murder or sodomy, [should] do penance for ten years.”²⁵ Cummean assigns seven years’ penance for sodomy, four to seven years for fellation.²⁶ There is a variety of penalties for boys: six to ten special fasts for kissing, depending on whether the kisses are “simple” or licentious or cause pollution; twenty to forty days for mutual masturbation; for femoral intercourse one hundred days, on repetition one year. “A small boy misused by an older one, if he is ten years of age, shall fast for a week; if he consents, for twenty days.”²⁷ It is notable that lack of consent on the part of the boy mitigated but did not erase his imputed sin.

The later penitentials derive from Anglo-Saxon England. These include the penitential of Theodore of Tarsus, who became archbishop of Canterbury in 668, and the penitentials of the Venerable Bede (d. 735) and of Egbert, archbishop of York (d. 766). All penance male homosexual acts. Theodore is unusual in making a special reference to lesbianism: “If a women practices vice with a woman she shall do penance for three years.”²⁸ In the eighth century the use of penitentials spread from the British Isles to the continent, where numerous new compilations appeared. A diligent modern scholar has identified thirty-one, dating from the sixth to the eleventh century, that punish male homosexuality and fourteen that punish lesbianism.

We may draw two conclusions from the wide use of these manuals. First, we may assume that the sexual behavior they describe was indeed regularly confessed. The codes were not mere fantasies of a prurient clergy, as some

shocked Protestant historians, writing before the age of Kinsey, imagined. Second, they show that homosexual relations ranked among the worst of sexual sins, and indeed of all sins, in the eyes of Christians. John Boswell, who was inclined to discount any evidence for homophobia on the part of the church before 1200, held that the penitentials “hardly constitute an index of medieval morality.”²⁹ But Pierre Payer, who has made the most thorough study of the penitentials to date, thinks that Boswell erred in this assumption.³⁰ It was through their prescriptions that priests informed parishioners of their all-but-universal sexual sinfulness, instilling guilt and fear of divine retribution for such deeds. By defining morality in this way, the church gained immense power over its adherents and, in time, immense wealth, as affluent sinners, having savored the pleasures of this life, sought to ease the pains of the next through deathbed bequests to the church. Men who loved men and women who loved women must have felt especially threatened.

• The Carolingian Panic •

The penitentials belong to the period from 500 to 1000 when Europe’s political life, economy, and culture plummeted, along with the collapse of Roman sovereignty. During the reign of Charlemagne (768–814), however, Western civilization made a partial recovery. Beginning as king of the Franks, Charles created a potent new order, the Holy Roman Empire, which brought Europe a period of peace and stability it had not known for centuries. In addition, he facilitated a revival of education led by monks imported from Ireland and England, lands that had not suffered as severely as the Continent from barbarian depredations. But this rebirth of civilization rested on strict Christian orthodoxy. Anxious to impose unity on his new dominions, Charlemagne entered into a close partnership with the bishops and other clergy. The results were not always humane. When he finally conquered the recalcitrant and pagan Saxons, the defeated tribesmen were given a choice between baptism and death. Charles also supported the church by enforcing Christian sexual morality, which until now had hardly influenced northern Europe, through the “capitularies” he issued in large numbers. Charlemagne’s puritanism stopped short at the gates of the palace, however. Within its walls, five mistresses supplemented his four successive wives and bore a due proportion of his eighteen children.

Under Charles’s reign, church councils and synods issued at least seven ordinances condemning homosexuality.³¹ In 789, in a “General Admonition” to his subjects, he specifically endorsed the heavier sanctions authorized at Ancyra “for those who sin against nature with animals or with men.”³² (By equating love between men with bestiality, this edict, like many before and after, quite literally “de-humanized” it.) In this age also, the penitentials that had been in use for centuries were denounced by church councils for failing

27. Charlemagne's victory over the Saracens, c. 780. Manuscript illustration, *Grandes Chroniques de France*, fourteenth century.

[To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.]

to cite scriptural, patristic, and conciliar authorities and for their leniency, especially with regard to homosexuality. In 813 the Council of Châlons prohibited their use and ordered them destroyed.³³

The anathemas of Charlemagne and his clergy served to keep homophobic prejudices and fears alive in people's consciousness. As a result, homosexuals became scapegoats in Charlemagne's empire, as they had been in Justinian's. Thus, the Council of Paris, held in 829 some fifteen years after Charlemagne's death, multiplied the disasters that might be blamed on God's wrath against sodomites. Here is a literal translation of its Canon 34, which has been little noted or studied:

Though human wretchedness often provokes the incomparable mercy of its Creator to severity by the manifold excesses of its weaknesses, it transgresses more seriously and more wickedly against Him when it sins against nature. For, indeed, we read that the Lord . . . has fearfully revenged this sin in three ways.

Among all the other sins which the human race fatally committed at the beginning of creation, it is believed that, provoked to wrath especially by this sin (as certain teachers have maintained), [God] said: "I repent making

man on the earth" [Gen. 6:6]. Therefore on this account, he utterly destroyed by a cataclysm [the Flood] the whole human race except for eight souls. Furthermore, because of this crime five cities were swallowed up by raging fire from heaven and by the gaping mouth of hell, and forty or more thousand of the race of Benjamin were struck down by the sword's edge in fraternal war [Judges 20]. Thus these manifest proofs show beyond a doubt how detestable and execrable this vice is to divine majesty.³⁴

What inspired this canon, which was calculated to raise fear and hatred of homosexuals to new heights by implying they were responsible not only for natural disasters like fires and floods but also for defeat in battle? Undoubtedly, it was prompted by the military and political crises that faced Charles's domain during the reign of his son Louis the Pious. "Saracens" raided the coasts of Italy and Provence, Bulgarian hordes poured into the eastern provinces of the empire, and pagan Vikings and Danes pillaged northern Europe. These dangers created widespread hysteria, and Louis ordered public prayers and fasts in 827. The situation was familiar. Churchmen feared that defeats by pagan or Islamic forces might weaken Christianity's claim to be the one true religion. But by representing defeats as acts of divine chastisement, they became not signs of Christianity's weakness but manifestations of God's wrath. The mood was one of terror, a terror focused on a special class of sinners.

In just such a penitential mood, Bishop Wala, the leading churchman of the Frankish kingdom, convened the Council at Paris in order to "make diligent inquiry into the way in which the rulers and the faithful were observing the law of God."³⁵ Going beyond Elvira and Ancyra, the council explicitly endorsed the death penalty for sodomy. Moreover, Canon 34 not only endorsed Leviticus but also interpreted Paul's Epistle to the Romans as advocating capital punishment: "Moreover, the Lord in his law commands that any who commit this infamous crime be punished with death [Lev. 20:13], and the Apostle adds that they are "worthy of death [Rom. 1:32]." We may recall that at the end of the first chapter of Romans, Paul accuses non-believers of a long list of sins, in which homosexuality is given a special prominence. Then he adds that the "judgment of God" makes such sinners "worthy of death."

Justinian's jurists had made male love responsible for the "destruction of cities." But Canon 34 went further and made it the reason for Noah's Flood—and the near extinction of humanity. How did it arrive at this conclusion? Genesis 6 says only that "God saw the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was evil continually." Canon 34 mentions "certain teachers" who taught that the Flood was, in particular, a punishment for sodomy. In all likelihood this is a reference to the eighth-century Latin version of *The Revelations of Saint Methodius*. Methodius was a Libyan bishop martyred by Diocletian in 311;

the *Revelations* ascribed to him were in fact an invention of the seventh century. The Syriac original makes no reference to antediluvian homosexuality, but the Latin translation introduces the idea, which seems to have derived from an obscure passage in the Talmud.³⁶

The use by the council of a strange and bloody tale from Judges 19 and 20 is less recherché, though quite as questionable. The Book of Judges tells of a Levite offered hospitality by an old man in the Benjaminite town of Gibeah. Certain men surround the house and in language parallel to the Sodom story demand that the host “bring forth the man that we may know him.” Again echoing Genesis 19, the old man offers his virgin daughter as a rape substitute. Instead, the Levite’s concubine is sent out, is abused “all the night,” and in the morning is discovered dead on the doorstep. The Levite dismembers her body and sends a part to each of the tribes of Israel. The outrage provokes a war against the Benjaminites which results in the carnage referred to in Canon 34.

Clearly, the slaughter of the Benjaminites was the result of a heterosexual rape and murder and only indirectly connected with homosexuality. But the council was preoccupied with the great anxiety of the times—the fear of Islam. By interpreting Judges 19 as it did, the council suggested that sodomy might provoke God to give victory to the enemies of Christianity. The sin might be punished in three different ways, the council noted: by “water or blood or fire.” Here we see how, once a prejudice has been established, imagined dangers to society posed by a scapegoated class quickly multiply. Thus, in our own century ingenious Nazi propagandists ascribed innumerable undesirable characteristics to Jews and other “lesser races.” In defining these new dangers, the council also damned the penitentials and endorsed the more severe canons of Ancyra: “For indeed the holy fathers, inspired by the divine spirit, have justly decreed in the sacred canons that this sin be judged more severely than others, since they plainly understood that while it reigns the state of the Church of Christ is weakened and the kingdom placed in danger.” “The kingdom placed in danger”: we must project ourselves back to a superstitious age haunted by the fear of conquest to understand how ominously those words would have sounded in the ears of Wala’s compatriots.

Though no authentic edict prescribing the death penalty for sodomy was issued by Charlemagne himself, a capital law was invented and foisted on the emperor.³⁷ Fabricated about 857, it was spuriously assigned to the year 779 by a clerical forger of whom little is known except his name—Benedict Levita, or Benedict “the deacon.” That Benedict’s *Collection of Capitularies*, an elaborate document of over 1,700 chapters, should have appeared at this moment is perhaps not surprising; the ninth century was remarkable for the number and extent of its ecclesiastical forgeries. To this era belong the notorious “Donations of Constantine,” perhaps the most famous forgery in Western history, and the “False Decretals” (manufactured papal letters), a

collection ascribed to Saint Isidore of Seville, who had in fact died in 636. (The “Donations,” which gave secular authority over central Italy to the popes, went unchallenged until 1440, when the humanist Lorenzo Valla showed that the text’s biblical quotations came from Jerome’s Latin translation—that is, they were post-Constantinian by a half century.)

In order to strengthen ecclesiastical over secular power, Benedict ascribed to Charlemagne many laws that were not his. To this end he drew on the Theodosian Code, the Novellas of Justinian, papal decretals, the church fathers, and the Bible. Benedict pretended that his work was a continuation of the (authentic) compilations by the Abbot Ansegisus. Since unique copies of imperial laws were often in the hands of the clergy, his work was made easy.

In Capitulary 21 of its *Second Supplement* (“Of Various Shameful Deeds of Evil Men”) Benedict incorporates verbatim that portion of Canon 34 of the Council of Paris that makes homosexuality responsible for the Flood and the slaughter of the Benjaminites.³⁸ The language is presented as Charlemagne’s, not the council’s, and another forged chapter pronounces sentence of death in the emperor’s name.³⁹

If we consider such ordinances together with Paul’s vehemence in Romans, Clement’s fulminations, Augustine’s view of sodomy as a kind of treason against the Creator, and the endorsement of the death penalty by such fathers of the church as Tertullian, Eusebius, and John Chrysostom, together with the theologically inspired codes of Justinian and the Visigoths, it is difficult—in fact, impossible—to accept the view set forth by John Boswell that “the peculiar horror which has been associated with male homosexuality in Western culture and the correspondingly violent condemnation of it were products of the twelfth century.”⁴⁰ Here, long before the twelfth century, the most important body of law promulgated in Europe in the early medieval period allowed for the ultimate penalty to be visited on homosexuals. This, over the forged name of a famous ruler. From a practical point of view it made no difference that the law was a deception: Benedict’s “False Capitularies” were widely disseminated, much used, and accepted as authentic until a German scholar questioned their genuineness in an article published in Latin in 1836.⁴¹

In his *Fourth Supplement* Benedict returns to the subject at length, adding much rhetoric and drawing on Roman law to justify burning.⁴² The chapter names “the nations of Spain and Provence and Burgundy” as especially guilty of sodomy and ends with a warning: “It is better for us to shun such things, than through them to come to ruin, so that the nation is annihilated by the heathen or captured by them.”⁴³ Once more Benedict explains defeats in battle as due not to military incompetence or the superior power of the enemy or the treachery of allies but to sexual sin. Commenting on his rhetoric, Gisela Beibtreu-Ehrenberg justly remarks: “Benedict Levita shows himself to be the legitimate father of the misguided jurisprudence of the high middle

ages, which later, within the framework of the Inquisition, banished logic and justice from the law courts for centuries."⁴⁴

• Love in Arab Spain •

What were, we may ask, the attitudes toward homosexuality in those Muslim lands so feared in the Christian West? One index may be found in their literature, which abounds in homoerotic love poetry, most notably in Arab Spain. Its efflorescence here was not unique but paralleled the Islamic world generally. Similar lyrical outpourings also graced the courts of Iraq and Syria, the gardens of Persia, the mountains of Afghanistan, the plains of Mogul India, the empire of the Ottoman Turks, and the North African states of Egypt, Tunis, and Morocco. Medieval Islamic anthologies, whether compiled in Baghdad, Damascus, Isfahan, Kabul, Delhi, Istanbul, Cairo, Kairouan, or Fez, reveal, with astonishing consistency for over a millennium, the same strain of homoerotic passion we find in love poems from Córdoba, Seville, and Granada.

The civilization ruled by the Umayyad caliphs of Córdoba from 756 to 1031 surpassed any in Catholic Europe. Córdoba's only rival among European cities was Constantinople at the other end of the continent. Indeed, the caliphs may have exceeded the contemporary Byzantine emperors in culture and probably maintained a higher level of public administration. Many of their Christian subjects (and certainly Spain's Jews) preferred these infidel rulers to the Visigoths. Moorish architecture produced, in the course of centuries, such masterpieces as the great mosque of Córdoba, the Alcázar and Giralda in Seville, and the Alhambra in Granada. Literature in the form of poetry was enthusiastically cultivated, as in all Arab countries. Native Spaniards studied Arabic eagerly to perfect an elegant and expressive style, and scholars from Christian Europe came to Seville, Toledo, and Córdoba to study medicine, astronomy, and mathematics. The scholarly Sylvester II, Rome's pope in the year 1000, had been a student in Córdoba.

To moralists beyond the Pyrenees, Islamic culture seemed a luxurious paradise tantalizingly endowed with harems, pretty slave girls, and suspiciously handsome sakis. But in sexual matters, Islam maintained a paradoxical ambivalence, not least with respect to homosexuality, for the severity and intolerance that characterized traditional Judaism and Christianity reappear in the laws of this third Abrahamic religion, under the influence ultimately of the Hebrew scriptures.

The Koran shows both Jewish and Christian influence in its interpretation of the Sodom story. Though Muhammad does not mention Sodom by name, he was well acquainted with the tale of Lot and uses the episode several times. He presents Lot as a prophet of God (like himself) and interprets the fire from above as proof of God's willingness to chastise those who ignore

his messengers. Muhammad calls the men of Sodom simply “the people of Lot,” that is, Lot’s neighbors. Through this curious association, the common Arabic word for sodomy, *liwat*, derives from Lot’s name, as does the word for homosexual, *luti*, literally a “Lot-ite.” In the Koran, Muhammad makes Lot scold “his people” for lusting after men, a taste he condemns as an “abomination,” and represents God as smiting them with tablets of baked clay rained from heaven.⁴⁵

When assigning punishment, however, the Koran stops short of the ferocity of Leviticus. After confining adulteresses to their homes, Muhammad adds: “And as for the two of you [men] who are guilty thereof, punish them both. And if they repent and improve, let them be. Lo! Allah is Relenting, Merciful.”⁴⁶ But the Koran was not the only source of authority among orthodox Muslims. There were also the *hadith*, collected sayings attributed to Muhammad which appeared in five enormous collections in the ninth century. They include a decree that both active and passive partners should be stoned, a view which had a definitive influence on Islamic law.

The theologian Malik of Medina (d. 795), whose school of jurisprudence eventually became the dominant one in Spain and North Africa, endorsed the death penalty. So did the leader of another important school, the literalist Ibn Hanbal (d. 855).⁴⁷ Others more lenient reduced the punishment to flogging, usually one hundred strokes. Barbaric sentences were in fact meted out by Muhammad’s immediate successors. Abu Bakr, an intimate of the Prophet and the first Muslim caliph (632–634), prescribed burning as a penalty and had one convicted man buried under the debris of a wall. (In modern Afghanistan this punishment was revived by its Taliban rulers in an updated form: the walls were pushed over by bulldozers.) Muhammad’s son-in-law Ali, the fourth caliph (later regarded as infallible and semidivine by Shiite Muslims), had a guilty man thrown headlong from the top of a minaret; others were stoned.⁴⁸ Thus, through early judicial theory and practice, Old Testament severity came, at least in theory, to dominate the legal side of Islam.

Elsewhere in Islamic culture, however, the evidence is strikingly contradictory. Popular attitudes were more accepting than in Christendom, and European visitors were repeatedly shocked by the relaxed tolerance of Arabs, Turks, and Persians, who seemed to find nothing unnatural in love between men and boys.⁴⁹ Behind this important cultural difference lies a vein of romanticism that runs deep through medieval Arab treatises on love. For Islamic writers, emotional intoxication might spring not just from the love of women, as with the troubadours, but also from the love of males.

Arab enthusiasts held that romantic love was a meaningful and valuable experience for its own sake. But how were they to reconcile such a view with their faith? This they did by appealing to another *hadith* ascribed to the

Prophet: "He who loves and remains chaste and conceals his secret and dies, dies a martyr."⁵⁰ Nor was this love limited by gender. The Iraqi litterateur Jahiz, who wrote extensively on the subject of love, had laid down the rule that *ishq*, or passionate love, could exist only between a man and a woman. But Ibn Daud, who was born the year Jahiz died (868), recognized the possibility of love between males in his *Book of the Flower* (*Kitab az-Zahra*), and this view prevailed in later Arab culture.⁵¹ Ibn Daud was a learned jurisprudent as well as a literary man; but according to an account repeatedly cited, his passion for Muhammad ibn Jami (to whom his book was dedicated) made him a "martyr of love." Another friend told their story:

I went to see [Ibn Daud] during the illness in which he died and I said to him, "How do you feel?" He said to me, "Love of you-know-who has brought upon me what you see!" So I said to him, "What prevents you from enjoying him, as long as you have the power to do so?" He said, "Enjoyment has two aspects: One of them is the permitted gaze and the other is the forbidden pleasure. As for the permitted gaze, it has brought upon me the condition that you see, and as for the forbidden pleasure, something my father told me has kept me from it." He said . . . "the Prophet said 'He who loves passionately and conceals his secret and remains chaste and patient, God will forgive him and make him enter Paradise'" . . . and he died that very night or perhaps it was the next day.⁵²

Both these traditions, the punitive and the romantic, figure in the literature of Arab Spain, and especially in the writings of its foremost theorist of love, Ibn Hazm. Ibn Hazm was born in Córdoba in 994 during the last days of the Umayyad dynasty. His father had held political office but was forced to flee when the Umayyads were overthrown in 1013. Later in life Ibn Hazm became famous—and controversial—as a theologian and the author of a notable essay on comparative religion. But about 1022 or 1027 he wrote a treatise on love called, in the poetic style favored by Arab writers, *The Dove's Neck-Ring about Love and Lovers*. He died in 1064, seven years before the birth of William IX of Aquitaine, the first of the troubadours.

Ibn Hazm begins his book with a conventional Muslim prayer and makes haste to justify his undertaking on religious grounds: "Love is neither disapproved by Religion, nor prohibited by the Law; for every heart is in God's hands," that is, love is an inborn disposition "which men cannot control."⁵³ Later, he elaborates on this defense: "It is sufficient for a good Muslim to abstain from those things which Allah has forbidden, and which, if he choose to do, he will find charged to his account on the Day of Resurrection. But to admire beauty, and to be mastered by love—that is a natural thing, and comes not within the range of Divine commandment and prohibition."⁵⁴ Ibn Hazm assures us that "of the saints and learned doctors of the faith who

lived in past ages and times long ago, some there are whose love lyrics are sufficient testimony to their passion, so that they require no further notice."⁵⁵ By way of proof he mentions several famous imams and jurists of Medina.

Ibn Hazm, unlike the Greeks, does not exalt love because it leads to courage, virtue, and wisdom. It may, but it may also produce simple derangement.⁵⁶ Here is Epicurus' diagnosis without his condemnation. Indeed, this Arab psychologist calls love a "delightful malady, a most desirable sickness. Whoever is free of it likes not to be immune, and whoever is struck down by it yearns not to recover."⁵⁷ Ibn Hazm emphasizes, and seems almost to relish, a masochist element: a suffering friend rebuked him when he expressed a hope he might be freed from his misery, and a man of rank he knew rejoiced when a page-boy took notice of his infatuation by slapping him.⁵⁸

What does Ibn Hazm's treatise tell us about Hispano-Arabic attitudes toward homosexuality? *The Dove's Neck-Ring* is a mixture of theoretical generalizations and anecdotes, most of them based on the writer's personal observations. Perhaps nine tenths of the anecdotes concern the love of men for women, especially for lovely slave girls. Yet Ibn Hazm repeatedly intermingles stories of men falling in love with other males and assumes that homosexual love is, psychologically, no different from heterosexual love. Aristotle, Plutarch, and the author of the *Amores* had sharply distinguished the two kinds of love. But Ibn Hazm moves from a story of a man's infatuation for a slave girl to a story of male love with no suggestion that one experience differs from the other.

Consider, by way of contrast, a Christian writer like Andreas Capellanus, who wrote his famous essay on courtly love a century and a half later at the court of William IX's granddaughter, Marie de Champagne. In his second chapter Andreas states categorically the assumptions of medieval Christian Europe: "The main point to be noted about love is that it can exist only between persons of different sex. Between two males or two females it can claim no place, for two persons of the same sex are in no way fitted to reciprocate each other's love or to practice its natural acts. Love blushes to embrace what nature denies."⁵⁹ Later writers on love north of the Pyrenees would overwhelmingly have agreed. What we may call Ibn Hazm's romantic bisexuality would have been incomprehensible to them.

We may glean some insight as to how Ibn Hazm and his fellow religionists viewed love between men indirectly from his anecdotes and poems. Arab delicacy and discretion is amply illustrated by Ibn Hazm's tales of men who kept silent about their love. It was not regarded as proper in Arab society for two men to avow their love publicly—in contrast, say, with ancient Greece or Tokugawa Japan—though it was perceived as highly romantic to harbor such feelings without naming the beloved. Here is a Platonism that out-Platos Plato. In a chapter on "martyrs of love" Ibn Hazm mentions six lovers who died, or nearly died—two women who loved men, two men who loved

women, and two men who loved men. The tales are intermixed and not grouped by gender. One story tells of a friend, Ibn al-Tubni, whom he praises highly for his learning, personal qualities, and his beauty: "It might have been said that beauty itself was created in his likeness, or fashioned out of the sighs of those who looked upon him."⁶⁰ They were separated when Berber troops overran Córdoba. In exile in Valencia, Ibn Hazm was saddened by the news that Ibn al-Tubni was dead. When an acquaintance had asked Ibn al-Tubni what made him so emaciated, he had replied:

"Yes, I will tell you. I was standing at the door of my house in Ghadir Ibn al-Shammas at the time that Ali ibn Hammud entered Córdoba, and his armies were pouring into the city from all directions. I saw among them a youth of such striking appearance, that I could never have believed until that moment that beauty could be so embodied in a living form. He mastered my reason, and my mind was wholly enraptured with him. I enquired after him and was told that he was So-and-so, the son of So-and-so, and that he inhabited such and such a district—a province far distant from Córdoba, and virtually inaccessible. I despaired of ever seeing him again; and by my life . . . I shall never give up loving him, until I am laid in the tomb." And so indeed it was.⁶¹

Both Ibn Hazm's anecdotes and his poems, from which he quotes unabashedly in *The Dove's Neck-Ring*, reveal something of his own erotic sensibility. His grand passion seems to have been one he experienced at age sixteen for a slave girl. But several poems tell of his feelings for other men. Though Ibn Hazm's poetry rarely rises above mediocrity, his very banalities are instructive:

If he should speak, among those who sit in my company, I listen only
to the words of that marvelous charmer.

Even if the Prince of the Faithful should be with me, I would not
turn aside from [my love] for the former.

If I am compelled to leave him, I look back constantly, and walk [like
an animal] wounded in the hoof.

My eyes remain fixed firmly upon him though my body has departed,
as the drowning man looks at the shore from the fathomless sea.⁶²

Vouching for his own purity, Ibn Hazm assures us, with naive candor, "I am completely guiltless, entirely sound, without reproach . . . and I do swear to God by the most solemn oath that I have *never* taken off my underwear to have illicit sexual intercourse."⁶³ Yet he admits to being tempted by the beauty of men: to avoid sin, he had shunned a party where he would meet a handsome man he was attracted to.⁶⁴

In his final chapters Ibn Hazm analyzes the moral, religious, and legal sides of love, which in Muslim culture were of course one. Several of the

transgressions he describes in “The Vileness of Sinning” are homosexual. A distinguished religious scholar, he tells us, lost his reputation because of his open liaison with a boy. Another scholar, the former head of the an important Muslim sect, fell so madly in love with a Christian boy that he committed the ultimate enormity—he composed a treatise in favor of the Trinity.⁶⁵ But not all Arabs were as censorious as Ibn Hazm. At the house of a wealthy businessman, two guests withdrew repeatedly to a private chamber. When Ibn Hazm showed his disapproval—characteristically by reciting a poem—the host ignored him.

This chapter also contains Ibn Hazm’s sole reference to lesbianism. “I once saw a woman,” he tells us, “who had bestowed her affections in ways not pleasing to Almighty God.” But her love changed to an “enmity the like of which is not engendered by hatred, or revenge, or the murder of a father, or the carrying of a mother into captivity. Such is Allah’s wont with all those who practice abomination.”⁶⁶ But Islamic references to lesbianism were apparently not always this condemnatory. At least a dozen love romances in which the lovers were women are mentioned in *The Book of Hind*, who was herself a lesbian. The ninth century produced a lost *Treatise on Lesbianism* (*Kitab al-Sahhakat*), and later Arab erotic works contained chapters on the subject.⁶⁷ Here lies a challenge for research.

In Islam, questions of morality were inevitably also questions of law. So Ibn Hazm’s chapter on sexual sins also sets forth the various penalties prescribed by religious tradition. He recounts a story of Abu Bakr’s burning a man alive for playing the passive role.⁶⁸ The first caliph, we are told, struck and killed a man “who had [merely] pressed himself against a youth until he had the orgasm.”⁶⁹ The jurist Malik, he notes, praised an emir who beat a young man to death for allowing another man to embrace him similarly. But for Ibn Hazm this was excessive; he thinks ten lashes might have sufficed, though he admits this is heterodoxy.⁷⁰ As for the completed act of sodomy, he cites only Malik’s opinion that both parties should be stoned, but he fails to say whether he agrees or not.

In this atmosphere of harsh religious laws and overcharged romanticism, men loved, expressed their feelings openly in fervent verse, and loudly protested their chastity. Perhaps some of the poetic fervor was merely literary. Perhaps some of the protestations were sincere. Occasionally, these affairs involved famous rulers. Caliph Abd ar-Rahman III, who ruled Córdoba at its political and cultural zenith (929–961), was attracted to a young Christian hostage, was rejected, and had him barbarously executed. The boy, canonized as Saint Pelagius, became the martyr-hero of a narrative poem by the German nun Hrosvitha (a contemporary), who condemned Arab lust and glorified Christian chastity.⁷¹

Architecture, belles lettres, and scholarship flourished in Córdoba under Abd ar-Rahman’s son al-Hakam II, who was their eager and discriminat-

ing patron. In his youth his loves seem to have been entirely homosexual. This exclusivity was a problem, since it was incumbent upon the new caliph to produce an heir. The impasse, we are told, was resolved by his taking a concubine who dressed in boy's clothes and was given the masculine name of Jafar.⁷²

The love of al-Mutamid, emir of Seville and the outstanding Andalusian poet of his day, for another poet, Ibn Ammar, ended violently after a long friendship. Al-Mutamid was a passionate lover of women but also loved males. Of a cupbearer he wrote, "They named him Sword; two other swords: his eyes! / . . . now we *both* are masters, *both* slaves!"⁷³ His love for Ibn Ammar is the most famous, and most tragic, romance in the history of al-Andalus. In 1053 al-Mutamid, aged thirteen, was appointed titular governor at Silves by his father, who made Ibn Ammar, nine years his senior, his vizier. A story tells how after an evening of wine and poetry his fondness led him to declare to Ibn Ammar, "Tonight you will sleep with me on the same pillow!"⁷⁴ In a poem he sent to al-Mutamid's father, Ibn Ammar declared:

During the night of union there was wafted
To me, in his caresses, the perfume of its dawns,
My tears streamed out over the beautiful garden
Of his cheeks to moisten its myrtles and lilies.⁷⁵

Apparently the prince's father came to disapprove of the relation with the commoner, for he exiled the poet in order to separate them.⁷⁶ On his succession, al-Mutamid granted Ibn Ammar great political and military power. A famous tale, which we are not required to believe, tells how, when they were sleeping together in one bed, the poet dreamed that his lover would kill him and fled the scene; he was wooed back by the king, who assured him that this could never happen.⁷⁷ But later the two men quarreled bitterly. Finally, when Ibn Ammar fell into his hands, the ordinarily humane and generous al-Mutamid first pardoned him and then, when Ibn Ammar boasted too triumphantly of his reprieve, fell into a rage and hacked him to death with his own hands. "Afterwards he wept, as long ago Alexander had wept for Hephestion, and gave him a sumptuous funeral."⁷⁸

Almost any collection of Hispano-Arabic poetry yields a plethora of love poems by men to or about other males. Erotic poetry first flourished in Andalusia at Córdoba under Abd ar-Rahman II (822–852). His grandson, Abdallah (888–912), penned amorous verses to a "dark-eyed fawn."⁷⁹ Ibn Abd Rabbihi, a freedman poet at Aballah's court, wrote of another young man in a typical mood of subjection. "I gave him what he asked for, made him my master . . . / Love has put fetters on my heart / As a herdsman puts fetters on a camel."⁸⁰ Al-Ramadi, the foremost poet in Córdoba in the tenth century, fell in love with a black slave. Again we see the conscious reversal of roles: "I looked into his eyes, and became drunken . . . / I am his slave, he is

the lord.”⁸¹ Latin poets in Augustan Rome had likewise addressed love poems to slave boys but never in this style; the self-abasement of these Andalusians more closely prefigures the romantic chivalry of medieval France.

After the fall of the Umayyads at Córdoba, Arab Spain—fatally weakened—disintegrated into a score of petty states. But despite this political disarray, the eleventh century was a golden age of Arabic poetry in the Iberian peninsula. Love songs continued to pour forth under the Almoravid rulers (1090–1145) and the Almohads (1145–1223), homoerotic verse with the rest. The most acclaimed lyricist of this brilliant era, Ibn Quzman (c. 1080–1160), has been called one of the greatest of medieval poets. An irreverent bohemian in the mold of François Villon, he composed racy, colloquial *zajals*, far removed in style from the canons of classical Arabic verse. Tall, blond, and blue-eyed, Ibn Quzman led a licentious life resembling that of Harun al-Rashid’s boon companion in Baghdad, the poet Abu Nuwas, who was also unabashedly open about his homosexuality. In short, terse lines and elliptical stanzas that are almost untranslatable, he celebrates “wine, adultery and sodomy.”⁸² Like the troubadours of Provence, he complains of the hauteur and disdain of his lovers, who are often male, but laughs at the scruples of ideal love: “What do you say about a beloved, when he and you, without anyone else, are alone, and the house door is locked?”⁸³ Poverty-stricken, he ended his days as an imam teaching in a mosque.

The philosopher Ibn Bajja, better known to Latin Europe as Avempace, was in every regard a more respectable figure. It was he who introduced Aristotelianism to Spain and paved the way for Averroes. Ibn Bajja, we are told by an anthologist, wrote memorial verses on the death of “a black slave with whom he was infatuated and who . . . died at Barcelona, much to his grief.”⁸⁴ Several Andalusian anthologies appeared in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the most important being Ibn Said’s *Pennants of the Champions* (1243). A selection of these poems has been translated by the poet-scholar A. J. Arberry. The cautious Briton seems to have eschewed verses whose sexual details were explicit, but his selection still reveals a broad range of male-love poems intermixed with other lyrics.⁸⁵ Ibn Said, who was born at Alcalá la Real near Granada, arranged his anthology according to the poets’ birthplaces and occupations. Verse in praise of boys appears from Seville, Lisbon, Córdoba, Toledo, Granada, Alcalá, Murcia, Valencia, and Saragossa, authored by kings, ministers of state, scholars, men of letters, and civil servants, as well as professional poets. The translation of this sophisticated poetry presents a formidable challenge. Marked by elaborate word play, compact allusions with subtle connotations accumulated over centuries, complex rhymes, and much alliteration, these poems—to the Western mind—border on the fantastic, even the surreal. One saki’s delicate cheek is as intoxicating as the wine he serves, another’s fingers are stained with golden wine as the ox’s lips are by the pollen of the narcissus it browses. A mole on Ahmad’s

cheek is like an Abyssinian gardener in a bed of roses. One boy is praised because no trace of moss eclipses the sun of his countenance.⁸⁶ Another is thanked for his beard, since it is a sheath that protects the poet from the “saber of his smile.”⁸⁷ A poet in thirteenth-century Córdoba turns the accouterments of a boy’s trade into knightly symbols:

His work stool (as if it were a horse)
 carries him proudly (as if he were a hero).
 But this hero of mine is armed only with a needle,
 long like his eyelashes and like them shining.
 Watching it stitch up the seams of a cloak
 I think of a falling star trailed by a silken thread of light.
 He twists the thread and the thread twists about my heart.
 O that my heart could follow him, close like the thread behind the
 needle!⁸⁸

One surprising consequence of this profusion of Andalusian love poetry was its imitation by Jewish poets writing in classical Hebrew. Hebrew as a spoken language had died out many centuries earlier, but in Muslim Spain the literary language was revived and a renaissance of Jewish poetry followed. Though medieval Jewish religious poetry has been widely studied, far less attention has been paid until recently to secular verse, which shows a strong Arab influence in its imagery and themes.⁸⁹ It now appears that these poets enthusiastically emulated Arabic poems to boys and youths, despite Judaism’s religious taboos. This unexpected revelation has agitated some conservative Jewish scholars, but the evidence of a substantial body of Hispano-Hebrew male-love poetry now seems incontrovertible.

The most distinguished Hebrew poets of the Arab period were Solomon Ibn Gabriol (c. 1021–1057), Moses Ibn Ezra (1055–1140), and Judah Halevi (1075–1141), all of whom earn admiring articles in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Moses Ibn Ezra is often considered the greatest of the Spanish Hebrew religious poets. All three imitate the subjects, meters, and images of their Arab contemporaries and, steeped in the Hebrew Bible, use erotic conceits from the Song of Songs in poems they write to boys.⁹⁰ Arab poets occasionally wrote love poems to Jewish youths; the Hebrew poets reciprocate by professing their love for handsome young Muslims, though they speak only of kisses and embraces and stop short of Arab directness in sexual matters. Like their Arab counterparts, they picture boys as fawns or lovely gazelles who crush hearts with their shining faces and dark hair, yield sleepless nights, and betray their admirers treacherously. One example must serve for a score:

Gazelle desired in Spain, wondrously formed,
 Given rule and dominion over every living thing;
 Lovely of form like the moon, with beautiful stature:

Curls of purple upon shining temple,
 Like Joseph his form, like Adionah [Absolom] his hair.
 Lovely of eyes like David, he has slain me like Uriah.
 He has enflamed my passions and consumed my heart with fire.⁹¹

We must not imagine that Jewish theologians condoned such affairs. The greatest of all medieval Jewish scholars, Moses ben Maimon, known to us as Maimonides, was born at Córdoba in 1135 but fled with his family to North Africa at the age of twenty-four to escape Berber fanatics. Maimonides startled the orthodox by explaining scriptural miracles naturalistically and arguing that faith should not contradict reason. But as a moralist he was severely orthodox, interpreting the Pentateuch as teaching that "we ought to limit intercourse altogether, hold it in contempt, and only desire it very rarely. The prohibition of pederasty [Lev. 18:22] and carnal intercourse with beasts [ibid. 23] is very clear. If in the natural way the act is too base to be performed except when needed, how much more is it if performed in an unnatural manner, and only for the sake of pleasure."⁹² The fifth book of Maimonides' huge commentary on Jewish law, famous as the *Mishneh Torah* or *Code of Maimonides*, teaches that Jewish law requires that both the active and passive partners in homosexual relations be stoned to death.⁹³

From the thirteenth century on, Arab power ebbed in Spain, until it surrendered its last outpost at Granada in 1492. To the end, its poets hymned the love of boys, as in the case of Yusuf III, who reigned in the Alhambra from 1408 to 1417 and composed these lines:

O you who have aimed at my heart with the dart of a piercing glance:
 Meet one who's dying, whose eye is shedding fast-flowing tears!
 Who will claim justice from an alluring fawn
 Slender of body as is the fresh, green bough,
 Who has insisted on distance and shunning? . . .
 He has seduced me with the spell of his eyelids.
 Had it been allowed—yet he shuns me ever—
 I'd have won my desires by undoing his sash.⁹⁴

How are we to explain this legal-lyrical schizophrenia, where a potent religion and a flourishing secular culture seem so at odds? Arabs claimed to be the descendants of Abraham's son Ishmael and so regarded the Hebrew Bible as a sacred book, though superseded by the Koran. This racial-religious affiliation assured that Islam would share many of the prejudices of Judaism and Christianity. Homosexuality seems to have been comparatively little in evidence among the Bedouins of Arabia in pre-Islamic times. It has been suggested that Arab attitudes toward sex underwent a change as they conquered more advanced and sophisticated empires, especially Sassanian Persia. Cul-

28. Shah Abbas I with a page.
Muhammad Qasim Mussarvir,
tempera and gilt, 1627.

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

turally, the conquest of Persia did for the Arabs what the conquest of Greece did for Rome—it introduced a rather primitive society to a markedly more advanced and luxurious one. Unfortunately, though we know boy love flourished spectacularly in Islamic Persia, inspiring a very substantial literature, we know little about Persian mores before the Arab conquest, and what we know is contradictory. The Zend Avesta (c. 550), the sacred book of the Zo-

roastrians, forbade it and even decreed the death penalty, but a hundred years later Herodotus reported that the Persians had adopted Greek views in this matter.⁹⁵

One thing the conquest did indubitably achieve, however: it provided an ample supply of young male slaves. A crucially important difference between Islam and Christianity was their relation to slavery. Christianity forbade sexual relations with slaves. Unlike Christianity, which for its first three hundred years lacked political power, Islam from the start had enormous military success, conquering nation after nation. In this triumphal atmosphere, few moralists were prepared to challenge the victors' prerogatives, which included sexual rights to women, married or unmarried, who belonged to men defeated in battle. To these all-powerful rulers, riding the crest of a wave of good fortune, it must have seemed eminently reasonable that attractive young male captives who were not Muslims should also be regarded as legitimate bedmates. Some authorities seem to have sanctioned such intercourse.⁹⁶

The parallel with Rome is clear. But this is not the whole story, for though numerous love affairs with male slaves are recorded and poetry on this theme abounds, we note that in the circles of Ibn Daud and Ibn Hazm and in royal courts men repeatedly fall in love with friends, acquaintances, and sometimes strangers of equal rank. Here we have a pattern akin to the ancient Greeks. The emphasis in such affairs, however, is not on mentorship, as in Sparta and Athens, but on the emotional experience itself, which was allowable under the guise of a quasi-religious Platonism.

Above all, it was the love-martyr *hadith* that conferred an exalted status on love in Islam, providing religious sanction for an extravagant romanticism that later crossed the Pyrenees and found its way into medieval Provence. The startling thing, from a Christian point of view, was that this glorification of love was gender-blind. Linked with a theoretically perfect chastity, it could escape moral condemnation. In the literature of Sufi mysticism, rapturous poetry addressed to male lovers might even symbolize union with the divine. So Muslim religion paradoxically forbade, allowed, and exalted homoerotic desire. It provided striking similarities with Judaism and Christianity in the sphere of law but fostered a radically different literary, social, and affective atmosphere that was much more tolerant. Sexual contact was forbidden, but the man who admitted to love for another male might still be respected and admired. He was not, in Islamic culture, a moral monster, a traitor to his maker, or a pariah who might expose a nation to destruction at the hands of a wrathful deity.

• The Growth of Canon Law •

In the chaotic tenth century the authority of the church in Christian Europe had sunk to its nadir and few councils were held. Nevertheless, the age pro-

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

29. Two lovers. Riza 'Abbasi, gouache and gold leaf, 1630.

duced a new kind of document, more scholarly and authoritative than the penitentials, that allows us to trace the evolving ecclesiastical consensus on sexuality. These were ambitious compendiums of church teachings bringing together in an organized fashion patristic opinion, conciliar edicts, penitential rules, and papal decrees. The first significant effort was made in 906 by Regino, a German Benedictine from Prüm, a town near Trier, whose archbishop asked him to draw up a collection as a guide for church synods and bishops making diocesan visits. Regino's *Of Synodical Cases and Ecclesiastical Discipline* cites the harsh canons of the Council of Ancyra on homosexuality and then, as a hint that church authority should not be flouted, invokes the Theodosian law of 390 that provided for burning.⁹⁷ The *Decretum* of Bishop Burchard of Worms (1012) drew on Regino but was much more systematic and more influential; its most notable feature is the minute detail with which it treats every kind of same-sex relation: interfemoral, masturbatory, oral, and anal, as well as sex between women and between boys. Burchard, too, endorses the lifetime penances prescribed at Ancyra and quotes Augustine and Ambrose on the especial wickedness of the sin of Sodom.⁹⁸ Bishop Ivo (or Yves) of Chartres (d. 1116) appealed to these same now-standardized authorities in his own *Decretum*, which followed Burchard closely.⁹⁹ We shall hear from him again.

This medieval effort to provide an authoritative guide to church law culminated in the *Decretum* of Gratian (1140), a vast compilation culled from "Roman law, canons of the church council, papal and royal ordinances; Biblical, liturgical, patristic, and penitential texts; and contemporary theological discussion," which its author entitled (with boastful optimism) *Concordia discordantium canonum*—The Concordance of Discordant Canons.¹⁰⁰ Gratian was a Camaldolese monk from Bologna, by now the chief center for the revival of Roman law. Acclaimed as the "Father of the Science of Canon Law," he later found a place in Dante's *Paradise* among the doctors of the Church. His work became the standard text and was eventually incorporated into the *Corpus Juris Canonici*, the church's official collection of canon law, authoritative from the fifteenth century until 1917.

In one important respect Gratian moved beyond his predecessors. He now lists sexual sins in order of increasing heinousness: these are fornication, adultery, incest, and, worst of all, "sins against nature."¹⁰¹ This moral ordering was to become a basic tenet of scholastic theology. Aquinas, as we shall see, gave it his definitive sanction in his *Summa*, adding some refinements of his own. Where earlier penitentials had wavered in their assessment of homosexuality, Gratian put it unequivocally among the most serious sins, and the sodomite among the most thoroughly damned of sinners.

When reading these dry condemnations of hot-blooded acts, it is easy to forget that their effects were visited on persons in very concrete ways in the form of punishment, contempt, and scorn. Michel Foucault and his follow-

ers have argued that the “homosexual” is a modern invention, a mental construct of the last hundred years. This is, of course, true, of homosexuality as a “scientific” or psychiatric category. But it is a mistake to presume that earlier ages thought merely of sexual acts and not of persons. Medieval literature speaks not only of sodomy but also of “sodomites,” individuals who were a substantial, clear, and ominous presence. The fact that such beings were perceived from a theological rather than a psychological point of view did not make them any less real, or less threatening.

The classical Greek ideal of the *pederastes* as the heroic lover, protector, and mentor was long forgotten in the West. Now the lover of males appeared in a demonic metamorphosis. As time passed, blame for whatever new disaster vexed society might be placed on his head. When a plague broke out in sixteenth-century Valencia, a fanatical monk incited a mob to kill sodomites.¹⁰² Sometimes the hypotheses achieved a fascinating absurdity: a hundred years later a leading German jurist found sodomites responsible for plagues of “fat, voracious field mice.”¹⁰³ In the eighteenth century a Dutch crew left a shipmate to die of thirst on a barren island in the south Atlantic, convinced that the sodomite’s presence put their lives in jeopardy.¹⁰⁴ If Christianity was concerned primarily with sinful acts, we must remember that it was sentient human beings who suffered, and acknowledge their flesh and blood reality. The killing, maiming, or torture of homosexuals ranks among humanity’s innumerable “hate crimes,” crimes encouraged in this instance by the Christian clergy. We must deduct such actions, as we deduct the persecution of heretics, witches, and Jews, from the enormous debt our civilization owes to the religion preached in Jesus’ name.

• The *Book of Gomorrah* •

Medieval canon law provided a logical structure for moral theology and implied a strong disapproval. But to understand how the eleventh century *felt* about homosexuality, we must turn to polemicists and poets. Preeminence in the first category belongs to a monk born shortly after the millennium, Saint Peter Damian (c. 1007–1072). Damian’s *Book of Gomorrah* was not only the most elaborate attack on homosexuality from the pen of a churchman in this age but was to remain the single “book” the Middle Ages produced on the subject. (In translation it runs to about fifty pages.) An ascetic who lived a hermit’s life at Fonte Avella in the Apennines, Damian’s antisocial lifestyle did not keep him from becoming the foremost Italian man of letters of his time and, ultimately, a cardinal of the church. In his fervent hatred of every form of sex, as in his general asperity of temperament, he reminded his contemporaries of Saint Jerome. His career as a moral crusader links him to the so-called Gregorian reforms which aimed to suppress clerical marriage and concubinage and end the purchase of ecclesiastical offices.

The *Book of Gomorrah* is, however, addressed to an earlier pontiff, Leo IX (1048–1054), who set in motion many of the reforms his successor achieved. Since these efforts were directed specifically at the clergy, the emphasis in Damian's tract is upon homosexuality among priests. Its tone may be savored in its preface:

A certain abominable and terribly shameful vice has grown up in our region. Unless the hand of severe punishment resists as soon as possible, there is certainly the danger that the sword of divine anger will be used savagely against it to the ruin of many. Alas! it is shameful to speak of, shameful to suggest such foul disgrace to sacred ears! But if the doctor shrinks in horror from infected wounds, who will take the trouble to apply the cauter? If the one who is to heal becomes nauseated, who will lead sick hearts back to health? Vice against nature creeps in like a cancer and even touches the order of consecrated men. Sometimes it rages like a blood-thirsty beast in the midst of the sheepfold of Christ.¹⁰⁵

This is the spirit of John Chrysostom reborn in the medieval Latin world.

Damian is particularly concerned with a question of canon law: when should clergy be deposed from their offices for unnatural sexual acts? After distinguishing four kinds of reprehensible behavior—solitary masturbation, masturbation performed with other men, interfemoral fornication, and “the complete act against nature”—he argues that, while present practice mandates deposition in the last case only, committing any one of these acts should be sufficient to remove a priest from office. All are “worse than all other crimes”: Sodom and Gomorrah were obliterated for them, Onan was struck dead by God for spilling his seed, and guilty men are condemned to death in Leviticus. “Sodomists” share with “demoniacs” (the insane) a common trait—they are under diabolical influence.¹⁰⁶

Damian was especially concerned with priests who seduced young males in their charge and with sodomitical priests who might assign each other light penances. He cites with approbation the ceremony of degradation for sodomitical monks ascribed to Saint Basil (c. 370): “A cleric or monk who seduces youths or young boys or is found kissing or in any other impure situations is to be publicly flogged and lose his tonsure. When his hair has been shaved his face is to be foully besmeared with spit and he is to be bound in iron chains.”¹⁰⁷ Then he speaks again in his own voice:

Truly this vice is never to be compared with any other vice because it surpasses the enormity of all vices. Indeed this vice is the death of bodies, the destruction of souls. It pollutes the flesh; it extinguished the light of the mind. It evicts the Holy Spirit from the temple of the human heart; it introduces the devil who incites to lust. It casts into error; it completely removes the truth from the mind that has been deceived. It prepares snares

for those entering; it shuts up those who fall into the pit so they cannot get out. It opens hell; it closes the door of heaven . . . This vice tries to overturn the walls of the heavenly homeland and is busy repairing the renewed bulwarks of Sodom. For it is this which violates sobriety, kills modesty, strangles chastity, and butchers irreparable virginity with the dagger of unclean contagion.¹⁰⁸

This may strike the modern reader as extreme, but Damian affects to believe that public sentiment is on his side. "Sodomists," he adds, using the noun *Sodomitas* to stigmatize not just the deed but the persons, are "despised among men" and must "bear the disgrace of human derision."¹⁰⁹

The second half of the *Book of Gomorrah* is addressed not to the pope but directly to sodomite priests. Damian tries every rhetorical device at his disposal to overwhelm such men with guilt and fear and to deprive them of any sense of self-respect. He accuses them of "wallow[ing] voluptuously in the pigsty of foul obscenity."¹¹⁰ Having defiled their holy office, they must await "the judgment of divine severity." It is clear that Damian himself suffers from an extreme degree of erotophobia linked with the fear of hell fire. In chapter 21 he recounts, with naive simplicity, the story of a hermit who was persuaded by the devil that "whenever he was aroused by lust, he should release semen by rubbing his genitals, just as he blows mucus from his nose."¹¹¹ When the gullible monk died, Damian assures us, he was instantly carried off by demons. How can a man, he asks, risk thousands of years of "atrocious, flaming fires" for "the fleeting pleasure caused by a momentary emission of semen."¹¹²

Pope Leo's reply to Damian's book has survived in the shape of a letter that has sometimes been regarded as a rebuke to the saint's harshness but might more properly be called a moderately conservative response. Leo agrees that men who commit anal intercourse or other acts over a long period should be deposed. But he draws back from Damian's extreme position that those who perform a single act of solitary masturbation or interfemoral intercourse should lose their office. The language of his letter, while not so violently vituperation as Damian's essay, is still abusive in the medieval mode. Pope Leo calls love between men "obscene," "filthy," and "an execrable vice."¹¹³ Later references to Damian's book are, however, rare. We may assume that theologians were unwilling to call attention to a work that exposed clerical scandals so pungently.