



## Europe: Medieval

by Eugene Rice

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.  
Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.  
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Compared with more richly documented times and places, such as fifteenth-century Florence and Venice, eighteenth-century London and Paris, twentieth-century Berlin and New York, the historical information about homosexuality we can find in surviving medieval sources is thin.



A medieval representation of Peter Damian, author of *Book of Gomorrah*.

We do learn that homosexual behavior was observable in many areas of Europe in every century of the long period we call the Middle Ages, something about the shapes it took, and a great deal about attitudes towards it.

### Sources

The dossier of sources from the early Middle Ages, commonly understood to extend from the sixth century to the middle of the eleventh century, is comprised of monastic rules, canons of church councils, diocesan statutes, legislation of secular rulers, and--by far the richest in candid sexual detail--the penitential handbooks of the clergy, aides-mémoire for priests hearing confession, with lists of sins and suggested penances.

In the period from the middle of the eleventh century to the end of the thirteenth, relevant source material is more varied, including scores of poems, romances, philosophical and moral textbooks, medical works, histories and chronicles, sermons, saints lives, a new genre of handbook to help confessors (the *summa confessorum*), and two informative treatises devoted to the denunciation of homosexuality, Peter Damian's *Book of Gomorrah* (1049) and Alan of Lille's *Complaint of Nature* (ca 1165).

With the rarest of exceptions, these sources are hostile in context and intent. The problem for historians of the Middle Ages is that they must construct a history of homosexuality from homophobic sources and without the testimony of real men and women of same-sex preference speaking their own truth.

### Terminology

To discuss same-sex eros, medieval people used a new family of words, derived from the place-name Sodom and evocative of that city's incendiary punishment. Males imagined or known to have sex with other males were called "sodomites" (*sodomitae*), said to fornicate in the manner of their biblical namesakes (*more sodomitico*), that is, they practiced anal intercourse. This, deemed very sinful, was eventually recognized as the core action denoted by the class noun "sodomy" (*sodomia*).

Under the influence of Paul's epistle to the Romans (1:26-27), where women are pictured in unnatural pursuit of women and males burn with lust for each other, theorists more closely defined sodomy as same-sex intercourse--for males anal penetration by a human penis, for females penetration by a dildo or an enlarged clitoris. Emphasis on the same-sex principle widened the idea of sodomy to include male-male acts other than anal intercourse and narrowed it by classifying cross-sex anal intercourse, not as sodomy,

but as an irregularity of heterosexual intercourse.

### **Incidence**

The evidence for the frequency of sodomy in Europe is anecdotal and impossible to quantify. It usually occurs in warnings made urgent by metaphors of contagion, disease, and plague: sodomy is said to be spreading rapidly and publicly; strong measures are needed to contain it.

The Sixteenth Council of Toledo (693) asserts as well-known fact that "many men" are infected with "the sodomitical evil" and the Second Synod of Aachen (860) asserts as fact the ubiquity of male same-sex copulation. Peter Damian justified his letter to the pope attacking sodomitical practices by reporting that "a certain abominable vice has grown up in our region." Priests copulate with each other, then absolve each other in confession. They have sex with males they have baptized, with priests they have ordained, and with their male parishioners, clerical and lay.

In the mid twelfth century, Bernard of Cluny reports that sodomites are as plentiful "as barley in a field, oysters in the sea, sand on the shore, islands in the Adriatic, incense in India, and reeds along the Tiber." Sodomitical leprosy clings to every class; castle, town, and church are awash with this filthy plague. In the mid thirteenth century, Albert the Great claimed to be equally well informed: "Even today the same filth spills into the courts of kings and the rulers of the world, pollutes the holy dwellings of bishops and priests, and fills with iniquity the paradise of the religious [that is, the monasteries]." Some of these statements may reflect fragments of accurate observation. Taken together, they leave more the impression of hostile alarmists alert to the imaginary threat of an uncertain number of real sodomites.

### **The Ages of the Participants**

The ages of the two parties in many same-sex relationships suggest continuity with ancient taste and practice. In monastic communities, three male-male relationships appear to have been more common than those among adults: between boys of roughly the same age who engaged in what the older brothers called sexual "play"; between an older adolescent and a younger boy (the penitentials are full of references to very young boys "oppressed," that is, seduced or abused by older boys and youths; and between adults--of undisclosed age--and boys, adolescents, or youths--the oldest of whom seem rarely to have been over twenty.

The beautiful Saint Pelagius was martyred in 925 because he spurned the advances of the ruler of Muslim Spain (Andalus) with the contemptuous question : "Do you think I'm like one of your effeminate?" Pelagius was thirteen.

A tenth-century constitution for regulating the lives of English monks and nuns cautioned monks and abbots not to embrace or kiss "adolescents or little boys . . . let your affection for them be spiritual." Around 1135, aged about twenty-four, Aelred, abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Rievaulx in the north of England, loved a chaste and beautiful young monk named Simon, who was no more than fourteen.

The same pattern is visible among men of same-sex inclination living in towns along the river Loire in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. A group of poets, Marbod of Rennes (*ca* 1035-1123), Baudri of Bourgueil (1046-1130), and some anonymous clerics, has left us a sketchy picture of their sexual practices.

They wrote in Latin for other learned clerics who shared their tastes for ancient Roman verse and masculine love. They identify some of their acquaintances as "males who sleep with males." They document male prostitution in Sens, Chartres, Orléans, and Paris. Hostile observers confirm their testimony. Any visitor to Chartres, advises one, should get out in a hurry unless he wants to be transformed into a woman. In Orléans, reports another, no class of person escapes the sodomitical plague (*sodomitica pestis*).

They addressed most of their love poems to boys. The poets call this kind of love *amor in pueros* and think of themselves as "men who sleep with boys," *puerorum concubitores* (playing on *masculorum concubitores* at 1 Cor. 6:10). The adjective most commonly used to describe the boyfriend is "tender" and "young" (*tener*). (The next most common is "beautiful.") In the vernacular romances, the usual word is *garçon*. What "the men who sleep with boys" like best is "to have young boys (*teneros pueros*) live with them as their spouses."

### ***Altercatio Ganymedis et Helene***

Among these poems is the most important medieval example of a genre popular in both the Greco-Roman and Muslim worlds and in Edo Japan, the comparison of boy love with love of women. The debaters are Ganymede and Helen. The author is unknown; the date is late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Both contestants are described as unimaginably beautiful and desirable.

Helen begins by marshalling the conventional arguments against male-male eros. A preference for sex with males inverts the right (created) order of things (the cosmological argument); it is against the law (the argument from scripture and the prohibitions inferred from it); it is sterile and unable to beget and multiply (the biological and demographic argument); birds, wild beasts, and cattle do not practice it (the argument from the behavior of animals); same-sex love is unnatural (the philosophical argument). The love of a man for a boy never touches the heart. All the man feels is lust. The boy gets no pleasure from the encounter; all he wants is money.

Ganymede stands naked before the judges, Nature and Reason. In an exceptional turn, it is the boy who speaks in defense of pederasty, not his adult lover. His arguments are unsystematic, jokey, and coarsely misogynist, but the note he sounds is as warmly unapologetic as it is rare. The gods themselves invented boy love, and still today it is approved by honorable men, among them the highest officers of church and state, including the censors who monitor behavior and define sin.

Like fits best with like (*par cum pari*), and same-sex is more natural than different-sex (*hic et hic* not *hic et illa*), for opposites always disagree. These same-sex attachments will not depopulate the world. There are many older men around eager for sons; let *them* beget. Propagation is not an obligation of youth, pleasure is.

While Ganymede clearly thinks boys enjoy their sexual encounters, he does not deny that they are often paid. "Money smells good; nobody turns down money./ Wealth, I admit, attracts us." Only the gray-haired have to pay. This is one way boys get ahead. When he runs out of arguments, he tells Helen "it's time to put religion and modesty behind us" and speak frankly about the stink and gaping looseness of the female "cave."

The *Altercatio Ganymedis et Helene* is more than usually confiding about what the boy and his partners do in bed. Unexpectedly, the predominant sexual practice recorded by the author (and by some of the Loire poets as well) is intercrural frottage, not anal intercourse. It is the "slippery [that is, hairless] thighs of boys" that attract those prosperous officials invoked by Ganymede. The boy who asks for money "sells his thighs (*sua vendit crura*)." The *fricator* squanders his semen (the poet calls it "Venus's tear") between his boy's thighs (*inter crura*). So Ganymede says: "I'd like to be smooth and hairless under my genitals (*sub inguine*)," but Helen reminds him he will soon be hairy, with a rough bush on his belly: Who will want to rub him then?

Although the pederastic taste predominated, sexual relations between adult males were not unknown. Most of the monastic regulations designed to make homosexual contacts more difficult (no naked bathing, one to a bed, lights on at night, and the like) were aimed at adult monks and not at boys. Peter Damian does not mention boys at all, but simply describes fornication between "males," a usage that can include boys, but leaves open the ages of the participants. When he has adults in mind, he uses the word for "man" (*vir* and, plural, *virii*): thus, *inter femora vir cum viro*, "man with man between the thighs"; "man with man (*vir cum*

*viro*) polluting themselves in whatever manner inflamed desire suggests"; or "man with man (*vir in virum*) when lust drives them to commit unchastity."

In the Middle Ages, as in antiquity, androphiles, or lovers of adult men, flourished like sturdy weeds in the flowerbeds of pederastic romance.

## Sex Roles

The sources tell us very little about the dynamics of male-male sexual relations. Linguistic evidence suggests that the traditional polarity of roles remained predominant. A seventh-century Visigothic law mandated castration for both *inferens* and *patiens*, the "inserter" and the "passive." The standard terminology later in the Middle Ages and in early modern times would be *agens* and *patiens*, from which come our "active" and "passive." *Activus* and *receptivus*, "active" and "receptive," were also current, as were *faciens* and *patiens*, actively "doing" and passively "being done."

Some authorities also recognized reciprocity as a possible, more egalitarian arrangement, suggesting that medieval role playing may have been marginally more flexible than that of the ancients.

Peter the Chanter asserts that sodomites are androgynes (*androgei*), which he defined to mean that they are now active (*agentes*), now passive (*patientes*). Playing with analogies from logic and grammar, Alan of Lille sets up a three-fold classification of sexual roles. He posits men who act as if subject and predicate were interchangeable.

Since in the logic of Venus the major premise of a syllogism, like the subject of a sentence, is masculine, while the predicate of a sentence and the minor premise are feminine; males who mistakenly believe that subject and predicate are interchangeable show that they are willing to play both the active and passive roles in sexual intercourse. In contrast, the penetrators, "take the part of the subject and cannot function as predicates"; while the receptive passives, "function as predicates only but have no desire to have the subject term submit to them."

## Identity

What did it mean to call a man a sodomite? Was he a particular kind of person?

We know from the penitential literature that confessors wanted to know whether a sexual act had been committed once or twice or, as they variously put it, "frequently," "over long periods," "regularly," "time and time again," "incessantly," or, most often, "habitually."

The men who confessed their "habitual" practice of intercourse with males not only learned that they had committed a sodomitical act (and that such acts were serious sins); they also learned to recognize themselves as "sodomites," males of a fixed (though not necessarily exclusive) taste for sex with other males.

Eventually, confessor and sodomite were able to identify persistent same-sex *desire* as the "root of the [sodomitical] sin" (*radix illius peccati*). Having diagnosed the underlying condition, it remained the duty of the priest to prescribe an appropriate penitential medicine to cure, or at least mitigate, the disease.

A number of vernacular writers describe male characters accused by women of an exclusive, immanent orientation to their own sex. In *Le lai de Lanval* of Marie de France (third quarter of the twelfth century), King Arthur has a loyal vassal named Lanval, with whom Queen Guinevere falls in love. When she declares her love, Lanval replies: "Lady, do not speak so. I do not wish to love you and betray the king I have long served." The humiliated queen accuses Lanval of feeling no desire for women (*de femme n'avez talent*) and finding pleasure only with young men.

A similar topos surfaces in another twelfth-century romance, the *Roman d'Eneas*. Eneas and his lover Lavine are entirely heterosexual and in the end reciprocate each other's love. Before this happens, Lavine's mother (falsely) accuses Eneas of treachery and sodomy. A "man of that nature" (*tel nature d'ome*) has no interest in women (*n'a gaires de femme cure*). He prefers a boy (*garçon*) to any woman. He won't even eat hen! When he appears to reject her, Lavine rages against him like her mother. Eneas, she says, loves only his Ganymedes. Women mean nothing to him. Men "of that nature" love only males.

Alan of Lille uses the three Latin genders--masculine, feminine, and neuter--to categorize the different sexual inclinations of all the males in the world. The result is a familiar paradigm. He begins with males who desire and have sex only with members of their own biological sex. A second group embrace only those of feminine gender. Still others sleep with persons of feminine gender in winter and masculine gender in summer. Like bisexuals, they are attracted indifferently or in different degrees to both sexes. (The penitentials, too, are familiar with married sodomites, and among the Loire poets were some who pursued girls as well as boys, and others who courted both men and women.)

### **From Sin to Secular Crime**

By the end of the thirteenth century, a confluence of homophobic currents produced in Western Europe a fiercely persecuting mentality that would rage well into the eighteenth century.

Sodomy, a sin long confessed to and assigned a penance by priest or bishop, became a crime, monitored, tried, and punished by the governments and courts of the better organized city and territorial states. The indictment of sodomites accelerated when "the sin against nature" was linked to heresy, a capital crime of *lèse majesté* against the king of heaven, regularly prosecuted according to inquisitorial procedures based on delation (or informing on others), secrecy, and torture. Thus the unspeakable wickedness attributed to each class of sinner rubbed off on the other.

So close indeed became the link between sodomy and heresy that in several vernacular languages "heretic" and "sodomite" became interchangeable terms. In Old French, *herite* and *erites* signify both heretic and sodomite. French *bougre*, from Bulgar, thought to be the people in Eastern Europe who had brought dualist heresies like that of the Cathars to the West, gave Italian *buggerone* and English "bugger" and "buggery." In German, *Ketzer*, meaning interchangeably "heretic" and "sodomite," derives from "Cathar," as do *ketzern* (the verb for anal intercourse) and *Ketzerie* equals *sodomia*.

The virulence that characterizes discourse about the sins against nature in the later Middle Ages can still surprise us. Not only do the traditional scriptural texts continue to be cited, new ones were reinterpreted to show how detestable the crime was. A good example is the use made by the churchmen at the Third (1179) and Fourth (1215) Lateran Councils of the "sons of disobedience" at Ephesians 5:6, whom they identify with contemporary sodomites. Future lawyers and theologians would regularly repeat the identification.

Interpreters found the "strange" or "different" flesh at Jude 7 irresistible. They read "strange" to mean same-sex intercourse and "different" to mean different from the natural relationship instituted by God when he created male and female so they would multiply in the worship of God.

### **The Christmas Day Massacre**

A rabid imagination produced new legends. Invented in the early thirteenth century, the Legend of the Christmas Day Massacre may have circulated first in one of the many spurious works attached to the name of St. Jerome. It received a stamp of approval and a wider diffusion when it was included in the compilation of scriptural glosses put together in the 1230s and attributed to the biblical scholar and first Dominican cardinal, Hugh of Saint-Cher, who died in 1263.

The gloss reports that on the night when the Savior was born "all sodomites died, wherever they were in the world." The glossator continues: "Jerome explains this by saying that it was right and just that the enemies of nature should die at the very moment the Author of nature was born, for they were unable to endure the splendor of his coming." (No such explanation is to be found in any of Jerome's authentic works.)

This story was combined with another, the Legend of the Incarnation's Postponement, and attributed (falsely) to Augustine. Because of humanity's inclination to unnatural sex, the Son of God delayed taking on human flesh for the 5,000 years thought to separate the creation and the birth of Jesus.

### ***Peccatum mutum***

The notion that sodomy is so detestable it must not be named crystallized in the phrase *peccatum mutum*. Commentators offered several reasons why sodomy was the "mute sin."

The common-sense view was that the sodomite is mute because he hides his sin, by choice, or by necessity, or from fear. More popular was the view that the sin was so filthy it pollutes the mouth of the person who speaks it and the ears of those who hear it. It is one of those crimes so terrible the tongue is incapable of uttering it in confession. The devil himself blushes to hear it.

Most popular of all was this: "Sodoma has been well translated to mean mute, because this is a sin that renders men dumb on Judgment Day." Stupefied by the magnitude of their sin, sodomites will stand mute and helpless before the supreme Judge.

One of the earliest civil statutes against sodomy comes from Bologna in 1288. The text reads as follows: "If a man commits unchastity (*stuprum*) with a male, he shall be burned, whether he is the active or the passive party. But if the passive party was taken by force, he incurs no penalty, nor if his youth excuses him." A very dangerous epoch was in the offing.

### **Bibliography**

Alan of Lille. *The Complaint of Nature*. James J. Sheridan, trans. Mediaeval Sources in Translation 26. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980.

Baldwin, John W. *The Language of Sex: Five Voices from Northern France around 1200*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Bleibtreu-Ehrenberg, Gisela. *Tabu Homosexualität. Die Geschichte eines Vorurteils*. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1978.

Boswell, John. *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Brundage, James A. *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Damian, Peter. *The Book of Gomorrha*. Owen J. Blum, trans. The Fathers of the Church, Medieval Continuation. *The Letters of Peter Damian 2:3-53*. Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1990.

Goodich, Michael. *The Unmentionable Vice. Homosexuality in the Later Medieval Period*. Santa Barbara, Cal.: ABC-Clío, 1979.

Hergemöller, Bernd-Ulrich. *Sodom and Gomorrah: On the Everyday Reality and Persecution of Homosexuals in the Middle Ages*. John Phillips, trans. London and New York: Free Association Books, 2001.

Jordan, Mark D. *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Lochrie, Karma, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz, eds. *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*. Medieval Cultures 11. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Payer, Pierre J. *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code, 550-1050*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993.

Sautman, Francesca Canade, and Pamela Sheingorn, eds. *Same Sex Love and Desire among Women in the Middle Ages*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Spreitzer, Brigitte. *Die stumme Sünde. Homosexualität im Mittelalter, mit einem Textanhang*. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik 498. Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1988.

Stehling, Thomas. *Medieval Latin Poems of Love and Friendship*. Garland Library of Medieval Literature 7. New York: Garland, 1984.

### **About the Author**

**Eugene Rice**, who died on August 4, 2008, was Shepherd Professor of History Emeritus at Columbia University. His last book, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, was awarded prizes by the American Society of Church History, the American Catholic Association, the American Academy of Religion, and the American Historical Association. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, he instituted Columbia University's first "Seminar on Homosexualities" and served as an adviser to Columbia University Press for its series on gay and lesbian studies. At the time of his death, he was working on a history of Western homosexualities.