



Conquistador Vasco Núñez de Balboa (1475-1519) uses attack dogs to execute native sodomites.

## Latin America: Colonial

by Pablo Ben

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Both Spanish and Portuguese colonial societies in Latin America were a result of contested cultural encounters between Iberians and native peoples. Pre-conquest attitudes towards queer practices and identities constitute an essential element of the analysis of colonial societies.

Spanish conquerors classified as "berdache" all those individuals who broke (their) sexual or gender norms. However, this category included very different phenomena, ranging from sexual penetration signifying political or military victory to the blurring of gender roles.

### **Aztecs**

In *Sex and the Conquest*, Richard Texler explains how among the Aztecs the "berdache" were defeated adversaries in interethnic wars or politics. Their passivity in sexual intercourse reinforced the masculine status of the male chieftains who penetrated them. Despite the differences between the Spanish and Aztec gender systems, the Aztec representation of sexual penetration as political victory was not alien to the Mediterranean world of the conquerors.

This similarity could be interpreted as part of a broader pattern of commonality, following the argument of Lockhardt, who states that the Aztec society had a relatively similar structure to the Spanish one that was later used by the conquerors to impose their power. Texler argues that sexual penetration as a metaphor for power was not only Aztec, but a general Pan-American trend, and Pete Sigal describes a similar phenomenon among the Mayas of Yucatan. Other authors, however, consider that the case was very different in other conquered regions of Latin America.

### **Andean "Third Genders"**

According to Michael Horswell, the Andean world had a tradition of same-sex sexuality and identity with cultural meanings beyond the association of sexual penetration with political power. Andean culture conceived the world through a gendered understanding of complementary male and female roles. Within this understanding, "third genders" constituted the borders between complementary gender roles. Same-sex sexual practices and identities were integrated through rituals expressing the relations between the feminine and the masculine in the Andean social structure.

### **Problems of Analysis**

The analysis of the sexual culture of native peoples is problematic because the accounts of the conquerors are the only available sources to understand them. However, some authors have begun to read colonial documents against the grain to grasp the elements of native sexual cultures.

In spite of this possibility offered by an ethnohistorical perspective, the only sexual cultures explored so far have been those of the Aztecs, the Mayas, and the Qechuas, which were somewhat exceptional in the

Americas, where most of the native groups had not formed state-societies as in these three cases.

### **The Iberian Heritage**

The Iberian heritage is better known. According to Ward Stavig, the sixteenth-century Spanish attitudes towards same-sex sexuality had been constructed through war and political conflict against the Moors. Spanish culture identified sodomy as a foreign practice, and specifically a Moorish behavior that they were proud to avoid.

Old Castile law from the thirteenth century punished same-sex sexual practices with castration and stoning. At the time of the conquest, Ferdinand and Isabella (the Catholic King and Queen who unified Spain, expelled the Moors, and supported the conquest of the Americas) changed the punishment to burning.

When the Spanish Inquisition was established in the Americas, it extended the same punishment for sodomy to the colonized areas. However, in 1575 Philip II issued an edict stating that indigenous people should not be judged by the Inquisition because they were new to the Faith and, thus, they were not *gente de razón* [people capable of reasoning].

Hence, native people could no longer be killed for same-sex conduct, but there was still repression through other religious and civil means. For example, priests would tell native people that God would punish them if they carried on with their "perverted" sexual practices. Moreover, the Catholic religion justified the conquest in part on the basis of the inferiority of groups who performed the sodomitical sin.

### **Sodomitical Practices as Uncivilized**

Both the Spanish and Portuguese conquerors shared an interpretation of sodomy as a regular practice among the most "uncivilized" groups. The prohibition of sacrifice, cannibalism, and sodomy was taken as a measure of civilization that God compelled the conquerors to impose. Pete Sigal notes that to the colonial mind, these three customs represented an abominable degradation. Thus, conquerors took the presence of these customs as proof that Satan had imposed his will on a given society.

Those who practiced sodomy were considered heretics. It seems that this was not only the representation of the colonial elites. Serge Gruzinsky describes the case of the Indian Miguel de Urbina, who wanted to have sexual intercourse with his male lover instead of his wife. After having sex with her, "he grabbed a candle and set a figure of saint Baby Jesus that he had on an altar on fire." In spite of this acceptance of the Spanish norms by an acculturated Indian, Gruzinsky argues that "it seems that a certain degree of narcissism substituted for the culpability inculcated by society."

### **Tolerance of Sodomites**

According to the Inquisition authorities, a network of sodomites found in Mexico City in 1658 had developed a "complicity" to hide each other. In Gruzinsky's view, the capacity of this network to escape from the Inquisition for a long time shows a level of tolerance among the population. Many of the sodomites who were punished had performed same-sex sexual activities during many years in a society where there were few places that were not exposed to public scrutiny.

Luiz Mott has analyzed the Inquisition records for Brazil, especially for the Northeastern region, and found the existence of another extended network of sodomites who fought to sustain their practices in spite of the punishment. These men, called "fanchonos," seemed to be relatively open in their practices.

Little is known about same-sex sexual performances and identities between women, both because of lack of research and because the sources for such activities are scarce.

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**Pablo E. Ben** researches the history of sexuality in Latin America. He has published articles considering the medical construction of sex and hermaphroditism in Buenos Aires at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. He has also explored other issues associated with sexuality, social control, and the nation-building process in Argentina. His research focuses on Argentina, but through a comparative view of other Latin American countries. He is completing his doctoral studies at the University of Chicago.