

## IRAN

Formerly known to the West as Persia, the name Iran was selected by the modern Pahlevi dynasty as a sign of the country's "Aryan," or Indo-European, heritage. This ethnically diverse land contains large numbers of Persians, Turks, nomadic tribesmen, and smaller numbers of Jews, Assyrians, and Arabs. The national language (Farsi) is Indo-European, not Semitic; Iran is not an Arab country.

*The Pre-Islamic Period.* The history of homosexuality in Iran has been both influential and contradictory. **Zoroastrianism**, the teachings of Zarathustra, is the most homophobic ancient faith known to modern scholarship. The fateful Zoroastrian doctrine (that all homosexuals, active or passive, are inherently demonic, and must be put to death when detected) was to make its way into the religious tradition of the Jews, who escaped their Babylonian captivity under Persian rule in 538 B.C.

This condemnation seems to have made its way but slowly against the much older Iranian traditions of polytheism and initiatory pederasty, traditions similar to those of the Greeks and probably inherited from a common ancestral Indo-European behavior pattern. During the Achaemenid period (sixth and fifth centuries B. C.), these two Iranian religious cultures were in conflict, as were two similarly warring faiths in the Palestine of the **Old Testament**. The Mazdaist/Zoroastrian cult reached its zenith of social control under the Sassanids (second to seventh centuries of our era). The only surviving Zoroastrian documents date from this time, when factions urged the Mazdaist clergy to a formal codification in the Pahlevi language.

The Sassanian church was a cruel persecutor of other religions, which included by this time Jews, Christians, **Manichaeans**, and even Buddhists toward the east. The battle with the Christians was especially fierce, and it is a minor irony of history that Christianity seemed destined to triumph over Mazdaism in Iran, when

the Arab whirlwind of conquest decisively overcame both of them.

*Islam.* The Persians were conquered by the Arabs in A.D. 637. The Mazdaist faith was cast out and replaced by Islam, and the first three fourths of the oldest Pahlevi Avesta perished during the conquest. (The older religion now survives chiefly among the Parsees of India, who fled Iran during this epoch.)

The Arabs were only superficially intolerant of homosexuality, and certainly the Koran specified no earthly punishment for such behavior (it did, however, repeat the Sodom story in various places, most notably Sura 6, "The Heights," 80-84, where homosexual behavior is specified as the unique reason for the destruction of Sodom). The Islamic *hadith*, or oral traditions of Muhammad, held only that homosexuality was a sin greater than *zina*, or fornication, and specified no earthly punishment. The devout Muslim was expected to know that God would be displeased, and this knowledge (added to the desire for paradise) would be enough to control his behavior.

The outcome was a toleration and even celebration of pederasty in classical Islam, and much of the Arab poetry of this time (e.g., that of **Abu Nuwas**) is devoted to boys and their beauty. As a result, over a period of time the people of Persia once again moderated or reversed their earlier position. The most famous Persian poets were familiar with the love of young men—Hafiz, Rumi, Sa'di, and the astronomer-poet Omar Khayyam. The oft-cited lines "A Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough, A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse—and Thou / Beside me singing in the Wilderness" are addressed to a young man. The matched themes of wine and boys became staples of Arabic and Persian poetry of the classic period, and echoed down the centuries into the gardens of Moorish **Granada**.

The conquered Persians did, however, formalize their anger at the Arab conquest into the Shiite schismatic movement. (The mainstream of Islam is Sunni.)

The Shiite faction has, from the beginning, been innately mystical, revolutionary, and capable of extreme sadism, masochism, and puritanism. It has hosted the whirling dervishes and the poetry of wine and boys; but it has also been the school of the Old Man of the Mountains, the fanatic who drugged his murderers with hashish and duped them into the belief that he held the keys to paradise on earth. (The term "assassin" derives from the hashish used by this group of thugs, who would risk anything for a return to the paradise they had glimpsed.)

In more recent times, this historical confusion about the subject has produced a sort of schizophrenia in the Iranian mind. Travelers from the nineteenth century report a man executing his son in the town square for the "crime," yet clearly many Iranians were and are devotees of pederasty, the Farsi term *bachebazi* (lit. "boyplay") being the equivalent of the ancient Greek *paidika*. In modern times under the Shah, Teheran had open gay bars and male hustlers were available. (These tended to come from the south of Teheran, particularly the impoverished suburb of Rayy, often under the guidance of tough *lutiyy* [brawling, folk-hero types] as their pimps and protectors.)

The overthrow of the Shah and the installation of the Khomeini regime saw another abrupt reversal. Basing their legitimacy on "Islamic fundamentalism," the mullahs (religious teachers) soon began executing homosexuals en masse in town squares—acting like Zoroastrians while citing Islam. They were also executing the few remaining Iranian Zoroastrians, which should come as no surprise to anyone who has been following this singularly erratic government.

The Iranian Baha'i sect, which claims to integrate all the great religions, also suffered at the hands of the mullahs. The Baha'i had never made any formal statement about homosexuality, finding this question difficult to solve, but unofficially held that homosexuality was a

"curable disease," which shows they had gathered elements of psychiatry into their ecumenical mixture.

An ironic sidelight on the new regime is the fact that, for centuries, the Iranian people had regarded the mullahs themselves as generic homosexuals, and respectable Persian fathers would routinely warn their sons to guard their chastity during religious instruction.

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## IRELAND

In the first millennium B.C. the ancient Celts of the European continent were noted for their initiatory and military homosexuality. Yet as the mists of prehistory lift in Ireland in the fifth century of our era, no trace of these institutions is recorded. This absence (or silence) undoubtedly reflects the thoroughness of the process of Christianization, initiated by the quasilegendary St. Patrick. Yet the Irish Church pioneered in a new system of penitentials, a procedure that allowed sinners to "work off" their infraction with specified periods of restriction. The penalties for homosexual conduct found in these documents reveal a more lenient attitude toward homosexual conduct, while at the same time initiating the bureaucratic approach that was to eventuate, centuries later, in the confessional system of the Roman Catholic Church. Irish missionaries active in remote areas of the British Isles and the European continent were sometimes linked by bonds of intense affection, a homosocial (if not homosexual) pattern that was to recur among the later medieval clergy ("particular friendships").

Beginning in the ninth century devastation by foreign invaders, first the Vikings and then the English, complicated the history of Ireland. In the present state of our knowledge we can only point to a few homosexual episodes before recent decades. In 1640 John Atherton, bishop of Waterford and Lismore, was convicted of sodomy and hanged. There is some indica-