

*Lesbianism.* Of female same-sex behavior (*musahaqa*) almost nothing is known. Islamic law considers it sex outside of marriage and therefore as adultery, with all the consequences already described. Yet because no penetration takes place, punishment is theoretically limited to one hundred lashes. In practice lesbian behavior is regarded as relatively unimportant, because it usually takes place discreetly.

See also *Abu Nuwas; Africa, North; Mujun; Rumi; Sa'di; Sufism; Turkey.*

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## ITALY

Apart from classical antiquity, there are two eras in which Italy has a salient interest for the study of homosexual behavior. The first stretches from approximately 1250 to 1650 (the *Renaissance*, broadly interpreted); the second from World War II to the present.

Italy has a particular attraction for the historian because of its vast archives of material from the premodern period—archives which have not yet been much tapped. For the curious layperson, present-day Italy offers a lively homosexual subculture which sprang up after World War II, accelerating notably after the birth of the country's gay movement in 1971.

*The Classical Heritage.* Contrary to what has often been stated, there was no

direct continuity on Italian soil between the homosexuality of Greco-Roman stamp and that which arose after the barbarian invasions. "Greek love" in Italy is in fact a later invention of northern European travelers of the nineteenth century, invented to lend dignity to the type of sex that they came to the country to enjoy.

In reality, at the time of the fall of the Roman empire there were recurrent foreign invasions. Over the centuries Italian soil was occupied by the most disparate peoples—Goths, Langobards (Lombards) and other Germanic tribes, Byzantines, Slavs, Arabs and Berbers, Normans, and Albanians. In addition it would be a mistake to discount the profound effects of the implantation of Christianity. All these factors could not help but disturb the characteristic features of the Greco-Roman world.

To cite an example of how complex the amalgam produced by the introduction of the customs of foreign peoples, one need only recall that the laws of the Lombards, a Germanic people, displaced Roman law in vast regions of Italy down to the thirteenth century. In fact the last remnants of Lombard law, confined to a few districts of southern Italy, disappeared only with the Napoleonic regime at the start of the nineteenth century. (See *Law, Germanic.*)

The Latin heritage was significant in the history of Italy (and not solely in that country) as an ideal image of a golden age which must be recaptured through a "revival." In the Middle Ages this aim took concrete form in the institution known as the Holy Roman Empire, and it was to have later avatars.

This theme is found in jurisprudence, having come about through the rediscovery and renewed study of Roman law (as concretized in the *Corpus Juris Civilis* of Justinian) conducted by the great Bolognese jurists of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This rediscovery is responsible for the West's adoption of the penalty of burning at the stake for sodo-

mites, originally stipulated by the fourth-century Christian emperors of Rome. (The first such burning of which we have documentary evidence dates only from 1266.)

The literary revival, which was accomplished by the labors of philologists and the renewed circulation of surviving ancient texts, was a later task—that of the Renaissance proper.

The process of rediscovery, restoration, and reevaluation of classical antiquity continued in Italy until the sixteenth century, constituting the backbone of the Renaissance, which was one of Italy's most important contributions to Western civilization. This revival, which in some circles assumed the guise of a real idolatry of the antique, influenced in one way or another the most varied realms of old Italy, from philosophy (as seen in the work of Marsilio Ficino), through language, the arts, and law, to religion itself.

One should not be surprised then if a substantial portion of the evidence on homosexuality in premodern Italy "speaks classically," in the sense that it allows one to see behind it a classical model that gave it inspiration. Of course the same phenomenon is to be seen to some degree in the other European countries.

*Before the Renaissance.* The first homosexual poem of Italy after the classical age is the song, "O admirabile Veneris ydolum" ("Oh, splendid image of love") of the ninth century. It is in fact suffused with classical—even pagan—reminiscences. Evidently the author was a cleric, that is a member of the only social class that could engage in cultural pursuits before the arrival of the new lay-bourgeois culture after the year 1000.

From the religious sphere comes the first (condemnatory) treatise on homosexuality in Italy, the harsh *Liber Gomorrhianus* of ca. 1050 by St. Peter Damian (1007–1077), a violent invective against the sodomitical clergy, as well as the revealing *Sermones subalpini*, written in the vernacular at the end of the twelfth or the beginning of the thirteenth century.

Yet a real body of homoerotic poetry, such as that produced in France and the northern countries of Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (see *Medieval Latin Poetry*), has not come to light.

One cannot ignore the appearance of laws against sodomy in the statute books of the Italian city states. At first mild, then ever more severe, they began about the middle of the twelfth century.

Only at the end of the twelfth century does Italy show a literary interest in the theme of homosexuality. The course of the thirteenth century is illuminated by a whole constellation of poetry of love and moralizing which directly confronts the subjects of same-sex affection and love, with such well known names from Italian literature as Brunetto Latini (ca. 1211–1294, who was placed by Dante among the sodomites in the *Inferno*), Rustico di Filippo (second half of the thirteenth century), and Guido Cavalcanti (1255–1300).

Special note must be taken of the circle of Perugia love poets of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (major figures are Cecco Nuccoli and Marino Ceccoli), as well as of the Siense burlesque poets of the fourteenth century, who treat homosexual love with the greatest freedom of expression and naturalness—whether they are approving or condemning.

A special place belongs to the treatment of homosexuality by Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), the "father of the Italian language," in his *Divine Comedy*.

It should be noted that the whole period was deeply marked, as Michael Goodich has shown, by the ascendancy of the Dominican St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), and by the growth of a moralizing trend calling for the reform of customs among certain sectors of the bourgeoisie. The convergence of these two factors led, toward the middle of the fourteenth century, to the enactment of severe laws against sodomy in most of the Italian city states.

*The Coming of the Renaissance.*

As a result of these developments Renaissance Italy confronted homosexuality with a much more hostile attitude than that which had prevailed several centuries before. The source of this hardening was not so much the Catholic church, which did indeed have a reinforcing role, as those urban strata that in a struggle that stretched over the centuries had pursued a policy of moral reform.

And yet, if in the fourteenth century homosexual love disappeared from love poetry, the figure of the sodomite lingered, often described in a light-hearted way, in vernacular short stories. The best known author is of course Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375), but alongside him are numerous short story writers and chroniclers—too many to be cited here—who were not averse to recounting in explicit fashion the diverting adventures of this or that sodomitical character. In some instances the classical model becomes dominant (for example Apuleius' *Golden Ass* in Boccaccio), in others the pure anecdote prevails.

The fact is that it is just at the start of the fourteenth century that one can detect the first signs pointing to the existence of a sodomite subculture in the great mercantile cities of Italy, including Venice, Siena, Bologna, and Florence. It would be interesting to know to what degree the legislative hardening constituted simply a reaction to the perceived menace of a "deviant" underground which seemed to be proliferating.

Literary documentation and the trial records reveal how homosexual behavior enjoyed a certain margin of tolerance and protective silence among the citizens; paradoxically, silence was greater where legal sanctions were most severe, as in Venice, than where they were milder, as in Florence.

Nonetheless it is important not to commit the error of viewing this subculture as a kind of prefiguration or rough sketch of the gay "ghettoes" of American

cities of our own day. Fourteenth-century sodomites formed a subculture with certain recognizable features, but which was strongly marked by a type of relationship which was regarded as "normal" even by the heterosexual population of the day, though not necessarily by us: the adult-adolescent bond (*pederasty*). The denizens of this subculture, though accustomed to meeting one another, did not have sexual relations one with another, but rather with boys who came into their orbit from time to time (money usually served to facilitate consent). One must never lose sight of this fundamental characteristic when one speaks of the homosexual subculture of former times.

During the major phase of the Renaissance, with its characteristic showcasing of classical texts, Italian society entered into a period of enlightened tolerance of homosexual conduct. This tolerance, to which the so-called *libertine* current contributed, fostered a flowering of cultural expression in which homosexuality appeared in the forefront.

This efflorescence, noteworthy also in the field of the visual arts, began to lose strength with the coming of the Counterreformation, which imposed a return to a more moralistic climate, and above all an iron discipline over sexual themes.

*The Counterreformation.* In Italy the Catholic Counterreformation coincided with the inception of a period of decline that lasted until the nineteenth century. This decline was not merely economic, stemming in large measure from the shift of trade routes away from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic (to which Italy had no direct access), but also political.

In a changed European climate it was particularly disastrous that Italy saw the persistence of a pattern of many small states (some minuscule) which hindered the creation of any unified nation. The most determined opponent of such unification was the papacy, which until 1870

held a large-sized state that cut the peninsula in two at the center.

In this atmosphere of stasis the bourgeois stratum became "feudal," permitting itself to be absorbed by the nobility and becoming a parasitic class that was more concerned with preserving the status quo than with keeping up with the times.

The Counterreformation set the seal on these trends of ideological and political conservatism. The treatment of the scientist Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) by the Holy Office is symptomatic of the fate of Italian intellectuals during this period. In this way Italian civilization suffered a blow that could not be easily remedied afterwards.

In accordance with the trends, the "enlightened" tolerance toward homosexuality that was typical of the Renaissance gradually disappeared as the generation born before 1550 died off.

In Italian literature evidence is found until about 1650, one example being the book *Alcibiade fanciullo a scola*, which defended pederasty, but these manifestations become ever rarer and more isolated. In the same period historical evidence on homosexual behavior in Italy diminishes to a trickle, while at the same time it increases in countries like France and England, which in a fairly short time became as loquacious on homosexuality as Italy had been up until that point. One must add, however, that the historical period that precedes the Risorgimento, the Italian national revival of the nineteenth century, has not been sufficiently studied. Recent scholarship shows that under the conformity imposed by the Counterreformation there continued to flow, like underground streams, currents of heterodox thought, such as the libertine one that has been cited.

This fact means that, in order to unearth the indications of nonconformist thought of this period, special attention must be directed to the recovery of unpublished manuscripts—*samizdat*, in effect—created for internal circulation among

private circles of enlightened intellectuals.

As regards the working class, the persistence of a homosexual cultural pattern that has been designated **Mediterranean** made possible the de facto tolerance of same-sex conduct, provided that it conformed to a rigid and prescribed model of behavior.

*The Age of Enlightenment and Positivism.* A number of preliminary inquiries pursued by the present author have shown that it is probable that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there arose the first prototypes of the insidious type of "repressive tolerance" still practiced today in Catholic countries. Even though in the initial phases of the Counterreformation there were new outbreaks of persecution, with the passage of the decades one notes an ever greater reluctance to impose the death penalty for sodomy.

An underground debate, the dimensions of which we are not now in a position to determine, must have taken place. Otherwise one cannot explain the appearance in 1764 of *Dei delitti e delle pene* (On Crimes and Punishments) by Cesare Beccaria (1738–1794). A book that captured the spirit of the times, which influenced legislation throughout Europe, and which called for the abolition of the death penalty for sodomy—such a book cannot have come out of a void.

Nonetheless the fanatical censorship that was imposed during those centuries, combined with a certain reluctance by Italian historians to enter "obscure zones of a special character," has served to keep us from learning much of homosexual life of the epoch.

The only certainty is that in this period the homosexual subculture took shape and began to come out of hiding, as shown by several studies completed by scholars in the field. We still lack, however, a precise analysis of what happened in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Italy; from what is now known it seems that Italian conditions were not very dif-

ferent from those of other Catholic countries, such as France, which have been better studied.

*Italy Today.* Two main factors characterize Italian gay life today: its situation overlapping the two main paradigms of homosexual culture—the central and northern European type, which predominates in northern Italy, and the Mediterranean type, which rules the south—and its acceptance of a kind of “social pact,” typical of Latin and Catholic countries, between the homosexual community and the state.

The first factor means that homosexual lifestyles in Italy are not homogeneous. In the north the foreign observer, even though he does not fail to register the difference between Italian gay culture and his own, still recognizes the links with central and northern European gay life. Southern Italy, however, follows a completely different model, that of the above-mentioned “Mediterranean homosexuality.”

Situated astride the boundary of two different cultures, Italian homosexual life lacks homogeneity, embracing as it does lifestyles which are profoundly different and even contradictory.

The second characteristic element is the “social pact” which the political authorities have tacitly conceded the homosexual minority since the nineteenth century, when sodomy was decriminalized thanks to the Napoleonic reforms. In exchange for the renunciation of homosexual militancy and advocacy of the right to be different, the state has agreed to respect the abrogation of all specifically antihomosexual laws.

This concession does not mean that homosexual conduct is exempt from stigma, but simply that the task of “social control” in the realm of sexual repression has been left to the Catholic church. Consequently, the state authorities need only intervene when the informal system of social control is not felt to be adequate. This occurred during the fascist period

when scores of homosexuals were sent into exile on small islands for periods from some months to several years. Despite this policy, there is no known case of a homosexual deported as such to a concentration (extermination) camp or of anyone executed for his homosexuality.

These contradictory factors explain how it was possible that from 1800 to 1950 Italy was a “wonderland” for foreign gays, who saw in the country a paradise where everything was allowed (hence it was an obligatory stop for every aristocratic Anglo-Saxon gay tourist), while at the same time it remained a country in which homosexuals, with rare exceptions, were reluctant to seek affirmation of their own identity, or to proclaim it through fiction and essays.

For generations Italian gay people declined to speak up on a vital question, understanding that repression would be deployed only in response to an attempt to create an “alternative lifestyle” in competition with that of the heterosexual family. In exchange they have benefited from a climate in which, though homosexuality officially did not exist and it was forbidden to mention it even in condemnation, scandals were systematically hushed up, the authorities dispensed with any “witch hunts,” and the common people refused to make an issue of it. Italy has never had an Oscar Wilde scandal.

Moreover, the Mediterranean culture of homosexuality has long permitted a certain phase of homosexual experimentation to young heterosexuals in order to safeguard the virginity of nubile girls. Italian homosexuals took advantage of this situation—until the arrival of the “sexual revolution” which, by facilitating premarital sexual relations, has progressively reduced the viability of this erotic ploy.

Residues of this legacy of compromise persist even today in Italian politics—on the one hand in the considerable integration that the gay community has achieved with society in general (no Italian cities have gay ghettos, the ghetto being a

reaction to a society that leaves no other space to the minority than the ghetto itself), on the other, in the absence, thus far, of phenomena such as the antigay crusades of an Anita Bryant or a Jerry Falwell, or the witch hunts occasioned by hysteria over AIDS.

Also a product of this tradition are the lesser strength of the Italian gay movement in comparison with the Anglo-Saxon countries, as well as the reluctance of homosexual intellectuals to "come out." There are no laws to defy, no clearly definable immediate objectives, so that the average Italian gay man can hardly grasp the need for an affirmation that, in this context, is more a political choice than a lifestyle choice. This last factor explains the high degree of politicization of the Italian gay movement, which often surprises foreign visitors.

This situation should not obscure the fact that the period after World War II has seen the appearance of a generation of intellectuals more or less willing to discuss homosexuality not only in the lives of others, but at times in their own. In recent years there has arisen a new generation with ideas influenced by the gay movement and more receptive to a "transgressive" vision of homosexuality.

Among the most important names of the first generation are the novelists Giovanni Comisso, Umberto Saba, Carlo Coccioli, and Alberto Arbasino; the poet-novelists Piero Santi, Dario Bellezza, Elio Pecora, Giampiero Bona; the poets Sandro Penna, Nico Naldini, Mario Stefani; the directors Luchino Visconti and Franco Zeffirelli; the playwrights Giuseppe Patroni Griffi and Giovanni Testori (also a poet); the painters Filippo De Pisis, Aligi Sassu, Ottone Rosai, Mario Schifano, and Renzo Vespi gnani; and the composer Sylvano Bussotti. To these must be added the complex personality of the poet, novelist, playwright, and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini. Other creative figures whose sexual orientation is known are omitted because

their work does not reflect any commitment to homosexuality.

Among the most important personalities of the new generation who can be defined without any hesitation as gay (apart from a few who claim the status of bisexuals) are Aldo Busi (unquestionably one of the most important living Italian writers), Piervittorio Tondelli, Dario Trento, Corrado Levi, Riccardo Reim, Giancarlo Rossi, Stefano Moretti, Gino Scartaghiande, Ciro Cascina, and the director Marco Mattolini.

In the last few years theatre, film, music, and the entertainment world in general have experienced a flowering of interesting talent that is openly gay.

The new climate of intellectual openness means that it is now possible to speak of the homosexuality of major figures of the Italian literature of the past, such as Carlo Emilio Gadda, an innovative Roman writer, and Aldo Palazzeschi, not to mention the nineteenth century patriot Luigi Settembrini and even the great Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837).

Today's Italian gay scene is notable particularly in the great industrial cities of the north; tourism has also stimulated the appearance of a leather scene in Florence. The south and Rome see, by contrast, the prevalence of a more "Mediterranean" mode: cruising takes place mainly outdoors so that many cities lack locales, such as bars and bathhouses, that are directed at a gay clientele. As a whole the Italians—except for those in Milan and Turin—are still little accustomed to bathhouses as places of gay encounter.

The Italian gay movement dates only from 1971, but it grew rapidly. Today it is organized on a national scale in the Arci-gay confederation, with its seat in Bologna, where there is a gay center (Il Cassero) and an archive-library. In 1988 there were twenty-two groups affiliated with Arci-gay, which also issues publications.

Turin and Milan boast their own gay archives linked to centers of gay initiative: one of these, the Fondazione Sandro Penna in Turin, publishes a high-quality annual of gay culture, *Sodoma*. There is also a gay Catholic movement, active only in the north.

Closely related to the gay movement is the informative Milanese monthly *Babilonia*, the only non-pornographic gay magazine in Italy. *Babilonia* publishes an annual gay guide in pocket-book format, bilingual in Italian and English and known as *Italia Gay*.

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