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## Homosexuality

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**Homosexuality** was a key symbolic issue throughout the Iberian middle ages. As was customary everywhere until the nineteenth century, homosexuality was not viewed as a congenital disposition or “identity”; the focus was on non-procreative sexual practices, of which sodomy was the most controversial. Female homosexual behavior was ignored, and almost nothing is known about it.

In al-Andalus, homosexual pleasures were much indulged in by the intellectual and political elite. Evidence includes the behavior of rulers, such as Abd ar-Rahman III, al-Hakem II, Hisham II, and al-Mutamid, who openly kept male harems; the memoirs of Badis, last Zirid king of Granada; references to homosexual prostitutes, who charged higher fees, and had a higher class of clientele, than did female prostitutes; the repeated criticisms of Christians; and especially the abundant poetry. Both pederasty and love between adult males are found. Although homosexual practices were never officially condoned, prohibitions against them were rarely enforced, and usually there was not even a pretense of doing so.

During the final centuries of Islamic Spain, in part because of Christian opposition to it and because of immigration and conversion of those sympathetic, homosexuality took on a greater ideological role. It had an important place in Islamic mysticism and monasticism. The contemplation of the beardless youth was “an act of worship,” the contemplation of God in human form.

Many Christians in northern Iberia and elsewhere in Europe were scandalized by or terrified of Andalusian sexual behavior, which relied heavily on slavery; homosexual indulgence, viewed as an incurable and contagious vice, was seen as a threat to the fighting strength of the army and thus to the integrity of the state. The boy-martyr San Pelagio, executed for refusing the amorous intentions of Abd ar-Rahman III, was a hero, and subject of a poem of Hroswitha. The Christian states worked to rescue captive Christians, prevent slaving raids, set up a bulwark to prevent Islamic expansion northwards, and suppress homosexuality within the Christian states themselves. The Castilian emphasis on virginity and marriage, its rejection of lyric poetry, the delayed implantation of clerical celibacy in Castile, and the western European cult of the Virgin Mary, all may well have their origin in this confrontation. The possible homosexual elements may be a reason why the theory of Islamic origin of courtly love and troubadour poetry has had such a poor reception.

Juan II and his lover Álvaro de Luna were the most famous homosexual couple in medieval Christian Spain. The execution of Álvaro de Luna, arranged by Juan's second wife, mother of Isabel la Católica, remained into the seventeenth century an event symbolic of repression of homosexuality. In the "Farsa de Ávila," Enrique IV was dethroned in effigy as "puto" (faggot); his incapacity as ruler was seen as a result not of illness, as today seems likely, but of moral depravity. Homosexuality was tolerated in the court of Alfonso el Magnánimo after its move to Naples.

In the background of the conflict over Iberian homosexuality are the Jews. Throughout Spanish history Judaism and variant sexuality have been associated by those hostile to either. One reason Jews were excluded from some countries after their expulsion from Spain was because they allegedly took homosexuality with them. Judaism and homosexuality are linked in Golden Age literature, as for example in Quevedo's poetry, and in the early twentieth century homosexuals were referred to as "judíos," and in the aggregate called a "sect."

The discovery and publication of much poetry thought lost, and the pioneering studies of it by Schirmann and Roth, have given us surprising new perspectives on Sephardic sexuality. There are scores of pederastic poems, by the greatest Jewish authors of the period: Ibn Gabirol, Samuel ha-Nagid, Moses Ibn Ezra, Judah ha-Levi, and others. From this poetry, "refined, sensual, and unabashedly hedonistic," we know that homosexuality was widespread among the Jewish elite while living in al-Andalus, apparently more prevalent than among the Muslims. Zirid Granada, a Jewish state in all but name, was the center of "a courtly aristocratic culture involving romantic individualism [in which there was] intense exploration of all forms of liberating sexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality, homosexuality." As with the Muslims, homosexuality and religious devotion were combined; Israel's love of God was sometimes expressed as the love of a male. The influence of Sephardic homosexuality has yet to be traced, but it is hard not to see it in the poetry of San Juan de la Cruz.

## Bibliography

On Sephardic homosexuality, see Jefim Schirmann, "The Ephebe in Medieval Hebrew Poetry," *Sefarad*, 15 (1955), 55-68; Norman Roth, "'Deal Gently with the Young Man': Love of Boys in Medieval Hebrew Poetry of Spain," *Speculum*, 57 (1982), 20-51; and Roth, "'My Beloved is Like a Gazelle': Imagery of the Beloved Boy in Religious Hebrew Poetry," *Hebrew Annual Review*, 8 (1984), 143-65. There is no comparable study of Hispano-Arabic homosexuality. A selection of relevant poems may be found in Emilio García Gómez's *Poemas arábigo-andaluces* (1930), rpt. in Colección austral, and Ibn Saïd al-Maghribi, *The Banners of the Champions*, trans. James Bellamy and Patricia Steiner (Madison: Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies, 1988).