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## Sexuality

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Medieval sexuality has been the focus of substantial recent commentary from a number of perspectives. Ruth Mazo Karras (2005: 5) usefully defines sexuality as “[the] whole realm of human erotic experience - the meanings that people place on sex acts, not the acts themselves - not the history of sex.” These meanings have been explored by medievalists from different directions (Bullough and Brundage 1996; Harper and Proctor 2008; Evans 2011). In older scholarship, the range and repetition of ecclesiastical regulation, commentaries and penitentials dealing with sexual behavior attracted the attention of James Brundage (1985, 1987). These are revealing of changing ideas not only of what constituted a valid marriage, but also of changing attitudes to the sexuality of priests, for whom chastity was increasingly emphasized (and required) from the eleventh century onwards. Brundage also briefly explored the regulation of sexual activity on the First Crusade, to which we shall return. The possibilities of [mainly male] same-sex relationships in the medieval past were the focus of early work by Michael Goodich (1979) and John Boswell (1980, 1994), and then of their critics, who highlighted the relative absence of women in the formulations set up (Murray 1996; Sautman and Sheingorn 2001; Lochrie 2005). Feminist interventions highlighted women's relationships, but the limitations of the gender binary also led to further reflections on male-male relationships and the transgender possibilities open to medieval people (Herdt 1996; Puff 2013).

Medievalists have drawn heavily on—and critiqued—Michel Foucault's (1990) formulation of individual and collective sexual history evolving from a sexual act to a sexual identity (a

debate that became particularly focused around same-sex relationships, but had broader implications for what constituted the 'norm' and when such an idea emerged). This frame still forms the starting point for more recent work that nuances the arguments still further (Karras 2005: 8-9; Lochrie 2011: 37-40). The title of *Sex before Sexuality: A Premodern History* (Phillips and Reay 2011) appears to accept the modern invention of the concept, but by structuring its essays along recognizably "modern" lines (examining sex 'between men', 'between women', and so on) it opens itself up to criticism that reaching the medieval and early modern actuality of sexual behaviors and attitudes is an impossible project. Historians of gender relations have also examined sexuality through the lens of masculinity and feminist theory: how sexual activity 'made' a man (in the right places and with the right partners) but might ruin a woman (e.g. Karras 2003: 75-83). There is also an inherent tension in medieval commentaries between the idea of women as passive partners in sexual intercourse, and the fear of their power to entice and entrap men into inappropriate fornication. Finally, the surge of work on medieval affect and the use of emotional or erotic language has also incorporated discussion of how those passions might or might not have resulted in physical relations. Erotic language did not necessarily imply genital contact though, and sexual activity and mutual pleasure did not occupy the same level of importance that it has gained in modern discourse. Complicating things even further, care must be taken here to acknowledge the Islamic medical tradition that saw in *female* sexual pleasure the key to successful generation of children (Park 2013: 88-92).

What does become clear through these different approaches is how variable 'sexuality' is as a category of analysis when applied to the premodern era. Most importantly, the modern binary between hetero- and homo-sexual, and its associated category 'heteronormativity', has

been comprehensively rejected in recent interventions related to the medieval situation, not least by Karma Lochrie (2011), whose own studies arguably kicked off its somewhat misplaced popularity among medievalists in the first place (Lochrie 2005). The debate around sexual identity has also spawned a trend for thinking about sexualities (plural) to which Karras has given short shrift (2005: 6), but which has a powerful hold on historians and literary scholars alike (Fradenburg and Freccero 1996). One of the major drawbacks of essay collections that explore challenges to 'prevailing conceptions of gender and sexual identity' is that they set up such cases as exceptions reinforcing a norm, yet the norm itself is rarely articulated (L'Estrange and More 2011).

Somewhat absent from this plethora of work, despite notable studies relating to sexuality within non-Christian communities (Rosenthal 1979, Roth 1996a, Roth 1996b; Kolten-Fromm 2000; Baskin 2010, Goldin 2011: 121-168, Park 2013, Schüller 2016), has been any consideration of how it mapped onto the ebb and flow of medieval empires, in particular the expansion of western European Christian polities (but the Umayyad kingdom of Al-Andalus in Spain, whilst not an empire, was also an offshoot of one (Ruggles 2004: 66)), and the establishment of the commercial empires across the later medieval Mediterranean and beyond. Such an omission is surprising, given the focus in modern postcolonial studies on the processes of othering and subjection of subaltern peoples through casting their cultures as 'backward', inferior, sensual, emotions-driven and therefore irrational (for postmedieval case studies, Parker *et al.* 1992). Twenty years ago Steven J. Kruger (1997: 158-9) highlighted the ways in which a focus on certain categories, such as gender, or religion, both key elements of considerations of medieval sexuality, had in fact elided other categories of consideration, so

that race and class, for example, barely registered in surveys of medieval society that 'mean[t] a European, Christian society.' Since he wrote, there have been isolated responses to his call for a more intersectional approach. A scholar who demonstrates the potential for such work is Kim Phillips, who has explored late medieval travelogues through a gendered and postcolonial lens (Phillips 2009, 2011, 2014). Here, it seems, the plurality of 'sexualities' can provide a useful analytical tool, as it is clear that medieval writers identified (or fantasized about) different sexual practices as a means of othering.

What questions can we draw from modern scholarly explorations of empire and colonialism to interrogate the medieval world's view of sexuality? The penetration of European culture into Africa, Asia and the Americas in the early modern era was accompanied by both a loosening of sexual restrictions compared with those of the homeland (on male colonists at least) and the sexual exploitation of both women and men in the subject communities (Bryder 1998; Voss and Casella 2012, Meiu 2015). It also saw the export from Europe, with Christian missionaries, of normative ideas of sexuality which condemned—as medieval clerics did—any local or native practices that were 'unnatural' and/or did not fit with the norms of 'civilized' society (for this process in Polynesia, for example, Johnston 2003). The prurient fascination with what lay behind the veil or in the harem fueled an image of the East as mysterious and inaccessible, an image that persisted into modern academic work (Said 1979; critiqued by Hastings 1992, Yegenoglu 1998: 25-27). The tension between colonizers looking to 'save' local populations, and the communities within which they worked, is not just a past issue: Leticia Sabsay (2016) highlights the ways in which modern global campaigns for sexual equality still 'indicate a process of othering [in which] coloniality and orientalist mentalities have influenced

the shaping of the emergent “sexual rights-bearing subject,” not only at the level of political rhetoric but also in terms of the kind of politics that is generated in the name of this subject.'

The possibilities for exploring sexuality against a background of cultural exchange and clash between expanding and contracting medieval empires are therefore rich. This chapter, rather than re-rehearsing the generalities of medieval sexuality, uses it as a way to interrogate 'empire', asking whether the dynamics of othering visible in modern colonial enterprises can provide insights into how first medieval empires (and I include here the expansion of Christendom, the ultimate 'empire') utilized sexual mores and activities to justify their rule over subject peoples, and often colonized the (mainly) female bodies of those they had conquered as a route to assimilation and control. It works thematically rather than tracing specific empires: although there were moments in the histories of medieval polities where sex came to the fore as a politically-charged topic (high-level divorce controversies in the Carolingian Empire and the tortuous diplomacy of western marriages with Byzantine princesses serve as examples), these rarely served as 'tools of empire', expanding dominance over a subject people, nor did they substantially shift prevailing ideas of sexuality *per se*. Whether the Byzantine emperors, for instance, saw the 'export' of princesses to western husbands as a means of expanding the potential boundaries of their empire, rather than simply preserving the *status quo*, has to my knowledge not formed a major topic of enquiry. Obviously, there is much more to say on this topic.

### **Using Postcolonial Theory**

Karras' formulation of medieval sex as a 'transitive act' (2005: 23) is useful here: if sex was indeed something 'done unto others', then its potential as a tool of medieval imperialism (understood here as a coercive force that might or might not have resulted in a recognizable 'empire') is worth investigation. There are, however, some important caveats to the discussion. Modern postcolonial theory, as Jerold C. Frakes points out, also makes room for –and is able to access–the voice of the Other not only as object of Euro-Christian hegemony, but as a subject that 'writes back'. This is a position 'that did not or could not exist in the thirteenth century' (2011: xiii), and thus in his view potentially compromises the work of medievalists such as Sharon Kinoshita (2006), who make extensive use of postcolonial theory to de-center their analysis of texts that are produced in Europe (in Kinoshita's case, France) but set in more distant lands. Frakes' position is, to my mind, too sweeping: 'writing back' can take many forms and is not, for instance, necessarily tied to the writer's own status as an immigrant in the country that has formerly colonized her/ his people. As this chapter will note, there is clear evidence that elite voices among the subjected people in the crusader states were highly skeptical of their new rulers' morals, and not at all afraid to comment upon them. It is, however, true that the present study of necessity mainly positions the western European merchants, crusaders, and other travelers as the dominant voices, subjecting and exploiting the peoples they met. Modern postcolonial studies are only now beginning to compare colonial territories *without* referring back to voices of rule from the 'center' (Philips 2006: 21). There is much work yet to be done. A comparative study of the subject Muslim experience in Spain, Sicily and the Holy Land, for instance, is still a *desideratum*, a project that the late Olivia Remie Constable signaled (2013) but was unable to complete.

Yet there are other areas in which a direct comparison between the medieval and modern are more difficult: the apparent centrality of licensed prostitution as a tonic for the colonizing troops in parts of the British Empire, and its opponents among social reformers and missionaries on the ground, does not have an easy equivalent in medieval society, for all that later medieval urban councils often sought to license and regulate the sex trade in their districts (Otis, 1985; Karras 1996). Yet Philips (2006: 1-5) uses contemporary accounts condemning the practice of allowing the men access to the sex trade to map the modern licensed areas for prostitution near or in colonial barracks, and there is possibly potential to explore the location of medieval brothels to see whether they, too, were deliberately-placed. The striking conversion of the name of Prague's brothel from 'Venice' to 'Jerusalem', and its housing of repentant prostitutes, hints at the international aspect to the trade and its potential to cater for, and include, foreign bodies in imaginary if not physical locations (Mengel 2014).

One area of enquiry that does resist easy comparison is that of the sexualization of children. Modern colonial endeavors frequently targeted and reported on the immorality of subject peoples who married off their children at what were deemed shockingly early ages (e.g. Philips 2006: 57-82, on India). Yet whilst both medieval canon law and several secular lawcodes in medieval Europe prescribed ages ranging from 12 upwards for valid marriages (meaning those that could be consummated), medieval travelers rarely comment on such issues among the people they encountered, and even quite explicit reports on the availability of sex to the traveler, such as Marco Polo's discussed below, do not include children in their survey.

Work on medieval colonial enterprises, interested more in legal and economic questions, has rather overlooked the day-to-day bodily engagement of colonizer and local. The



otherwise excellent volume *Coloniser au Moyen Âge* (Balard and Duceillier 1995) seems not to have considered the appropriation and control of sexuality as a 'technique of domination'. Yet medieval writers, particularly those describing unfamiliar people or situations, often resorted to both positive and negative descriptions of bodily form (skin, hair, shape, color) and clothing, as ways to mark 'otherness'. Such descriptions were rarely straightforwardly negative: there was a fascination, an attraction residing in the strangeness, that often comes through in the descriptions. It should be noted at the outset that the object of the (usually male) writer's gaze was more often than not female, and the issue of gender bias is one that lurks throughout the chapter.

The discussion that follows uses the three categories of Mission, Conquest, and Miscegenation to explore medieval sexuality and empire. These are not hard and fast divisions, since the first two headings arguably were two sides of the same coin in religiously-motivated campaigns, and the third was perhaps their inevitable result. The final section considers the ways in which western, Christian views of 'natural' sexual relations were challenged by the de- and re-gendered bodies encountered during the expansion of European horizons.

### **Mission - Converting Foreign Bodies**

The activities of medieval missionaries offer a substantial body of evidence to interrogate, since the expansion of Latin and Byzantine Christianity were both, arguably, colonial projects. The expansion of 'Christendom' and its interactions with non-European peoples and polities, so eloquently evoked by scholars such as Richard Southern (1962), who early on explored western views of Islam, and Robert Bartlett (1993), whose portrayal of Norman/French expansion has

examined ethnicity as a way of understanding the Frankish domination in the South and East, has mainly been seen in terms of political and cultural clash and accommodation. Southern noted the Christian view of Islam, particularly during the crusading era, that denigrated Muhammad for 'his plan of general sexual license as an instrument for the destruction of Christendom' (1962: 30) but focused his attention mainly on intellectual and religious, rather than socio-cultural, exchanges. Bartlett, despite dealing with 'colonial towns and colonial traders' in his survey, touches only lightly on the issue of 'mixed' cultures, exploring law and language rather than sexual encounters.

The 'conversion era', so often associated only with Europe in Late Antiquity, in fact extends well into our period when viewed from the perspective of empire. Both south-eastern Europe and the Baltic region were the subject of missions and crusades from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries. To what extent did reports and sermons of missionaries and converts focus on the sexual *mores* of the communities to whom they were preaching? The evidence from papal letters to the newly-converted and to the missionaries/crusaders is that whilst the sexual practices of the new Christians were considered, there seems to have been a considerable degree of leeway and discretion exercised. That is, the popes preferred the greater gain of extending the Christian community, rather than risking apostasy through enforcing canonical law too strictly. Two examples serve to illustrate this pragmatism in practice.

The first is an early case of dealing sensitively with local converts. The Bulgarian khan, Boris, appears to have converted to Christianity around 865 CE. The following year, Pope Nicholas I (858-67) sent a lengthy letter responding to the khan's queries about the proper

behavior of a Christian ruler and his people. It includes guidance on degrees of consanguinity in marriage, and the length of time a husband should wait after childbirth before resuming marital relations with his wife, but it is clear from other responses that Nicholas was keen to allow the khan to use his own judgment on some matters (cc. 39 and 64, Perels 1925: 582, 590; English translation in North 1998; Fønnesberg-Schmidt 2007: 118). More explicit were the letters of Pope Innocent III (1198-1215) to Bishop Albert of Livonia, against the wider background of the Baltic crusades from the later twelfth to mid-thirteenth century: the new converts might have rather different ideas about marriage, particularly regarding consanguinity, and thus the missionaries should be sensitive in imposing penance for sexual sin such as adultery and fornication, being merciful and lenient rather than overly zealous (Fønnesberg-Schmidt 2007: 117-8).

This conciliatory tone extended to the texts of other Christians travelling outside Europe. That is not to say that they were not interested in the morality of those whom they visited. Western travelers, particularly those engaging with the Mongol empire (whether as missionaries or diplomats) in the thirteenth century, include commentaries on the marital and sexual practices of the cultures they encountered, as noted for example by Scott Westrem (1990). Such cases have tended to be treated in isolation rather than being seen as a continuation of a discourse that, arguably, is as old as written records themselves, and very rarely has the exploitative gaze of the western writer been understood as such. William D. Phillips (1997), for example, does not mention the possibilities of sexual contact at all. John of Plano Carpini, travelling as an envoy of the pope to the Mongols, noted polygamy among the 'Tartars', but later in his report commented that, 'Their women are chaste, nor does one hear

any mention among them of any shameful behavior on their part; some of them, however, in jest make use of vile and disgusting language' (Dawson 1966/1980: 7 and 15).

Whilst John and the Franciscan missionary William of Rubruck, quite properly given their clerical status, were circumspect in their comments about the sexuality of the peoples they visited on their journeys East, and William gives a description of Mongol women that emphasizes their monstrosity in his eyes, near contemporary lay accounts provided rather more frank details. The merchant traveler Marco Polo, for instance, had no qualms about observing, reporting on and almost certainly enjoying various sexual relations on his travels. He reports several times, with varying degrees of disapproval, of local customs whereby the inhabitants of a particular region allow a sexual freedom to their womenfolk, or practice polygamy (I.34, I.41, I.47, II.4, II.37-39, III.25, Colbert 1997: 52, 62, 69, 96, 146-51, 240). He mentions the latter frequently but only rarely compares it with Christian monogamy (II.20, Colbert 1997: 126). Striking is his description of the district of Kamul (I.38, Colbert 1997: 58-9), where the inhabitants 'give positive orders to their wives, daughters, sisters, and other female relations, to indulge their guests in every wish... and the stranger lives in the house with the females as if they were his own wives', simply paying for this full-scale hospitality when he leaves. Had Marco himself sampled such hospitality, to leave what is an extended description of the women who were 'in truth very handsome, very sensual and fully disposed to conform in this respect to the injunction of their husbands'? Similarly, had he first-hand knowledge of the prostitutes he reports on in the suburbs of Kanbalu and Tai-du and in Kinsai (II.7, II.17, II.68.iii, Colbert 1997: 102-3, 121, 185)? He also reports on the beauty, or otherwise, of local women: those of northern Persia, in his opinion, are 'the most beautiful in the world', whilst those in Zanzibar are

'the most ill-favored women in the world' (I.21, III.37, Colbert 1997: 38 and 250). The extensive harems of eastern rulers also feature in his descriptions (II.31, II.38.ix, III.6, III.20.ii, III.24). Simon Gaunt (2013: 138) nevertheless takes issue with scholars convinced that Marco 'was preoccupied with sexual mores, alternatively [*sic*] representing the East as a kind of sexual paradise or betraying his own interests as a sexual tourist.' Marco's remarks can perhaps be better understood as those of a young man from a city whose engagement with the wider world was already well-established, and who would have witnessed first-hand the traffic in female slaves that came through the Italian ports, including those who served in Italian households and were in practice sexually available to their masters. The rigid honor culture of urban Venice, like other Italian cities, precluded young men's sexual dalliances with women from the same social class. Read through a colonial lens, Marco's text represents either the *real* sexual freedoms he experienced away from home, or perhaps an exaggerated fantasy of the sexual availability of foreign wives and daughters, safely distanced from his homeland and thus unverifiable by his readers.

Beside the campaign to extend the geographical boundaries of European Christendom, there was also increasing pressure from the eleventh century onwards on Jewish subjects *within* European kingdoms to convert. Kruger (1997: 166) uses the theme of conversion to explore the connections between the ideas of religion and race in late medieval Europe, and cites the didactic tale of Hermann of Cologne, a convert to Christianity who nevertheless lapses back into the 'carnality' of his former Jewish state by contracting a marriage inspired by the devil. Only through the prayers of two religious women is he brought back to the chastity of a Christian life. And this is an important marker between Christianity and both Judaism and Islam,

for both the latter religions were characterized by hostile (and sometimes grudgingly fascinated) commentators highlighting their 'deviant' marriage practices (Jews marrying bigamously or within degrees of consanguinity not permitted by canon law, Muslim men permitted polygamy, etc.) as a sign of their immorality more generally. There were also degrees of difference within, as well as between, religious groups in sexual practices: Joseph Shatzmiller (2009: 581) points out that the condemnation, by northern European, Ashkenaz rabbis, of the southern, Sephardi practice of bigamy fell on deaf ears among the Jewish communities of the Mediterranean world. Here, in fact, the only voices raised against bigamous marriages were from Christian, not Jewish or Muslim, authors.

Did later conversion narratives, in the same way as earlier ones, utilize sexuality in the *topos* of the pious wife/queen converting her husband/king and thus an entire people? It is hard to find direct evidence of this: indeed, the susceptibility of *women* to conversion seems to have been far more common in the central and later medieval texts, and the story of Muslim princesses falling for Christian lords and converting on their marriage became a stock feature of twelfth- and thirteenth-century literature (Barton 2011: 18). Elsewhere, the subjection of pagan peoples, such as the Cumans in Hungary, included marriage to and conversion of their high-born women, as in the case of the daughter of a Cuman chieftain married to the future István V (r. 1270-2) and baptized with the name Elizabeth. The Hungarian situation, as Nora Berend has pointed out, was somewhat unusual in that the Hungarian kings were not *colonizing* Cuman territory but instead trying to incorporate a pagan people that had settled voluntarily within their borders. The difficulties inherent in this project found expression in a common *topos*, that of dangerous, pagan men raping Christian women, as a report to the pope by István's father,

Béla IV, reveals (Berend 2001a: 220). Elizabeth's son, László IV, acquired the epithet 'the Cuman', and trod a precarious path between trying to convert the still-pagan Cumans settled in his kingdom and pacifying the increasing demands of the papacy to either achieve this goal or expel them altogether (Berend 2001b). Yet the later anxieties around the Cumans, most clearly expressed in the 'Cuman law' of 1279 outlined by the papal legate, focused mainly on their migratory lifestyle, living in tents, and their worship of pagan religious symbols, rather than their sexual threat to Christians.

### **Conquest - Appropriation of Bodily Services**

The eleventh and twelfth centuries were the age of expansive European aggression. Conquest narratives frequently portray the slaughter of men and the capture and enslavement of women and children (Gillingham 2015). Marriage, rape and abduction were fluid categories in western warfare, and 'strategic intermarriage' a frequent necessity (Finke and Shichtman 1998: 61-3). Western crusade propaganda included regular accusations that Saracen men (Turks and others) raped young girls and women, and even nuns, and captured women and boys to put in their brothels, although the evidence that this actually happened is scanty (Brundage 1985: 61 cites a few examples). Was their economic value, as slaves, outweighed by the value in their subjection? What happened to these women next? James Brundage has highlighted the violence of the *language* used by crusade historians to depict their Muslim enemies as 'addicted to lurid forms of sexual debauchery' (Brundage 1985: 60, citing Peter Tudebode), particularly towards virtuous Christian women. He suggests that Muslim females, prostitutes or not, were also 'bartered back and forth among themselves' (*ibid.*).

Modern warfare has included rape as a tool to terrorize people into submission, so did the same hold true in the medieval setting? Rape had a broad spectrum of meanings in medieval culture: the violent seizure and penetration of women (and men) was only one element (Dunn 2013 conveys something of the diversity of interpretations). Racial and ethnic difference was frequently expressed in terms of sexual 'crimes,' which could include not only perceived promiscuity, but also adultery, rape, incest and sodomy. In the religiously-confused environment of Norman-era southern Italy, the distaste of some Christian authors at the use of Muslim soldiers in King Roger II's (1130-54) army to put down rebellions in the Christian cities of Puglia resulted in reports of atrocities as the Saracens ran amok, raping wives in front of husbands and killing infants in front of their mothers – in fact just the kind of behavior that crusade authors had highlighted (Hysell 2012: 151).

Finke and Shichtman highlight that the age of the crusades gave rise to two genres of writing, vernacular history and romance, that their depictions of the strangeness of others 'manage[d] the anxieties – of both conqueror and conquered, the powerful and the exploited – about the chaos that lies beyond what is known' (Finke and Shichtman 1998: 59). In their study of the vernacular histories of King Arthur and the Mont St Michel giant, it is the latter who is the rapist – a monstrous, foreign being who kills Arthur's niece in his attempt to rape her, and then violates the girl's nurse, who in Wace is presented giving an extended account of her ordeal. The point is to present the giant not only as a monster, corrupting the purity of the young virgin to the point of death (the nurse is rather more matter-of-fact – she is an experienced older woman of a different class, thus her rape does not 'count' in quite the same way), but as a *foreign* monster – living in Brittany, not Britain.



The anxieties provoked by warfare may have pushed a Muslim father in Sicily to send his young daughter away from the island with a pilgrim companion of the writer Ibn Jubayr, perhaps to prevent any possibility of harm to her in the face of the Norman conquest. Although the story is told in the context of reports of forced conversions by the Christians, the girl's destiny—to marry the pilgrim or to be found a suitable husband by him—speaks to the dangers inherent in being a female subject (Amari 1880: 179-80; a translation of this story, though with an error on the page reference, is in Skinner and van Houts 2011: 74-5). More explicit is a case, again featuring a Muslim man, reported by the Norman author Geoffrey Malaterra:

Among them was a young nobleman, a citizen of Messina, who had a very beautiful sister, and as he fled he strove to have her come with him; the girl, who was small and virginal, weak in nature, and a stranger to work, began to lag out of fear and being unused to running. Her brother urged her to flee with the sweetest words, but these did no good, and seeing that she had exhausted her strength, he drew his sword and killed her, so that she should not remain to be corrupted by any of the Normans. And however much he was flooded with tears on account of the sweetness of his sister - for she was his only one - he preferred to be the killer of his sister and to mourn her death, than that she become a traitor to her faith and be unwillingly defiled [*stupraretur*] by another law. (Pontieri 1927-8: 33 [Book II, c. 11])

This particular episode has received some attention from scholars wishing to show that Geoffrey's intention was to appeal to a courtly audience and/or express a picture of the Muslims that was not wholly negative (Wolf 1995: 160; Hysell 2012: 147). Yet the Latin *stupraretur* for 'defiled' has a twin meaning of "defilement," as well as of "rape or ravishment."

The ambiguity of meaning highlights a common problem in the sources: it is not difficult, in various genres, to find reports of a **fear** of rape by members of a foreign group (St Margaret of Hungary, daughter of King Béla IV, famously asked for permission to deface herself as a protection against rape by the approaching Mongols (Skinner 2015)), but it is actually quite hard to find concrete examples of that fear being realized. The scene in the *Roman de Godfrey de Bouillon*, set against the First Crusade and showing a woman and child being sent up a ladder to escape a besieged city might speak to their ransom value (she is with the king) rather than sexual fears. The fears of these commentators in different parts of Western Europe simply reflected another reality of medieval life: that situations of conflict regularly led to the capture, enslavement and/or enforced conversion of women and children, who could be transported and sold far from their native lands (for a Catalan contract sending a female slave to Sicily in 1238, Constable 1996: 235).

Before leaving the subject of warfare and its fallout, it is as well to note that the many female slaves trafficked around Europe from their homelands further east faced the colonization of their bodies not just for sex, but other services. Rebecca Winer (2008) has highlighted the use of enslaved wetnurses in late medieval Spain. Papal Councils in 1179 and again in 1215 threatened excommunication to Christian women who served in Jewish homes, either as servants or wetnurses, suggesting, in Kruger's words, a certain visceral repugnance at the bodies that they sought to rope off from Christendom' (1997: 168-9). The reality of life for the colonized Jewish subject in Crete is highlighted by the entangled marital and business history of the female convert to Christianity studied by Lauer (2014). Further East, Genoese merchant records from the Crimea testify to numerous sales of women, with and without

children, and there is no doubt that their potential as sexual partners contributed to their value as a commodity (Skinner and van Houts 2011: 63-9; Stuard 1995). The Florentine merchant Gregorio Dati cheerfully acknowledged the son he had fathered with a slave in Barcelona, and sent for that son to be educated into the family business. As one may see, such children could be recognized and supported, if not placed on an equal footing with their step-siblings born of marriage.

We should not forget that it was not only women who could be trafficked as slaves and used for sexual purposes. As early as the ninth century, North African Muslim raids on the Christian central Mediterranean targeted boys who could be enslaved, castrated and sold for use as eunuchs, although the Byzantine hagiography that reports such raids (and their capture of future saints) does not refer explicitly to the practice (Conant 2015). The account of the Venetian traveler Marco Polo (II.45, Colbert 1997: 163) offers a further angle on the spoils of war and sexuality when he reports that all the [male] prisoners taken in war in the province of Bangala are presently emasculated and used as eunuchs to guard women's quarters, thus fetching high prices as slaves.

### **Miscegenation - Embracing Foreign Bodies**

In the aftermath of war, peace could bring with it either a relaxing of boundaries or their strict enforcement. John Gillingham (2015), using western narratives of the First Crusade, has pointed out that the likely use of Muslim women as enslaved sexual partners in the Near East is near invisible except in specific passages such as Fulcher of Chartres' "idyllic picture of a prospering multi-cultural society united by a single faith." Yet Fulcher's famous portrayal contrasts with the

continuing anxiety demonstrated by the prohibitions of the Council of Nablus in 1120 of interfaith sexual relations. The drastic punishment threatened in the latter against Christian men who had sex with Muslim women was castration, with the willing woman subjected to having her nose cut off. The reverse situation, a Muslim man taking a Christian woman with her consent, was punished as adultery, that is, with the death penalty (Kedar 1999). Nevertheless, the potential for men to make new lives with different sexual partners in the East might explain the celebratory effigy of Hugh I of Vaudemont being greeted by his wife back in France.

The term 'miscegenation' is more frequently associated with racialized mixing, and 'race' has itself been a contested category within Medieval Studies (Eliav-Feldon 2005; Heng 2011; Mittman 2015). More frequently, the texts we have display a fear of inter-*religious* rather than inter-racial sexual relations, but even this distinction is bogus, according to Sara Ahmed (2015). As Karras notes (2005: 107), all three major religions seem to have been reasonably tolerant of men having sexual relations outside the faith, particularly if they resulted in the female partner's conversion, but were less keen to see 'their' women appropriated in this way: even having sex with a prostitute outside the faith caused debate among the authorities. The Fourth Lateran Council's injunction in 1215 that Muslims and Jews should wear distinguishing dress or insignia derived precisely from the anxieties surrounding 'mistaken (*per errorem*)' intercourse by Christian men with Jewish or Muslim women, or Jewish or Muslim men with Christian women: notably the canons do not attribute a greater weight to the latter, although it was at the heart of the matter that Christian women should not become pregnant by Jews or Muslims (Kruger 1997: 167-8). The anxiety that this caused gave rise to almost fantasy-like portrayals of such mixed-faith relationships, as when the thirteenth-century Provençal rabbi Isaac ben

Yedediah expounded at length on the undesirability of uncircumcised men sleeping with Jewish women and bringing them to orgasm first (and thus making them desirous of more intercourse), in contrast with the swift ejaculation that for the rabbi marked sex between Jewish men and their wives, and left the latter 'ashamed and confounded' by their unsatisfied desire (quoted at length in Karras 2005: 78).

Such imaginings also permeated more sober legal documents, as in the fifteenth-century Aragonese court-cases studied by Martine Charageat. Here, the question was pollution of Christian women by Jewish men, a penetration of the 'frontière sexuelle', to use her evocative term. Yet as she notes, the cases focus not on the Jewish penetrator, but functioned as a means of interrogating the morals of the Christian woman who would even think to submit to him. These cases were a discourse built by Christians, for Christians (Charageat 2009: 590-1). The colonial subject here was not even invited to the proceedings.

Part – perhaps most – of the anxiety stemmed from the understanding of sex as an act that led to reproduction: medieval Christian theorists (and their counterparts in the other religions) categorized non-reproductive acts as 'unnatural'. This understanding of the sin on Onan has profound implications for our understanding of sexuality and empire, since it rendered the penetration of women against their will an entirely 'natural' act, unless it contravened the rights of another man who had prior claim to the woman in question (thus, in that sense, adultery was 'unnatural'). The offspring of such unions occupied an ambivalent space that was explored with fascination by writers of medieval literary works. Lynne Ramey examines how diverse medical models of conception were reflected in twelfth- and thirteenth-century tales of interfaith relationships (Ramey 2011). In the *King of Tars*, for example, the

Muslim 'sultan of Dammas' marries the daughter of the Christian king whom he is fighting, and she ostensibly converts to Islam and becomes pregnant. Her child, however, is born a formless blob of flesh, which her husband blames on her lack of sincere belief. Yet when a priest baptizes the child a Christian, it miraculously changes form, acquiring limbs, face and normal functions, and when the sultan follows suit, his black flesh is changed to white.

Whilst tales such as these reflect a worldview of Christian superiority overcoming the challenge of a mixed marriage, Muslims, too, were keen to avoid interfaith relationships. The fear of sexual contact was particularly prevalent in regions where different religious communities lived side by side, such as medieval Sicily and Iberia (Ruggles 2004; Barton 2011). Frakes (2011: xiii) has noted that these regions (and central Europe, already explored) were sites of 'Bhabha-esque... creative interstices', that is, places where the distinctions between Christian rulers and non-Christian subjects were regularly blurred, accidentally or deliberately, by everyday cultural interactions. In multi-cultural communities such as medieval Sicily, the iconographic depiction of ostensibly Christian courtly culture, on the ceiling of the Norman Palace Chapel in Palermo, includes a dancing girl clad in a full-body costume that emphasises her curves and speaks to Islamic tropes of a paradise filled with *houris* just like her (Grube and Johns 2005; Kapitaikin 2013), and the Muslim writer Ibn Jubayr speaks of the women of Palermo going about their lives with veiled faces (cited in White 2005: 84). The dynamics of interpenetration in Iberia changed over time, for the conquering elite in early medieval Spain was Muslim, not Christian. Barton (2011: 6) notes that Muslim elite men in early medieval Spain were not only permitted to marry outside the faith, but in many cases strategically did so for economic and political reasons. This aggressive marriage strategy only went into terminal

decline when faced with the combination of the concerted opposition of Christian clergy and arrival of Christian warriors after 1050.

The sexual purity of women remained a central facet of religious identity. Although not explicit about the question, the Muslim scholar Ibn Hazm was nevertheless highly-critical of the late-eleventh century rulers of the *taifas*, the Muslim successor states to the caliphate of Cordoba, whose appeasement of aggressive Christian rulers included allowing the latter to take Muslim men, women and children away to Christian regions as captives (Finke and Shichtman 1998: 69). Following the Christian reconquest of much of the Iberian peninsular the critical voices continued. David Nirenberg (2001: 71-3) has explored Muslim subjects who did not convert to Christianity, who were permitted to live circumscribed lives as Mudejars, subject to Christian lords. This set up a real tension, particularly in the eyes of external Muslim observers, particularly in North Africa, who wrote of the degradation of the Mudejars as Muslims. How, it was asked, could a Mudejar defend the sexual propriety of his wife when he was not permitted to exact Koranic punishments and was subject to the will of a Christian lord? How might Muslims defend their women from the risk of violation and conversion? Nirenberg illustrates that this was no mere theoretical question, since Mudejar communities in Spain identified numerous women who had transgressed in precisely this way, purchasing privileges from the Christians (and thus ensuring a record survives of each case) to allow them to put such women to death.

No less extreme was the reaction of Christians to interfaith sexual contact: King Alfonso III of Portugal was censured by the pope in 1268 for having permitted Christian men within his kingdom to marry women of Muslim and Jewish origin, regardless of whether these brides had

converted to Christianity. The suspicion of converts remained a formidable barrier to their assimilation into Christian society: as Kruger (1997: 166) comments, 'religious conversions [were] likely to be accompanied not by an embracing of normative heterosexuality, but rather by a movement from uncontrolled "luxury" into a more chaste and "ordered" state'.

It was not just male-female interfaith relations that were viewed as suspect: in her study of bathing in Muslim texts, Alexandra Cuffel (2009: 178-80) highlights the suspicion of Muslim and Christian women mixing freely at the bath or *hammam*, expressed by Islamic writers in Al-Andalus and, later, Syria, who feared same-sex relationships might result from such close proximity and intimacy, or that 'community boundaries would completely disintegrate'. Cuffel might have included in her survey the requirement on Jewish women to bathe too, particularly after menstruation, although the potential for mixing with women of other faiths was perhaps obstructed by the fact that baths were built specifically for Jewish ritual practices. Ruth Karras (2005: 77) highlights the custom for Jewish women to resume sexual relations with their husbands after such baths, and notes therefore that on seeing a woman emerge from the *mikveh*, 'everyone knew that she and her husband would be having sex that night.'

## **Conclusion**

As we saw above, war and conquest could mean the enslavement, subjection and sexual exploitation of boys as well as women. In both Christian and Muslim cultures, boyhood was celebrated as a time of extreme beauty by male writers, giving rise on both sides to accusations of sexual exploitation. Karras (2005: 133) quotes the fourteenth-century William of Adam on 'libidinous, vile and abominable men... corrupters of human nature' – an attack directed



primarily at Muslims – but he is equally scathing of the Christian merchants who buy and sell young slaves for this purpose. Classifying this, in modern terms, as verging on pederasty is not helpful: to reiterate, erotic language did not necessarily lead to full sexual contact (and see Uebel 2003). Boys ‘occupied an ambiguous gendered space’ in Muslim society (Clarke 2016: 77). Moreover, the *mukhannathūn* of the medieval Islamic world, men who dressed as women without seeking to **pass** as women, and the existence of *ghumaliya* or slavegirls with boyish looks who might be dressed as boys (Ruggles 2004: 73), complicates the supposedly clear gender binary still further. Their very existence may have given rise to further ways in which the Christianizing colonial powers of the twelfth century marked their subjects in predominantly Muslim lands as ‘other’. As we have already seen, the complex and ambivalent relationship between conqueror and conquered was often worked out in creative, literary texts. For instance, Kruger (1997: 161) highlights the queerness of foreign bodies as described in Christian texts, in particular Chaucer's 'mannysh' pagan and Islamic women.

The centrality of dress to the de- and re-gendering of young men and women is worth further consideration, for observers also remarked on costume as a marker of otherness. An early record of clothing differences as gender markers comes in the ninth-century papal letter of Nicholas I to the Bulgarian khan, Boris, introduced above. Perhaps in response to an enquiry about appropriate dress for new Christians, the pope's letter refers to the wearing of pants or trousers (*femoralia* - the Latin suggests a cut-off, short garment). Whilst he is dismissive of the problem - 'we do not wish the exterior style of your clothing to be changed, but rather the behaviour of the inner man within you' - Nicholas is nevertheless rather uneasy about the fact that a garment that he considers male is being worn by both men **and** women in Boris's realm.

'But really, do what you please', he reiterates. The garb of the Bulgarian women might be strange, even slightly transgressive, but of little import in the wider scheme of Nicholas's mission (c. 59, Perels 1925: 588).

This does however highlight an issue that Karras and others have noted – there is a focus, in descriptions of bodies and clothing, on the face and the lower body. The nakedness, or form of covering, of these areas signaled much about the perceived morality of unfamiliar people. Marco Polo, for example, as well as commenting on female bodies, also provides a quite detailed description of trousers worn by the women 'of the superior class' of Balashan:

who wear below their waists, in the manner of drawers. A kind of garment, in the making of which they employ, according to their means, an hundred, eighty or sixty ells of fine cotton cloth; which they also gather or plait, in order to increase the apparent size of their hips; those being accounted the most handsome who are the most bulky in that part. (l.26, Colbert 1997: 46)

Marco's comment reinforces a clear point about the intersection of sexuality with imperial or colonizing observations in medieval texts: the vast majority of sources focus on women. In Marco's text, for example, femininity (and perceived fertility) was reinforced by the wearing of padded trousers. The overwhelming majority of texts were constructed by men for men, and targeted their denigrations at men: the apparent visibility and implied sexual availability of subaltern women, or their seizure by force, was an action that dishonored and emasculated subaltern men.

As such, it would be all-too-easy to focus on the penetrating gaze of western travelers and position those they described as powerless to respond. But some subaltern voices—albeit

privileged ones—are audible as well. The Muslim scholar and diplomat Ibn Munqidh's mild bemusement at Frankish sexual mores is expressed in his autobiographical writing (Halsall 1998):

One day this Frank went home and found a man with his wife in the same bed. He asked him, 'What could have made you enter into my wife's room?' The man replied, 'I was tired, so I went in to rest.' 'But how,' asked he, 'didst thou get into my bed?' The other replied, 'I found a bed that was spread, so I slept in it.' 'But,' said he, 'my wife was sleeping together with you!' The other replied, 'Well, the bed is hers. How could I therefore have prevented her from using her own bed?' 'By the truth of my religion,' said the husband, 'if thou shouldst do it again, thou and I would have a quarrel.' Such was for the Frank the entire expression of his disapproval and the limit of his jealousy...

Now the purpose of such a tale is open to question, and amusing his reader with the 'strangeness' of the foreigners might be Ibn Munqidh's main aim, but there is perhaps an implicit understanding that had it been a Muslim in the bed, the Frank would not have been so forgiving, and Munqidh's own viewpoint is also clear: this would **never** happen in a good Muslim household.

Other subjects, however, exploited good relations with their colonial rulers to police boundaries **within** their communities. Precious testimonies from the subject Jewish community in Venetian Crete supported the Christian ban on interfaith relations, including the use of Christian wetnurses and other servants, on the basis of maintaining a peaceful co-existence and preserving proper religious customs, including sexual transgressions. The case-study of newcomer Shalom the Sicilian, accused of corrupting good Jewish women and polluting himself

in brothels, shows the community acting rapidly, and in collaboration with the Venetian authorities, to expel him (Borysek 2014: 257-8).

A focus on sexuality and empire reveals some of the contradictions and fault lines in medieval Christian Europe's engagement with strangers within and outside its borders. As Finke and Shichtman (1998: 71) observe, 'As boundaries are extended, those at the margins must be assimilated, pushed to more distant margins, or destroyed.' In fact, all three strategies are visible in the examples discussed above, and ideas of sexuality, particularly that of females, were central: Jews and Muslims (and pagans) were assimilated through marriage or non-consensual sexual penetration, or they were segregated by laws (including their own) that sought to avoid such relations, or they found themselves displaced, expelled or converted. And as the physical frontiers of Europe expanded, so the tolerances of sexual behaviors between conqueror and subject, the 'sexual frontiers', shifted and adapted too.

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