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VENEREAL DISEASE

See Sexually Transmitted Diseases.

VENICE

This northern Italian city, which stands on a series of islands in a lagoon of the upper Adriatic, is world-famous for its wealth of artistic monuments and for its unique and picturesque urban fabric, punctuated by innumerable canals and bridges.

History. Founded in the middle of the fifth century by refugees from a mainland then ravaged by barbarian invaders, the city remained in Byzantine hands, growing as a commercial center and increasing in autonomy, until independence was achieved in 697. In the ninth century Venice's particular political profile began to emerge: a republic that was at first democratic, then from 1197 on oligarchic. The merchant families who monopolized power (and the title of *nobili*) made sure that Venice's policy was directed to the increase and safeguarding of commerce. Expansion in the East and the securing of trading posts there were favored by the Crusades, especially the Fourth (1204), which the republic succeeded in manipulating to its own advantage to create an empire.

Defeating its maritime rival Genoa in 1378, Venice expanded its domain in the hinterland. The fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 and the discovery of America in 1492 ultimately doomed the city to gradual decline as new trade routes opened on the oceans. Yet the strength of the republic remained impressive: although locked in a seemingly end-

less conflict with the Turks, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Venice was nonetheless able to conduct a foreign policy that was independent of the great European powers and of the papacy. The descending curve, which was relieved by festive ceremonial and renewed artistic vitality, ended in 1797 with loss of independence. Conquered by Napoleon, the city was ceded to Austria, which kept it until 1866, when Venice joined the new Kingdom of Italy.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries industrialization occurred in the coastal centers of Marghera and Mestre, which are administratively part of Venice. The city on the lagoon, having lost much of its own population, today lives mainly on the receipts from tourism.

Homosexuality in the Renaissance: Research Parameters. Among the various city-states of Renaissance Italy Venice has gained particular attention on the part of historians for its evidence of older patterns of homosexual behavior. The reason for this interest resides not so much in any special quality of homosexual behavior in the republic as in a particular political situation.

A thousand years of political stability, and the city's freedom from invasion and sacking, permitted it to accumulate one of the fullest historical archives in the Western world. These archives have preserved trial records, sentences, and texts of laws against sodomy from the fifteenth century onwards. The accessibility of this material has made it a precious resource for research—the city's tangled and peculiar political structure notwithstanding.

The Administrative Framework. Never having been part of the Holy Roman Empire, Venice never accepted the political forms and legislation in force on the mainland. Venice tended to shun an organic code of laws. In practice it often occurred that two courts were called in, so that differences had to be decided pragmatically, case by case. For these reasons, Venetian antisodomy legislation cannot

be studied through one or more laws of a nonexistent code, but through a myriad of *parti* (decrees) promulgated from time to time to deal with particular transgressions. This legal situation recalls that of the English common law.

Until the fifteenth century the chief Venetian magistrature responsible for the repression of homosexual behavior was that of the "Signori di Notte" (the Lords of the Night), who had the responsibility of patrolling and overseeing the city. In 1407, however, the Lords were guilty of excess of zeal: in a big operation they arrested 35 sodomites, 14 of whom belonged to noble families of the city. For this reason, the Council of Ten, a body responsible for the security of the state, stepped in, checking the authority of the Signori di Notte so as to block the proceedings. Henceforth almost all sodomy trials were handled by the Consiglio dei Dieci, which also promulgated the decrees concerning the repression of homosexual behavior.

After the Council of Trent (1545–66) Venice also had to accept—not without long resistance and open defiance of the pope—the papal Inquisition; it was received, however, only with serious limitations on its jurisdiction. As regards sodomy the Inquisition was competent only for clergy, laity remaining within the jurisdiction of the secular courts. Thus no more than twenty trial records of this sort are preserved among the Inquisition papers.

With the Austrian conquest, Venice received first the penal code of Lombardy-Venetia, and then the Austro-Hungarian code, both of which criminalized sodomy. Annexation to the Kingdom of Italy in 1866 effectively abrogated the sodomy laws.

Social Realities. Recent studies in the Venetian archives (especially those of Ruggiero, Labalme, and Pavan) have brought to light the existence of a flourishing sodomite subculture in the Adriatic city, provided with meeting places (minutely listed in the decrees based on care-

ful surveillance) and marked by a certain degree of reciprocal knowledge among the participants. Among the places noted that must be watched were the shops of barbers (who often served as pimps), the establishments of pastry makers, unbuilt land on the edge of the city, and the porches of certain churches.

The pattern of relationships that emerges from the trial records is—like that of Florence and other historic Italian cities—pederastic in character: that of an adult (who plays the role of insertor) and an adolescent (the insertee). Money almost always played a decisive role in effecting the connection. In general the sodomy trial records reveal a high number of cases of violent assault, which received the death sentence, because these were more likely to be denounced by the victims or their relatives.

The many group trials (for example those of 1407, 1422, 1460, 1464, 1474, 1537, and 1547) show how it was possible, starting with a single arrested person, to find other guilty parties; this was also done through young hustlers who sold their favors to several clients. Yet the traumatic experience of 1407 made sure that no dragnet on a similar scale was attempted afterwards, at least as far as we know. This reflects the usual state of affairs in large cities where the "vice squad" knows the extent of clandestine sexual activity but is also aware that it must not compromise the holders of wealth and power.

Toward the middle of the sixteenth century the trial records also bear witness to taverns in which, with the acquiescence of the proprietor, sodomites could conclude their arrangements in peace and tranquility. The apparent resemblance between this practice and that of the English molly houses of the eighteenth century has not been studied, and must be considered not proven. In a trial of 1537, however, we find the use of a feminine name (*Ninfa*, "nymph") for one of the accused, foreshadowing the use of femi-

nine names later in the molly houses of London. This period also sees the emergence of more or less organized male prostitution, using barbers, tavern keepers, and procuresses as go-betweens.

The attitude of the Venetian Republic toward homosexual behavior was always severely unfavorable, so that in the middle of the fifteenth century there was discussion as to whether to pass—as had been done in other Italian states—from the penalty of burning at the stake to that of hanging or decapitation followed by burning—scarcely humane alternatives. Yet it was probably this severity of punishment that discouraged the people from systematic denunciations of sodomy. When an accusation would lead almost certainly to the condemnation of the culprit to death it was difficult for a friend, a relative, or even an acquaintance to denounce an “unnatural act” of which he had knowledge. Thus the trial records show a number of cases in which people warned their associates or helped them to flee.

To this understandable reticence there must be added, from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, subterranean currents of libertine thought, for the principal center of this philosophical trend was at the University of Padua, in Venetian territory. The tolerance found among the general population, especially among the educated, explains how it was possible to publish in 1652, probably in Venice itself, Antonio Rocco's almost legendary defense of pederasty, *L'Alcibiade fanciullo a scola*.

Later Developments. For the period after the sixteenth century, which has thus far attracted little attention from scholars, there is much to be learned. The persistence or rebirth of a libertine attitude—one tolerant of homosexual acts—is nonetheless witnessed by such documents as the jovial erotic poems written in Venetian dialect by Giorgio Baffo (1694–1768), which treat homosexual relations with the same unbridled joy as heterosexual ones, and the memoirs of one of the most famous Venetians of the eight-

eenth century, Giacomo (Jacques) Casanova (1725–1798).

After the fall of the Republic Venice became an obligatory stop on the grand tour of the romantic homosexuals of northern Europe in the nineteenth century; here the outstanding names are Count Platen, John Addington Symonds (who tells in his memoirs of his affair with a Venetian gondolier), and Frederick Rolfe, who styled himself “Baron Corvo.” It was not an accident that Thomas Mann chose Venice as the locale for his novella of the homosexual passion of a middle-aged man, *Death in Venice*.

Until World War II Venice was one of the favored spots of international homosexual tourism, especially in autumn—to the point that such birds of passage (and others mingling with them) were termed *settembrini*, “those who arrive in September.” The tolerance of the city's inhabitants made of it a kind of “zone of liberty” for well-healed homosexual visitors.

With the progressive depopulation of the city (from the end of the war to the present the urban nucleus declined from 200,000 to 90,000 inhabitants) and the “clearance” of proletarians to the mainland (Marghera and Mestre) to make room for the mass tourist industry, the city's role as a magnet for the elite gay traveler has declined.

There remain some notable relics of the past which have been given new life by the revival of the Venetian carnival, which is celebrated throughout the world. There is also the voice of the living poet Mario Stefani (b. 1938), who sings both of Venice and of homosexual love. Still these points cannot disguise the fact that today the city stands apart from the main currents of Italian gay life and from those of international gay tourism.

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Giovanni Dall'Orto

VERGIL (70–19 B.C.)

Greatest Latin poet. Descended from an equestrian family from Mantua, Publius Vergilius Maro was a propagandist in the employ of the Emperor Augustus' pederastic and possibly pathic minister of culture Maecenas, to whose circle he introduced the bisexual lyric poet **Horace**. Vergil created the *Aeneid* as a Latin epic to correspond, the first half to the *Odyssey*, the second half to the *Iliad* of **Homer**, tracing the descent of the Romans from the Trojan hero Aeneas and the fusion of Trojans and Latins into a single commonwealth. The epic, which embodied the high ideals and heroic destiny of the Romans, became the basic text for the education of their upper-class boys. His poem avoided homoeroticism—except for the heroic lovers Nisus and Euryalus.

Influenced by **Catullus** and the Hellenistic poets, Vergil studied Epicurean philosophy at Naples. As a young man he composed *Eclogues* partly taken from the *Pastorals* by **Theocritus**. His *Georgics* were in some ways inspired by **Hesiod**, but actually more by **Callimachus** and other Alexandrians. Under the first **Roman emperors** the rush to imitate the cosmopolitanism of **Alexandria** and the **Hellenistic monarchies** helped make pederasty less unacceptable. Of weak constitution, unlike most Roman aristocrats who while teenagers married girls of 12 or 13 as arranged by their respective *patresfamilias*, Vergil was one of the few distinguished Romans never to marry. A biography composed in late antiquity described him unambiguously as a boy-lover. He sang of pederasty in the *Second Eclogue*, which treats the unrequited love

of the slave Corydon for their master's favorite, the shepherd Alexis. The old claim that he was merely parroting Hellenistic pederastic themes, which he did, sometimes closely, sometimes freely, to court favor with his patron Maecenas, is no longer believed to "explain away" his subject matter. Though all his bucolic verses have Greek characters and are often set in Sicily, Vergil infused Italian elements and personal touches into them.

Christians, who claimed with the Emperor Constantine at Nicaea in 325 that Vergil's fourth and sixth *Eclogues*, celebrating the birth of a son for Augustus, really was divinely inspired to foretell the birth of Jesus, have long striven to deny that he actually praised, much less practiced pederasty, hence the concoction of the literary convention that he only followed Greek models or the tale that he so wrote to please Maecenas. His description of the love of Corydon for Alexis furnished the title of **André Gide's** defense of homosexuality (1924). So if the pederastic theme occupied a minor place in his writing, Vergil remains one of the great homosexual figures of world literature, whose epic poem commemorated the historical destiny of Rome.

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William A. Percy

VERLAINE, PAUL (1844–1896)

French symbolist poet. Born in Metz, he published his first book of verse, *Poèmes saturniens*, in 1866. It belonged to the Parnassian reaction to Romanticism, embodying the virtues of classical order and clarity. A few of the poems, however, revealed that he was more suited to a