

Chapter 4

On the Sin Abhorred by Beasts: Sodomy aboard Early Modern Galleys

1 Criminals and immoral individuals: Cultural representations of early modern *galeotti*

The aim of assembling a crew of militarily disciplined and God-fearing oarsmen underpinned a whole series of measures designed to impose stricter controls over the *galeottis'* behavior and morals. However numerous and strict the edicts concerning the governance of the galleys and their crews may have been, the sources—both institutional and procedural—invariably depict convicts and galley slaves as individuals prone to a range of criminal and immoral actions—primarily escapes, fights, and murders, but also forgery, gambling, blasphemy, and sodomy. The image that emerges is one of a violent and undisciplined microcosm, whose members were incapable of self-correction and redemption. The severity of punishments for offenders, along with the abundance of regulations on this front, risks creating a distorted image of crime aboard the galleys, as it is not entirely clear whether these edicts simply reflect an increase in vigilance against behavior deemed dangerous, or whether they serve as a blatant symptom of how the rules were not effectively respected, while offenses continued to be numerous—if not actually increasing. It is necessary to interpret these sources from both perspectives.

From a methodological standpoint, Mario Sbriccoli's position against a purely quantitative reading of criminal sources stands out. Such an approach would rest on "the false assumption that judicial archives contain the history of crime, when in fact they only record that of criminal justice." This abundance of procedures concerning certain actions considered illegal at the time was, in fact, evidence not so much of the reality of that particular crime, but rather of a more thorough and vigilant social oversight. To quote an example given by Sbriccoli, if theft appears to increase during times of famine, this should be interpreted as an actual rise "not in the hunger of the thieves, but in the fear and therefore the vigilance of the owners."¹ We may not necessarily be experiencing a real increase in criminal activity, but rather a more intransigent attitude toward it. Sbriccoli, however, does not advocate abandoning the quantitative approach to studying crime, but instead

1 Sbriccoli, *Fonti giudiziarie*, p. 493.

recommends using it judiciously, bearing in mind that “trials deal with crime, but they reveal justice.”²

Furthermore, it is clear that whenever the authorities attempted to impose strict discipline, they were confronted with a highly complex and multifaceted reality made up of individuals who could not be subjected to a single rule and pattern of behavior. This is all the more evident when one considers that galley crews generally numbered around 300 men, and to think that it would have been possible to control every one of them effectively is surely utopian. Despite the cramped conditions, even the most vigilant observer would not have been able to keep a close watch on the entire crew, especially in contexts where attempts to extort and bribe officials—who pretended not to notice what was going on in return for the promise of profit—appear to have been quite common.³

Furthermore, despite the regulation requiring each rower to carefully observe whether his fellow oarsmen on the bench—as well as those in front and behind—were obeying orders, and to notify the galley’s officers if they were not, sources suggest that mutual observation and denunciation among rowers was surprisingly rare. Instead, rowers appeared to respond to each renewed attempt at control with alternative strategies in their bid to avoid the authorities’ gaze and maintain as much freedom as possible. A kind of tacit, mutual agreement seemed to prevail between slaves and convicts: they did not hesitate to bear false witness on behalf of themselves and their comrades to avoid punishment. Rather than fostering discipline, the increasing promulgation of regulations aimed at controlling and correcting slaves and convicts only served to marginalize them further from society, thereby consolidating the galleys’ reputation as a haven for criminal and blasphemous individuals, ironically undermining the very discipline they sought to enforce.

Sodomy is often cited as one of the most widespread offenses committed among rowers of the Tuscan and Papal galleys between the 16th and 18th centuries. While reports of such acts involving slaves and convicts date back to the early use of these laborers aboard, the issue came to be seen as increasingly severe over time. As a result, legal responses became progressively more stringent, with legislation designed not only to curb the practice but also to intensify its legal suppression. Despite earlier records of sodomy among inmates in the 16th century, it was not until the 18th century that authorities officially acknowledged the phenomenon, potentially giving rise to the mistaken belief that it was a relatively recent problem.

² Ibid., p. 494 f.

³ Santus, “*Il turco*,” p. 126 f.

This raises the question of whether the increasing frequency of edicts and the heightened legal action against sodomy indicate a genuine rise in the practice, or whether they signal a shift in societal attitudes—where the imperative to publicly denounce and suppress the offense became more pressing than its concealment. The latter interpretation is more convincing, since the archival records frequently feature complaints of this practice even in the earliest years of the navies' existence.

The examination of these sources also invites reflection on the apparent paradox surrounding the treatment of sodomy, a crime that was both socially and religiously condemned, yet did not seem to provoke significant alarm aboard the galleys. More specifically, it prompts an analysis of the ambivalence in the authorities' stance toward sodomy among rowers. While it was officially recognized as a grave offense that needed eradication, in practice, limited efforts were made to suppress it unless it was connected to issues that threatened to destabilize the internal dynamics and operations aboard the galleys. A striking example of this can be seen in cases where the *mozzi* and *aguzzini*, who were tasked with monitoring and disciplining rowers, themselves faced accusations of sodomy.

The study of the representation and suppression of sodomy aboard galleys offers valuable insights into the broader debate surrounding a supposed paradigm shift in attitudes toward the practice during the 18th century. While the intellectual currents of the Enlightenment did not acknowledge the sexual identity of those labeled as "sodomites," nor eliminate the social condemnation of sodomy as unnatural, it nonetheless marked a critical juncture in the discourse. Enlightenment thinkers called for the decriminalization of sodomy, particularly from an anti-Catholic perspective. However, the 18th century also saw the emergence of a new consciousness regarding identity and gender among those engaged in same-sex relations, leading to the formation of distinct communities of individuals who identified as "homosexuals" due to their shared attraction to persons of the same sex.⁴

Such a shift in self-identification and gender awareness provoked a reaction from political authorities, who began to devote greater resources to isolating and

4 Grassi, *Sodoma*, p. 21; Davidson, *L'emergenza della sessualità*, pp. 48–51. In the early modern period, the term "sodomite" referred to an individual act—that of "sodomy"—rather than to a particular group, and it carried with it the notion of sin. In contrast, the category of "homosexual" only emerged in the late 19th century to define a member of a specific group who identified with same-sex love relationships, not necessarily with particular acts. According to this theory, the concept of homosexuality as a "perversion" arose from a new understanding of illness linked to the emergence of modern psychiatry. The sodomite was a moral and legal category, whereas the homosexual became a pervert and a patient.

controlling these individuals, while punishing them more discreetly than in the past.⁵ Although the naval authorities only took an interest in the “act” of sodomy—and not in the convicts’ alleged homosexual inclinations—one can nevertheless notice a greater concern and willingness to curb and to find a solution to the problem posed by sodomy, viewed both as a vice and a crime.

It is noteworthy that even in the earliest sources, the fact that the *galeotti* indulged in sodomy is not described with any degree of surprise. On the contrary, the notion that galley convicts and slaves practiced sodomy is presented as almost self-evident—not due to assumptions about their effeminacy, but rather because they were perceived as inherently criminal and amoral individuals, relegated to the margins of society—if not entirely outside it—by virtue of their actions, inclinations, or even their religious beliefs. These beliefs, particularly Islam—the faith to which the majority of slaves adhered—were often viewed as predisposing factors and frequently associated with sodomitic vice.

The idea of inherent “inclinations” toward sodomy can be traced in early modern thought—though not in terms of gender identity or sexual orientation as understood today. Instead, such inclinations were viewed as moral or behavioral tendencies—believed to stem from criminality or immorality—either seen as innate or acquired over time through exposure to corrupting influences. As Marina Baldassarri observed, in early modern Rome, sodomy was often regarded as a consequence of marginalization, violence, and deviant behavior. It was also widely believed that many individuals who engaged in sodomy had themselves been victimized in their youth, leading them to internalize the practice as a habitual part of their identity. This cycle of victimization and normalization contributed to the formation of a true *habitus*—an ingrained disposition toward the act.⁶

While the available sources on sodomite *galeotti* appear to confirm the “acts paradigm”—according to which the concept of sexual deviance prior to the modern era applied only to acts and not to persons or identities⁷—Umberto Grassi reminds us that the sources ultimately reveal only that “it was the judges who were obsessed with acts.”⁸ It is important to bear in mind that, in these circumstances, the naval authorities were dealing with individuals already deprived of their liberty. Trials were not intended to determine the moral or legal status of the acts themselves, but rather to decide whether punitive measures should be imposed,

⁵ Ibid., p. 161.

⁶ See, Baldassarri, *Bande Giovanili*. This was also an accepted theory on the medical level. Some critiques on this reductive position have been advanced by Scaramella, *Un doge infame*; Lagioia, *Passione Amorosa*.

⁷ Halperin, *History of Homosexuality*, p. 29.

⁸ Grassi, *L'offizio*, p. 26.

primarily to set an example for the rest of the crew. The authorities' overriding concern was not driven by a moral or ideological imperative but by the need to prevent and punish any form of promiscuity aboard so as to maintain the strict military discipline essential to the success of seafaring operations.

Throughout the early modern period, sodomy was condemned both as a crime and as a sin, with its denunciation deeply rooted in cultural, legal, and religious discourses and representations. This moral and legal framework created a theoretical gap in early modern medicine concerning the topic of sodomy, which was often deemed too vile and shameful to be addressed in medical discourse. However, contrary to traditional historiography, it is possible to argue that a form of "medicalization" of sodomy existed even before the 19th century. While the theoretical connection between medicine and sodomy appeared tenuous, in practice, the expertise of doctors was frequently sought during sodomy trials. In fact, sodomy between men⁹ had to be "perfect" to be considered punishable—that is, involving anal penetration.¹⁰ In many cases where the accused denied the act, it became necessary to conduct a meticulous physical examination to identify tangible signs of sexual intercourse, such as the presence of hernias, which were then thought to indicate penetration. Unsurprisingly, the only individuals equipped with the knowledge and skill-set to perform such examinations were doctors. That said, in many cities, doctors were legally required to report any signs of illicit sexual activity discovered while examining their patients¹¹—a responsibility that extended to those aboard the galleys as well.

Medical examinations in sodomy cases reveal another layer of complexity in the doctor-patient relationship, marked by inherent ambiguity. Indeed, the sources often depict a dynamic in which the doctor and the accused engage in a kind of rivalry. Eager to avoid admitting guilt, the accused would frequently deny the findings of the medical examination, offering inventive—if often implausible—excuses. Beyond the dissimulation of sexual practices, language itself played a key role in obscuring the truth. In this context, medical expertise was crucial to uncovering the facts and ensuring that such deceptions did not go unchallenged.

⁹ It is important to note that in the early modern period the definition of sodomy also encompassed anal intercourse between a man and a woman, masturbation, and sexual acts with animals.

¹⁰ This was penetration performed in an illicit vessel (*penetrazione in vaso indebito*).

¹¹ The first city which envisaged this type of measure was Venice in 1453. Canosa, *Grande paura*, pp. 107–115.

2 Sodomy and its condemnation in the early modern period

In spite of the numerous and profound attempts to impose discipline among rowers, early modern Italian galleys remained highly undisciplined spaces. The control exerted over convicts and galley slaves targeted not only their physical labor but also their behavior. Alongside discipline aimed at improving technical prowess, there were also efforts to regulate their moral conduct. This explains the critical role played by shipboard chaplains, who, alongside the naval authorities, were tasked with supervising both the slaves and convicts. Despite all the attention to the rowers' behavior, any infractions and disturbances that occurred were often described as regular occurrences. Among the most widespread disturbances, one in particular seems to have caused great concern for the galley chaplains: sodomy. While often concealed at an institutional level, only much later did it become a specific subject for regulation.

The frequency with which sodomy was practiced among galley convicts and slaves did not surprise the authorities. Throughout the early modern period, the “nefarious vice” was condemned not merely as a manifestation of effeminacy, but as an extreme expression of a violent and immoral nature—one that, in fact, led its perpetrators to reject every value on which society was based. Drawing on arguments from the Old Testament, as well as from St. Paul (4–64) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), it was argued that, in God's natural order sexual desire should be solely directed toward reproducing the human species, and that, therefore, any such act not intended for procreation was a violation of God's plan.¹² Sex against nature became the symbol for rebellion against God's Divine Will, which, in turn, led to the attribution of “demonic” characteristics to sodomites.¹³ Indeed, it was considered not only to be contrary to the natural order of creation [*peccatum*], but also contrary to the social and ethical order on which the civil community was based [*crimen*].¹⁴

2.1 Sodomy as a sin against nature

The term “sodomy,” coined in the Middle Ages, carried deeply religious connotations due to its biblical origin. Sodom was, in fact, one of the five cities of the Pentapolis in Canaan, which—according to an account in the Book of Genesis—

¹² Lavenia, *Un'eresia indicibile*, pp. 8–11.

¹³ Grassi/Marcocci, *Le trasgressioni della carne*, p. 12.

¹⁴ See Grassi, *Sodoma*, pp. 53–55.

was destroyed by God, along with the city of Gomorrah, to punish its inhabitants for sexual transgressions. However, the homoerotic interpretation of the Genesis account seems to have emerged later, as the biblical episode never explicitly refers to homosexual rape.

Genesis 19 (1–25) does not explicitly mention the practice of homoerotic intercourse by the inhabitants of Sodom. Rather, it recounts the arrival of two angels at the city gates at nightfall, where they encountered Lot, who insisted on offering them shelter overnight in his dwelling. When it was time to retire for the night, Lot's house was surrounded by the people of the city. They demanded to see the strangers, as they wished to "abuse" them. Lot offered his daughters in exchange, but the Sodomites attacked him, prompting the angels to intervene, rescue Lot, and urge him to flee the city, which, having incurred the wrath of God, was destroyed by a rain of fire and brimstone.¹⁵

Up until the first centuries of the Christian era, the scourge of Sodom and Gomorrah was attributed to the violation of the obligations of hospitality and assistance to foreigners and travelers, and to the duty to protect the poor.¹⁶ Later reinterpretations shifted the focus from social transgression to sexual ones. The first explicitly homosexual reading of this biblical passage came relatively late, and is thought to date back to the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (c. 25–50).¹⁷ The idea that the sins of the inhabitants of Sodom were attributable to sexual activity, and in particular the idea that divine punishment by fire and brimstone was intended for the sins of the flesh [*sclera carnis*], was not officially accepted until Gregory the Great (540–604).¹⁸

Despite the absence of a direct condemnation of sodomy in Scripture, the anti-homosexual reinterpretation of the myth of Sodom and Gomorrah gained increasing traction, and was reinforced by the Church Fathers, who generally held a markedly negative view of sexuality. Libido—framed within the legacy of concupiscence—was conceived as a disordered and destructive force. Within this framework, it was not merely beyond the control of the will, but was indicative of a fallen nature, and thus came to be associated with what lay outside the bounds of rational self-mastery. Accordingly, its renunciation was interpreted as an expression of spir-

15 As stated in Boswell, *Christianity*, p. 94: "In only ten of its 943 occurrences in the Old Testament does it [sodomy] have the sense of carnal knowledge."

16 Boswell, *Christianity*, pp. 94–97.

17 Lv 18:22 "cum masculino non commisceberis coitu femineo, quia abomination est, cum omni pecore non coibis;" 20:13 "qui dormierit cum masculino coitu femineo uterque operati sunt nefas, morte moriantur."

18 D'Angelo, *Liber gomorrhianus*, p. 42.

itual strength and moral freedom.¹⁹ Although Jesus does not explicitly condemn homosexuality in any passage of the New Testament, it is nevertheless there that we encounter the first reference to homoerotic relationships as acts “against nature,” in the extended invective against the pagans contained in Paul of Tarsus’ Epistle to the Romans.²⁰ In Romans 1:26–27,²¹ one might read an explicit condemnation of sodomy in the censure of Roman sexual practices, which were linked with idolatry, and which St. Paul associated with pagan orgiastic rites in honor of false deities.²² Similarly, two words from the Letters of St. Paul to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians: 6:9),²³ and from St. Paul to Timothy (1 Timothy 1:9–10),²⁴ have been interpreted since the twelfth century as clear indications of a condemnation which would result in the exclusion of “men who lie with males” [*masculorum concubitores*] from paradise.²⁵ For St. Paul, sex against nature was not a cause of divine punishment, but rather evidence of it: the visible consequences of a moral and spiritual disorder rooted in idolatry. Modern scholarship has revisited these interpretations to challenge long-standing assumptions. Moreover, as John Boswell argued in his seminal work *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (1980),²⁶ St. Paul did not appear to condemn homoeroticism *per se*; rather, he sought to protect young males from the pederastic practices typical of Greco-Roman society.²⁷

Boswell identified and categorized the core accusations against homosexuality made by the Church Fathers. First, the accusation of “bestiality,” which finds its clearest expression in the Epistles of Barnabas (70–132). Although now considered apocryphal, these epistles—included in the *Codex Sinaiticus*, one of the most renowned manuscript copies of the Bible—were accepted as Scripture

19 Grassi, *Sodoma*, p. 29.

20 Ibid., p. 25.

21 “propterea tradidit illos Deus in passiones ignominiae nam feminae eorum inmutaverunt naturalem usum in eum usum qui est contra naturam “similiter autem et masculi relicto naturali usu feminae exarserunt in desideriis suis in invicem masculi in masculos turpitudinem operantes et mercedem quam oportuit erroris sui in semet ipsis recipientes.”

22 “nam feminae eorum inmutaverunt naturalem usum in eum usum, qui est contra naturam. Similiter autem et masculi relicto naturali usu feminae exarserunt in desideriis suis invicem, masculi in masculos turpitudinem operantes et mercedem, quam oportuit, erroris sui in semetipsos recipientes.”

23 “iniqui regnum Dei non possidebunt [...] neque molles neque masculorum concubitores.”

24 “sciens hoc quia iusto lex non est posita sed iniustus [...] scleratis et contaminates paricidis et matricidis homicidis fornicariis masculorum concubitoribus.”

25 Boswell, *Christianity*, p. 106 f.

26 Although outdated, John Boswell’s thesis still represents a starting point for the study and reflection of sodomy during antiquity and the early modern period. See Kefler, *The Boswell Thesis*.

27 Benigno/Lavenia, *Peccato o crimine*, pp. 100–103.

during the early centuries of Christianity and influenced the writings of many prominent Church Fathers for generations. This symbolic linking of animal traits with sexually illicit conduct found echoes in classical natural history.” Referring to notions widely accepted in the ancient world and found in works such as Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia* (ca. 77–78), the author justified Moses’ ban on eating the flesh of certain animals by linking them to various sexual sins.²⁸ The hyena, for example, was believed to be able to change sex and, like the hare or the weasel, was obsessed with sexual intercourse. Over time, these animals became metaphors for homosexuality, and Moses’ prohibition against consuming them came to be interpreted as a covert condemnation of homoerotic relationships. The influence of the Epistles of Barnabas is evident in Clement of Alexandria’s *Paedagogus* (c. 150), a manual for Christian parents, in which the author advocated for the “Alexandrian rule” according to which, in order to be moral, sexual relations had to be directed solely and exclusively toward procreation.²⁹

Similarly, in the medieval *Physiologus* (2nd–3rd centuries A.D.) a text of anonymous authorship—commonly known as the “bestiary”—comparable condemnations can be found; likewise, Bernard of Cluny in the 12th century denounced men engaging in homosexual relations by likening them to hyenas.³⁰ Notably, the belief that the hyena was capable of switching gender was also accepted by pre-modern medicine, due to the particularly developed clitoris in females of the species which often gave rise to confusion in distinguishing between the sexes. In fact, “the enlarged clitoris, through which she urinates, copulates, and gives birth, resembles a penis due to pseudo-phallic erections; the labia are shaped much like testicles.”³¹ As early as the Middle Ages, the hyena had become a symbol of hermaphroditism and of sexual mores devoid of fixed gender roles, and was therefore perceived as a sign of deviation from the natural order of creation.³²

Alongside accusations of bestiality, homosexuality was also associated with other reprehensible behaviors—such as the tendency to molest children, and even more gravely, paganism.³³ Homoerotic relations thus became a symbol and a distinguishing mark of barbarians and heretics who, by rejecting the sacred Word of God, also defied it in their conduct, thereby violating the nature of the di-

²⁸ Boswell, *Christianity*, pp. 137–139.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 141–145.

³¹ In this regard, please refer to Zuccolin, *Hyena*, p. 672.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ Boswell, *Christianity*, pp. 143–145.

vine plan.³⁴ The theological weight of these condemnations was further solidified in the works of influential early Church thinkers. In this regard, St. Augustine's (354–436) reflection on the “Nature of Good” is central. As Boswell noted, the expression “against nature” can be misleading, since the idea of “nature” as a universal law or metaphysical truth was largely absent at the time. The term appears, rather, to refer to the character—the personal nature—of the individuals in question—to the innate disposition of human beings in the sense of what was “natural” to them.³⁵ Consequently, whenever St. Augustine employed the term “nature,” he was not referring to an abstract ideal or metaphysical category, but rather to the intrinsic and “normal” characteristics of the human species. His condemnation of sodomy was seen not as a crime against an abstract law of nature, but as a distortion of human nature itself, which God had created for the purpose of procreation—not for homoerotic intercourse.³⁶

St. Augustine, who had accepted the hypothesis linking male homosexual relations with the sin of the sodomites in *De Civitate Dei* (413–426), explicitly condemned sodomy as being against nature in his *Confessiones* (398), arguing that “when the nature created by God was violated by such perversity, it was the very union between God and man that was compromised.” Given that the telos of human nature is procreation, St. Augustine also condemned as shameful any kind of sexual act not directed toward that end, and in such cases advocated abstinence—even between spouses—as the preferable option. Lust, according to St. Augustine, was the first consequence of Original Sin and thus became symbol of human decadence. Had Adam and Eve not succumbed to the serpent's temptation, they would have enjoyed sexual pleasure, aimed purely at procreation, and the penis would have been subject to human will like any other limb. Instead, Original Sin irretrievably corrupted sex, which, now totally driven by desire, became the symbol of everything contrary to reason. Accordingly, all sexual intercourse not directed at procreation was to be condemned, and sodomy, which was not only stemming solely from sexual pleasure but also involved a reversal of gender roles, with men assuming the role of women—deserved the harshest condemnation.³⁷

Despite this early condemnation by the Church Fathers, up until the eleventh century, controlling sodomy did not seem to be a particularly pressing issue on the political agendas of ecclesiastical and secular institutions. The social and political

³⁴ The association between sodomy and heresy—and, in particular, between sodomy and the Muslim faith—will be discussed in more detail in the following pages.

³⁵ Boswell, *Christianity*, p. 110 f.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 150–152.

³⁷ Grassi, *Sodoma*, p. 29–31.

changes over the following centuries, however, radically altered this situation. A key manifestation of the shift in the Roman Church's attitude toward sodomy occurred at the Council of London of 1102, when it was officially defined as a sin for the first time, equated with fornication, and pederasty.³⁸ At the Third Lateran Council in 1179, Canon XI introduced legal provisions to defrock any cleric found guilty of sodomy, while also prescribing excommunication and banishment for laymen. These provisions were later included in the *Decretales* of Pope Gregory IX (r. 1227–1241), which, in turn, became part of the *Corpus Iuris Canonici*.³⁹

The scholastic period would take these theological foundations and codify them into a coherent moral framework. The Catholic Church's condemnation of sodomy as an act "against nature" was enshrined and systematized in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). In *Summa Theologica*, a veritable systematization of Christian doctrine, Aquinas asserted that God had directly communicated—and made discernible in the human mind—the law of nature, which, put simply, was "the participation of rational creatures in the eternal divine law." According to the Thomistic conception, sin constituted an unnatural deviation that distanced mankind from God and reduced the human condition to a level closer to that of beasts. Sins against nature are analyzed in the *Summa* in the section on lust, specifically in Articles XI and XII of *quaestio* 154 of the *Secunda secundae*. These vices were denounced as especially grave—not only contrary to reason and nature but also contrary to God—and were considered more serious than sacrilege, since the order of nature even precedes Christian revelation.⁴⁰

In redefining sexual behavior from a theological standpoint, Aquinas distinguished *fornicatio*, a less grievous sin, from *abominatio*, which he identified as a true act against nature and the most serious form of lust. Aquinas listed several sexual behaviors that fell under the category of "against nature," presented in increasing order of gravity: *immunditia* or *mollities*, associated with masturbation; *bestialitas*, sexual intercourse with non-human creatures; *sodomia*, same-sex acts, male and female; and more broadly all forms of sexual intercourse considered unnatural, especially anal intercourse [*in vaso indebito*].⁴¹ As several historians have noted, it is significant that, within the Thomistic framework, sodomy and "sin against nature" were not synonymous; the former was merely a subcategory of the latter.⁴² In any case, Aquinas classified such acts as sins against the Sixth Commandment—"Thou shalt not commit adultery"—though with partic-

³⁸ Baldassarri, *Bande giovanili*, p. 109.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Lavenia, *Eresia indicibile*, p. 14.

⁴¹ Canosa, *Grande paura*, p. 18.

⁴² Grassi, *Sodoma*, p. 51f.

ular gravity, due to what Aquinas referred to as *specialis ratio deformitatis*, that is, a specific reason for the act's deformity which rendered the venereal act especially indecent. Moreover, sodomy was also seen to contravene the First Commandment—"I, the Lord, am your God. Thou shalt not have other gods besides me"—insofar as it not only offended God but also implied a fundamental "error" in judgment.⁴³

2.2 Sodomy as a crime against nature

From the twelfth century onward—and even more markedly with the development of inquisitorial justice in the thirteenth century—the assimilation of religious and social deviance, including sexual deviance, became increasingly pronounced. As Pope Lucius III (r. 1181–1185) declared in his decretal *Ad abolendam*, issued in 1184, the Church's task was to define heresy, while it was the secular authorities' duty to eradicate it. This principle was later confirmed by a decretal of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), which obliged secular authorities to expel heretics from their territories.⁴⁴ Sodomy, already condemned as a sin, soon came to be prosecuted as a political crime, assuming the characteristics of *lèse-majesté*, and was thus considered a threat to the security of the state.⁴⁵ As a result, political authorities were compelled to react, seeking ways to eliminate the sodomitic vice from their cities, both to preserve social order and to avoid incurring divine wrath.

This intertwining of the moral and criminal spheres was fully justified by the legal system's increasing tendency—already evident in the Middle Ages but reaching its apogee in the 16th century—to politicize even religious or moral transgressions. Behaviors traditionally defined as sins became political offenses, ceasing to be matters of private conscience and instead assuming the status of public concern. The result was a blurring of boundaries between crime and sin, and the emergence of the belief that criminality and immorality were necessarily perceived as two sides of the same coin.⁴⁶ With the rise of the Inquisition, the distinction between sin and crime became increasingly fluid, and any transgression could thus potentially be reclassified as a crime—an expression of disobedience to constituted authority.⁴⁷ The classification of sodomy and blasphemy as political

⁴³ Lavenia, *Sessualità, islamofobia*, p. 105f.

⁴⁴ Grassi, *Sodoma*, p. 53f.

⁴⁵ Grassi, *L'offizio*, p. 181f.

⁴⁶ Sbriccoli, *Crimen laesae maiestatis*.

⁴⁷ Prodi, *Storia giustizia*, pp. 93–97.

crimes led to both sins being treated as conscious, subversive acts of defiance against the moral values underpinning social coexistence. As such, they came to be regarded as acts of grave insubordination, undermining the moral values and sovereign authority upon which social order depended.⁴⁸ Consequently, justice could not tolerate either blasphemy or the outright denial of God, and was compelled to respond in an intransigent manner.⁴⁹ As Paolo Prodi observed, traditional sins were increasingly publicly punished by sanctions, as “civil religion” came to be a key factor in fostering social cohesion throughout these centuries.⁵⁰

Recognizing the social order as a reflection of the natural order—which, in turn, mirrors a higher divine order—the imposition of what Sbriccoli termed a “liturgy of obedience” became essential for maintaining the prevailing hierarchy.⁵¹ This order was not merely political or social, but moral, natural, and therefore cosmic. Anyone who contravened it committed a mortal sin against the very structure of creation. Non-conformity thereby took on a political dimension, and warranted both earthly and heavenly punishment—social and moral sanctions alike.⁵² The gravity of such deviation was understood as a disruption of the prevailing social order, upon which all rules, roles, and hierarchies rested.⁵³ Transgressions related to the sexual sphere were considered particularly dangerous, as they undermined not only the principles of Christian morality but also the very pillars of societal stability. For this reason, no leniency could be granted: suppression and punishment had to be swift and rigorous. Condemning these crimes became a civic moral duty, as it was in the public interest that any offense against the social order be met with unequivocal retribution.⁵⁴

The criminalization, suppression, and punishment of sodomy, even on a political and legal level—though it reached its peak in the early modern period—had very ancient origins. As early as *Leviticus*, the prescribed punishment for sodomites was death.⁵⁵ Reflections on the criminal nature of sodomy became increasingly profound and precise over the centuries. A case in point: in the latter half of the 12th century, the French theologian Peter Cantor equated sodomy with murder in a chapter of his work *Verbum Abbreviatum* [The Abridged Word], dedicated to the sodomitic vice [*vitium sodomiticum*]. Since God had created man and woman

48 Sbriccoli, *Crimen laesae majestatis*.

49 Grassi, *L'offizio*, pp. 181–184.

50 Prodi, *Storia giustizia*, p. 170.

51 Sbriccoli, *Crimen laesae majestatis*, pp. 117–127.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 102f.

53 Prodi, *Storia giustizia*, p. 292.

54 *Ibid.*, pp. 133–135.

55 Boswell, *Christianity*, pp. 101–103.

for the purpose of procreation, both the murderer and the sodomite were perceived as guilty of destroying humankind—the former by killing, and the latter by failing to procreate.⁵⁶

Similarly, from the late 13th century onward, sodomy was classified as an “atrocious crime” [*enorme delictum*] on a par with murder, repeated theft, and counterfeiting, and was therefore subject to corporal punishment⁵⁷ as evidenced in the Code of Alfonso X, issued in 1255, though only enforced in the 14th century. Criminalization also occurred in France: the *Livres de Jostice et Plet* (also known as the *ancienne coutume d’Orléans*, circa 1260), and the *coutumes de Beauvaisis*, compiled by the jurist Philippe de Beaumanoir in 1285, both prescribed corporal punishment for sodomites. The *Livres de Jostice et Plet* imposed castration for the first offense, amputation of the penis for the second, and burning at the stake for the third.⁵⁸ By the late 13th century, almost all European legislative codes contained specific laws and provisions targeting sodomy,⁵⁹ reflecting a broader consensus around its legal and moral condemnation.

The perceived gravity and impiety of sodomy is also reflected in the etymology of another term commonly used to refer to the *vizio nefando* [nefarious vice]. Alongside its classification as a sin or a crime, sodomy was regarded as so abhorrent and detestable that it could not—indeed, should not—even be named. The term “nefarious” derives from the Latin *nefandus*, composed of the prefix *ne* and the suffix *fandus*, meaning “that which must not be spoken.”⁶⁰ It denoted an act so vile that it defied description.⁶¹

By the 14th century, the Latin term had been adapted into Italian and used to describe not only sexual relations between men but, more broadly, to denote all acts considered “against nature.” This encompassed “any kind of libidinous coitus either with an improper person or in an improper orifice.”⁶² Despite this generality, the term typically referred to male same-sex relationships. Indeed, sodomy

⁵⁶ Canosa, *Grande paura*, p. 15f.

⁵⁷ Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, p. 20.

⁵⁸ Canosa, *Grande paura*, p. 19.

⁵⁹ Grassi, *Sodoma*, p. 54.

⁶⁰ *Fandus* is the gerundive of *fari*, meaning “to speak with solemnity.” In Latin grammar, the gerundive is a verbal adjective expressing obligation or necessity, typically with a passive force and found in both active and deponent transitive verbs. Often called a “participle of necessity,” it conveys an action that must be done—an imperative here explicitly negated by the prefix *ne*, thus rendering *nefandus* as “that which must not be spoken.”

⁶¹ Alfieri, *Il discorso su tribadi e sodomiti*, p. 21.

⁶² Cattaneo, “Vizio nefando,” p. 57: “coitus libidinosus vel cum persona indebita vel in vaso indebito.”

in medieval and early modern discourse encompassed a wide spectrum of non-reproductive sexual acts, including anal intercourse between men, between men and women, masturbation, pederasty, and even bestiality—all of which were viewed as transgressions against the natural order and thus subject to moral and legal condemnation.

It is notable, as many historians since the late 1970s have observed, that the severity of anti-sodomy legislation was not always matched by comparable levels of rigor in its enforcement, which was often relatively moderate. This leniency might have taken the form of severe but infrequent penalties, or conversely, of more frequent condemnations tempered by relatively mild sentences.⁶³ Several explanations have been advanced for this apparent discrepancy. The most widely accepted among historians is that the authorities sought to keep the extent of sodomy's spread in a given area hidden from public view, primarily for reasons of decorum and to preserve a city's good reputation, as appears to have been the case in the Papal States. In other contexts, such as Florence and its territories, this more tempered approach may have functioned as a pragmatic strategy aimed not at the outright suppression of the nefarious vice, but at its containment.

3 Moral order and sodomy: sexual transgressions among early modern *galeotti*

It is, therefore, not surprising that early modern *galeotti*, who were forced to row either because of past crimes or because they were slaves belonging to a heretic religion, would engage in illicit sexual relations. The immoral acts they committed were seen as a further expression and confirmation of their inherently perverse and evil nature. Nor should we forget the persuasiveness of the, albeit reductive, “plumbing thesis,” which—if the sources are to be believed—enjoyed considerable traction at that time. According to that view, the marked incidence of sodomy in highly rationalized and supervised all-male segregated settings, such as prisons, galleys, and the army, inhibited heterosexual impulses and redirected them toward homosexuality.⁶⁴ Forced into all-male environments, the *galeotti*, and more broadly those working aboard ships, practiced sodomy regularly, and according to precise, codified patterns.⁶⁵

⁶³ To cite some works: Courouve, *La répression*; Lever, *Les bûchers*. Similar conclusions can be derived from the data collected in Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*; Grassi, *L'Offizio*, Baldassarri, *Bande giovanili*.

⁶⁴ Rowson, *Omoerotismo*, p. 50.

⁶⁵ Burg, *Pirati e sodomia*, p. 214; Calcagno, “Brutale libidine,” p. 176.

Whatever the reasons the *galeotti* practiced sodomy, what concerns us here is the fact that they did so and that they usually managed to evade the strict control systems in place at sea, aboard the galleys, and ashore—in hospitals or within the *Bagno* compound. In response to continued concerns, from the 18th century onward, the naval authorities began to envisage stricter oversight and more intransigent measures of repression. The 18th century thus represents a juncture in terms of the control and suppression of irregular sexual mores among rowers. The mounting severity of the punishments meted out and, more generally, the proliferation of sources on the subject—especially procedural ones—should not lead us to believe that sodomy was an absolute novelty; quite the contrary. The extant sources on sodomy aboard the galleys must be analyzed as evidence of a heightened vigilance toward this practice, and simultaneously as a symptom of a persistent disregard for the rules already in force, and perhaps, of an ever-increasing number of violations.

3.1 Vice and vigilance: sodomy and social control in the Tuscan maritime state

Florence's reputation as a "sodomite city" was already well established throughout Europe in the 14th century—so much so that the popular German term for "sodomite" was *Florenzer*, and the verb *florenzen* meant to "sodomize."⁶⁶ This stereotype was confirmed by an innumerable series of testimonies, not only from foreign authors but also—and more tellingly—from Italians themselves. For example, the Bolognese chronicler Matteo de' Griffoni attributed the cause of the Arno's flooding in October 1333 to the divine wrath provoked by the spread of the vice in Florence.⁶⁷ Similarly, in 1376, Pope Gregory XI, in his denunciation of usury and sodomy—named them as two of the characteristic sins of Florentines.⁶⁸

As already anticipated in Chapter 2, aboard the galleys of the Medicean fleet, sodomites accounted for only 1.1% of those condemned to life at the oars, despite the fact that this offense was the first crime ever punished with a galley sentence in Tuscany. This can be explained both by the restriction of such criminal sentences to repeat offenders and by the relatively limited number of surviving trial records—due largely to the difficulty of prosecuting such cases.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Canosa, *Grande paura*, p. 24.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, p. 3.

⁶⁹ Lo Basso, *Uomini da remo*, table p. 341.

As with the Papal galleys during the same period, the directives governing the Medici fleet included no explicit provisions to prevent illicit acts of this nature—with only a few rare exceptions. This omission should not be read as evidence of the crime's absence, but rather a deliberate effort to keep it hidden. To acknowledge the existence of such practices would have constituted a serious scandal—not only for the perpetrators themselves but also for the crew as a whole and, above all, for the authorities under whose jurisdiction the vessels operated. Furthermore, to publicize the fact that such acts were widespread would have only exacerbated the stereotype of Tuscany as a land of depravity. Multiple documents attest that the authorities explicitly sought to punish sexual misconduct “without publicity and solemnity,” shielding proceedings from the indiscreet gaze of the populace.⁷⁰ The decision not to prosecute sodomy may also have been motivated by a pragmatic concern: to avoid the loss of oarsmen vital to the fleet's operation. After all, though it was deemed an abominable practice, if practiced discreetly, it caused minimal disruption to navigation; it is therefore plausible that the authorities chose to turn a blind eye to such conduct aboard.

The earliest reference I have found to such behavior aboard Tuscan galleys appears in the instructions issued in 1590 by Francesco da Montauto, Knight of St Stephen and General of the Galleys. These directives prescribed life sentences at the oar for convicts and two years' imprisonment for any knights of the Order caught engaging in illicit sexual acts.⁷¹ While it is impossible to determine why de Montauto took this extra precaution, certain assumptions can be ventured. Reading the instruction's *incipit* reveals that the fleet was about to set sail for Sicily and that de Montauto had agreed to allow Don Diego Enríquez de Guzmán, Count of Alvaldeliste—who had previously served as Viceroy of Sicily—⁷² to travel aboard one of his galleys.⁷³ Could it be that the presence of this illustrious guest compelled the General to exert stricter control over the crew's behavior, with the dual aim of not inconveniencing his distinguished passenger and, at the same time, of preventing his own name from being tarnished by reports of a failure to maintain discipline? It strikes me as a rather plausible hypothesis. As has already been argued, there was an awareness that they were dealing with slaves

⁷⁰ See for example ASF, MP, 2109, cc.n.n.: “purchè ciò segue di notte e senza pubblicità.”

⁷¹ ASF, MP, 2131, dossier 3, c. 31r.

⁷² Alba De Liste (Alvaldeliste), Diego Enríquez de Guzmán conte di, in *Dizionario biografico Treccani*, consulted in May 2023.

⁷³ ASF, MP, 2131, dossier 3, c. 30r. The practice of embarking passengers on galleys was frequently documented. The captain made sure that guest passengers felt at ease and that crew members behaved appropriately.

and criminals “who are morally inclined, either through licentiousness or hardened habit, to live badly.”⁷⁴

Evidence of the vice within the *Bagno de' forzati* is comparatively more abundant. According to the aforementioned Father Filippo of Florence, the practice was encouraged not only by the general promiscuity prevailing within the compound—where slaves and convicts slept with each other without restriction—⁷⁵ but also by the guards who accepted bribes in exchange for their silence. While the *Bagno* operated under a regime of militaristic discipline, disturbances and violence remained commonplace. Significantly, even in this context, no specific measures were introduced in the early years to curtail such conduct. According to the instructions issued by the Captain of the *Bagno* in July 1609, the only preventative rules were that young prisoners should not leave their assigned quarters at night, and that neither prostitutes nor “suspicious” young men should be allowed to enter the building freely—since their very presence, it was feared, would arouse the inmates’ libido. Deprived of women on whom to satisfy their carnal desires, the inmates would inevitably turn their attention to these young men.⁷⁶

That these rules were poorly enforced—and that the *Bagno* authorities often permitted this state of affairs—is demonstrated by a 1648 investigation ordered by the Grand Duke. This inquiry followed accusations of corruption lodged by eleven slaves and three *buonavoglia* against the Captain of the *Bagno*, Marco Fabbroni, who, in turn, deflected the charges toward the Vice-Commissioner of the galleys and Scribe General, Francesco Pepi. To resolve the matter, Rector Domenico Puccini was dispatched to Livorno. Upon his arrival on 2 July, he issued a proclamation calling on all oarsmen and officers to testify regarding the conduct of the two ministers. The investigation concluded with the conviction of Captain Marco Fabroni, who was found to have orchestrated an elaborate system of bribery and violence, in which a significant portion of the income was derived from payments extorted from convicts and slaves in exchange for sexual access to young inmates.

It is notable that the prisoners who provided this testimony were all slaves: the first to speak was Romadà of Seit from Tunis, who carried out his reporting

⁷⁴ Ibid., dossier 6, *Ordini da osservarsi nelle Galere del sermo G. duca di Toscana*, c. n.n.: “i quali sono moralmente inclinati ò dalla Licentia, o dall’habito confermati à mal vivere.”

⁷⁵ Bernardi, *Relazione*, p. 17.

⁷⁶ ASF, MP, 2132, dossier 7, *Costituzione, et ordinazione dell’Offitio del Capitano del Bagno*, cc.n.n.: “capo XXII. Et sopra tutto proveda che li Giovani stiano nelle stanze assegnateli, se parimente di giorno, e più particolarmente la notte [...] capo XXIII. Non lasci entrare nel Bagno donne di partito, ne praticarci Giovani di sospetto, accio si rimedi all’inconvenienti, che ne succede.”

work with the utmost scrupulousness, denouncing all those involved without regard to their religion. This shows that—although systems of tacit agreement and forms of complicity certainly existed among the *galeotti* to evade official oversight—ultimately each man had to act in his own best interest, especially in a reality where brute pragmatism governed all conduct.⁷⁷

This state of affairs changed with the arrival of the Capuchins at the head of the *Bagno* and, in particular, following the establishment of the *vigilanti di Maria*. To eliminate the vice, the Capuchins sought to resolve the problem of promiscuity among the *galeotti* by introducing a rigorous system of denunciation and by preventing direct contact during sleep: wooden boxes—open at the front—were installed in the dormitories, within which each convict was required to sleep alone. Any slave or convict caught *in flagrante delicto* was publicly and severely punished: he would be pilloried and subjected to 50 or 100 lashes, depending on the gravity of his sexual misconduct.⁷⁸ To “arouse terror in the others,” and thus dissuade them from future transgressions, sodomites were also punished by having a “ring” affixed to their foot with the “iron sock.”⁷⁹

Tellingly, the sources documenting such acts within the *Bagno*—albeit initially limited—increased once the Capuchins took control. On one hand, this reflects the heightened vigilance regarding the *galeotti*’s behavior; on the other, it reveals that the system of intimidation introduced by the Capuchins did not fully eradicate the vice among inmates. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that numerous cases of sodomy were not voluntarily recorded or prosecuted, due to the authorities’ desire to keep such disorders as discreet as possible. However, just as riots and violence persisted, so, too, did sodomy.

As early as 1680, the *Bagno*’s *aguzzino* was instructed to segregate young rowers from the rest of the crew and to isolate them in a special section called the *Bagno de’ Giovani* [youth prison], in an effort to limit sodomy, which was believed to be incited by the mere presence of young men—reflecting the early modern association of this offense with pederastic paradigms. These precautions were not entirely effective, as sodomy could just as easily occur between two adult men.⁸⁰ Though less frequently documented, sodomy between young men also

77 ASF, MP, 2168, part 1. The episode has been analyzed in Santus, “*Il turco*,” pp. 127–130.

78 Bernardi, *Relazione*, pp. 33–37.

79 See, for example, ASF, MP, 2112, 2114, 2117 cc.n.n.

80 ASF, MP, 2099, c. 107r–v; ASF, MP, 2130, cc.n.n. Presumably, this was the section of the *Bagno* called Sant’Antonio. For the early modern period, criminal sources on sodomy show a clear predominance of male pederasty. This distortion is likely due to the violent nature of such acts, which were therefore prosecuted. Consensual same-sex relations are rarely recorded, and when

took place—as in 1681, when two young convicts caught having sexual intercourse were punished with 25 lashes every morning for a month.⁸¹ Nevertheless, in 1694, Father Ginepro complained that the *Bagno de' Giovani* was “a den of vice and turpitude.” To address this persistent problem, the internal layout of the *Bagno* was reconfigured: prisoners were to sleep alone, each confined to a wooden chest, open at the front.⁸²

There is evidence, however, of sodomy among galley rowers as late as the 18th century, and its frequency would appear to have increased. As in earlier periods, there are accounts of officers—and in particular, the leader of the *vigilanti di Maria*—who actively encouraged such behavior by promising to feign ignorance in exchange for a bribe.⁸³ In January 1715, for example, the *galeotti* denounced the guardian of the *Bagno* of Sant'Antonio, Bartolomeo Piovani, who was accused of offering the older rowers money to eat in other canteens, thereby allowing him to “*fare raddotto di gioventù*”—to concentrate all the young rowers in one place, presumably exposing them to potential abuse by older inmates.⁸⁴

Similarly, in 1719, the convict Giovan Francesco Sartori was removed from his quarters after being caught touching the “shameful parts” of another convict, Francesco Mancarelli.⁸⁵ Again in 1735, two slaves were beaten for being caught sodomizing each other.⁸⁶ There were also numerous cases of such behavior which were recorded but went unpunished. One example is that of a Jewish convict imprisoned in the *Bagno* for kidnapping, marrying, and impregnating a young Flemish girl under false pretenses: he posed as a Christian and then abandoned her. Although he had sodomized a young man in his tavern in 1719, he was not punished, as he was on friendly terms with the guards. It was for this reason that the Scribe bypassed regular channels and went directly to the Commissioner of the Galleys, insisting that the Jew be beaten and punished, as would have been the case for any other convict.⁸⁷

Again, in 1736, an appeal was made to the Commissioner of the Galleys to punish the slave Ali of Tripoli, who had been caught sodomizing a child. Although he

they are, it is often in a state of flagrancy. See, Benigno/Lavenia, *Peccato o crimine*; Scaramella, *Storia omosessualità*, p. 8 f.

⁸¹ ASF, MP, 2099, c. 293r.

⁸² ASF, MP, 2130, *Proposizioni del Pre Ginepro per la riordinazione, et aggiustamento del Bagno*, cc.n.n.

⁸³ ASF, MP, 2106, cc.n.n.

⁸⁴ ASF, MP, 2108, cc.n.n.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, cc.n.n.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, cc.n.n.

⁸⁷ ASF, MP, 2111, cc.n.n.

had previously worked in the Commissioner's household, and had been found guilty of lechery on several occasions, his transgressions had repeatedly gone unpunished. Officially, this was attributed to the poor reputation of his accusers; unofficially, it was widely understood to be due to the Commissioner's protection. The renewed demand for justice in this instance was likely due to the identity of Ali's most recent victim: a boy not yet seven years old, and the nephew of Corporal Leonardo Nardi.⁸⁸

Sometimes, the authorities resorted to medical expertise to obtain conclusive findings about the likelihood of sodomy. On 26 October 1697, a trial was held in which two slaves were accused of having sodomized a 23-year-old Flemish youth in exchange for money. The man was examined by a surgeon, who found that not only was his anus dilated and soft, but also that his shirt was also soiled with a substance resembling semen. Given that the same two slaves were accused of attempting to sodomize another 22-year-old boy two days later, the governor was asked to banish them.⁸⁹

The surgeon's opinion was again sought in 1699, when the slave Isuff Abdouman of Tripoli was accused of having sodomized a 17-year-old German boy. According to the plaintiff, the two had been caught in the bedroom of Abdouman's tavern, just as the slave was about to insert his penis into the naked boy's anus. However, as they had not been caught in the act, and only the suspicion of sodomy remained, the governor ordered that the boy be examined by a surgeon. According to the medical report, there was no physical signs from which it could be concluded that the penetration had occurred. As the slave's guilt could not be established, he was not punished. However, to prevent such cases from arising in the future, the governor issued an edict forbidding slaves from employing young Christians under the age of 25 as servants in their shops and taverns.⁹⁰

Another report dates from 1705 and was written by the surgeon Carlantonio Franceschini, who had been instructed to examine the slave Ali Buzzi Buzzi from Tripoli, accused of sodomy and sentenced to the chain. Extraordinarily, the report concerns the body of the active party rather than the passive one, and was requested by the Scribe of the Galleys, Vitolino Vitolini, with the aim of securing the suspect's acquittal—not his condemnation. The surgeon's statement is unambiguous: Buzzi could not have committed sodomy because his penis was almost entirely consumed by ulcers, thus rendering him incapable of copulation with either sex.⁹¹ While the specific disease afflicting the slave is not

⁸⁸ ASF, MP, 2117, cc.n.n.

⁸⁹ ASLi, Capitano poi Governatore poi Auditore Vicario, 1550–1808, b. 3086, trial n. 64, f. n.n.

⁹⁰ ASLi, Capitano poi Governatore poi Auditore Vicario, 1550–1808, b. 3088, trial n. 172, f. n.n.

⁹¹ ASF, MP, 2106, c.n.n.

identified in the source, it is plausible to assume it was syphilis. Corrosion of the penis and the nasal cartilage were hallmark symptoms of this venereal disease. Curiously, syphilis does not seem to have been widespread in the *Bagno*. Very few documented instances emerged from the sources I examined, and none involved convicts.⁹² As noted in 1724, the disease was more prevalent among the *buonavoglia*, owing to their greater freedom of movement.⁹³

Caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*, syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection that, left untreated, can detrimentally affect the entire body. The pathogen responsible for the disease, however, was unknown at the time, as was the fact that the genital organs of either sex could serve as vectors of infection. Syphilis was widely regarded as a disease specific to female genitalia, and particularly associated with women of ill repute—prostitutes.⁹⁴ With fewer opportunities to freely exit the *Bagno* and meet prostitutes, convicts were likely less exposed to the disease.

It is notable that no reference can be found to slaves with syphilis, despite procedural sources—such as trials held before the Governor's Court—demonstrating how frequent sexual intercourse was between Muslim slaves and Christian prostitutes. It is important to underscore that such encounters between a slave and a prostitute were not punished because they involved a relationship between an unfree man and a free woman, but rather because they constituted a relationship between a heretic man and a Christian woman.⁹⁵

While we now understand that syphilis can be transmitted through sexual contact, the explanation provided by the authorities at the time was internally coherent within their worldview. It was not so much the absence of sexual relations with prostitutes that limited infection among forced rowers, but rather the near-total lack of sexual activity in general—strictly forbidden both aboard the penal fleet and within the *Bagno*.

Let us now return to the role of medical expertise. The following example reflects a pattern also observed in Civitavecchia. It concerns a sentence pronounced in October 1710 against the *buonavoglia* Tommaso di Gio Rossi, who, upon admission to the hospital, underwent a thorough examination by the surgeons. During this examination, they noted that he complained of pain in his posterior parts. Confronted with the findings of the medical evaluation, the oarsman confessed

⁹² The first documented case dates back to 1690, when two *buonavoglia* were hospitalized after being infected with syphilis, see, ASF, MP, 2101, c.n.n.

⁹³ ASF, MP, 2113, cc.n.n.

⁹⁴ Tognotti, *L'altra faccia di Venere*, pp. 30–49.

⁹⁵ See ASLi, Capitano poi Governatore poi Auditore Vicario, 1550–1808, bb. 3086, trials n. 475, n. 637, n. 167; b. 3088, trial n. 232. See also Brogini, *L'esclavage à Malte*, p. 143.

to having been sodomized. As a result, he was imprisoned and dismissed from his post to prevent future occurrences.⁹⁶

Of particular interest is a case that appears to contribute in part to the hypothesis that, well before the 19th century, sodomy could be conceived not merely as a sexual act but also as an expression of genuine emotional and erotic attraction between members of the same sex. The case dates from July 1705, and involves two forced rowers: Francesco Mosti—convicted in 1695 for prostituting his wife—and a second man whose name is unknown, but who was nicknamed “Braccino.” Despite repeated threats from the guards, the pair had reportedly been “making love” for over two years. Suspicion that they were engaged in sexual relations was eventually confirmed by one of the *vigilanti di Maria*, who had been explicitly instructed to monitor them closely. One night, the vigilante hid and caught the two “lovers” [*innamorati*] in the act. Although no other witnesses were present, the *vigilante*’s reputation was unimpeachable, and both men were subsequently punished with one hundred lashes each.⁹⁷

What stands out most in this case is the use of explicitly amorous language: the authorities spoke of “love” and “lovers,” rather than portraying the men as criminals engaging in illicit acts. Yet it is equally clear that the authorities’ attention remained squarely focused on the act of sodomy itself—an offense strictly forbidden and subject to punishment. The possibility that terms such as “lovers” and “frolicking”⁹⁸ were used ironically—or perhaps mockingly—cannot be excluded, though this would be surprising given the gravity of the accusation. Comparison with comparable sources suggests that no such irony was intended. Rather, the language reflects a genuine recognition of the emotional bond between the two men involved—an affection that, while acknowledged, in no way mitigated the perceived gravity of the offense in the eyes of the authorities.⁹⁹

3.2 Repressing sodomy in the Papal States

Rome represented a different reality from Florence, as the seat of the Holy See never had a magistracy specifically dedicated to suppressing sodomy. In the Holy City, sodomy’s ambivalent character as a *crimen mixti fori*¹⁰⁰ [crime of dou-

⁹⁶ ASF, MP, 2107, cc.n.n.

⁹⁷ ASF, MP, 2106, c.n.n.

⁹⁸ In the Italian source: “*innamorati*,” “*amoreggiare*.”

⁹⁹ On the possibility of writing a history of emotions using archival sources, see, Lagioia, *Pasione amorosa*; Scaramella, *Amori nascosti*.

¹⁰⁰ Prosperi, *Tribunali della coscienza*, pp. 476–484.

ble jurisdiction] attained its fullest expression during the early modern period, as this immoral practice fell under the jurisdiction of three separate courts: the city governor—responsible for civil and criminal justice; the Inquisition—tasked with stamping out heresy; and the Cardinal Vicar, who presided over cases involving sin and crime. The governor's court handled the *forum externum*—treating this immoral act as a criminal offense; the Inquisition dealt with the *forum internum*, addressing it as a sin, while the Cardinal Vicar's tribunal was the first-instance court for *mixti fori* crimes.¹⁰¹

This overlap among three distinct magistracies should not be surprising, as each contributed, in a complementary way, to the suppression of sodomy on the criminal, theological-religious, and moral levels. Cooperation between Church and State in this domain was already clearly visible in the 16th century, when Pope Pius V issued two constitutions—*Cum Primum* in 1566 and *Horrendum illud scelus* in 1568—stipulating that individuals convicted of this unnatural vice by the Church were to be handed over to the secular authorities for execution, namely, by burning at the stake.¹⁰² Despite grave concerns about the vice—deemed an extremely serious offense—Roman authorities appeared to make little effort to prevent and suppress it. In most cases, the Governor's Court only acted after someone had been formally denounced. This likely reflects the prevailing tendency toward leniency and discretion in handling such cases, motivated by the desire not to disturb public order and to preserve the Holy City's respectable image.¹⁰³

According to trial records preserved in the Roman State Archives, the “nefarious vice” was thought to have been particularly widespread among the lower classes and in the city's more popular quarters. Typically, these cases involved adult men as the active party and children or adolescents as the passive one, following the classical model of pederasty. For this reason, most denunciations originated with the parents of the children involved. Sometimes, the parents informed the Governor's Court after the children confided in them; at other times, they did so after the child complained of pain in the buttocks, which led to an examination by a doctor who confirmed the hypothesis of anal intercourse. In many other instances, however, proceedings were initiated *ex officio*, either when the perpetrators were caught in the act by police officers [*birri*], or upon receipt of a medical

¹⁰¹ Fosi, *La giustizia*, pp. 21–32. Prodi, *storia giustizia*, p. 332. In the early modern period, sodomy was condemned both as a sin and as a crime “against nature,” thus emerging as a *crimen mixti fori*.

¹⁰² Cattaneo, “Vizio nefando,” pp. 56–59.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

report.¹⁰⁴ In Rome, doctors were legally required to notify the Governor whenever they examined a wounded or injured person.¹⁰⁵

At the Inquisition tribunal, it was often the accused who came forward, hoping for leniency—frequently naming their sexual partners in the process. The Roman Inquisition, however, was less concerned with the crime of sodomy *per se* than with the potential presence of any heretical positions associated with it. When no such heretical element was found, the Inquisition typically referred the matter to the court of the Cardinal Vicar, who, if the accused was found guilty, would then pass the case to the Governor's Court for execution of the sentence.¹⁰⁶

The desire to keep this reality hidden from public view has been rightly identified as a key reason for the relative scarcity of sodomy trials in the Roman archives.¹⁰⁷ Once again, we should avoid interpreting the sources from a purely quantitative perspective. Instead, we should consider this marked absence as an indirect indicator of the authorities' overall stance toward such illicit acts. Indeed, the judicial sources preserved in the fonds of the Governor's court suggest not only that cases of sodomy were relatively rare, but that they were confined to the city's lower classes. Members of the higher social strata are entirely absent from the records. As Marina Baldassarri has argued, this should not be taken to mean that they did not engage in such practices, but rather that they resolved such matters privately, away from public scrutiny.¹⁰⁸ The Roman authorities thus adopted a strategy of limited publicity but exemplary punishment in response to this unnatural vice: throughout the early modern period they sought to limit scandal while using harsh penalties as a deterrent.

The widespread problem of sodomy—alongside blasphemy—aboard the Papal galleys was denounced very early on as a matter of grave concern. The author of the aforementioned report on the disorders aboard Papal galleys, commissioned by Pope Pius V in 1571, described as commonplace the practice of youths being brought aboard specifically for the purpose of having them sodomized by members of the crew.¹⁰⁹ Aristocrats—captains and high-ranking officers¹¹⁰—would embark with teenagers, referred to as “galley nobles,” under the pretense

104 Baldassarri, *Bande giovanili*, pp. 120–123.

105 *Ibid.*, p. 131f.

106 Cattaneo, “Vizio nefando,” p. 68.

107 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

108 Baldassarri, *Bande giovanili*, p. 161f.

109 AAV, Misc. Arm. II, b. 110, *Secondo Avvertimenti sopra I disordini delle galere di S. Santità occorsi nell'anno passato 1571 dati da certe religiose persone et da bene con I rimedij necessari et opportune per emendargli*, ff. 394–396.

110 Crescentio, *Nautica mediterranea*, p. 94.

that they were their relatives or pupils. Young apprentices were recruited from among the crew to be turned into prostitutes, while in the rowing chamber, younger convicts were stationed near the hatches below deck so that they could easily disembark whenever clients approached.¹¹¹ The practice of sodomy, “abhorred even by beasts,” was fiercely condemned by the chaplains responsible for the spiritual care of the *galeotti*—not only because of the sheer unnaturalness of the act, but also due to its heretical nature, as such immoral conduct was believed to risk provoking divine wrath. The report consequently recommended that only adults be permitted aboard to avoid “the great dishonor to Christianity caused by doing as the Turks do, who take young men (on board) with them.”¹¹²

This situation appears not to have improved over the years, as in virtually every record of official visits to the Papal galleys by representatives of the Vicar of Rome—including that of 1668—this illicit practice continued to be identified as one of the most serious and widespread disorders on board.¹¹³

Significantly, however, it was not just sodomy that was forbidden aboard galleys, but sexual relations in general, as it was believed that fornication weakened discipline and rendered soldiers effeminate. After all, galleys were primarily military spaces, and the crews manning such spaces were made up of forced rowers and soldiers who had to fight in armed confrontations. As stated in one of the memories on the good governance of the fleet, “war is not the time for fornicating, but for fighting vigorously without falling in love.”¹¹⁴ The presence of prostitutes

111 AAV, Misc. Arm. II, b. 110, *Secondo Avvertimenti sopra I disordini delle galere di S. Santità occorsi nell'anno passato 1571 dati da certe religiose persone et da bene con I rimedij necessari et opportune per emendargli*, ff. 394–396; BCR, Ms, 34D18, *Memorie e scritture diverse appartenenti alle galere Pontificie e condannati nelle medesime Principalmente in tempo del tesorerato di mons. Lorenzo Corsini poi cardinale, e papa col nome di Clemente XII*, f. 35.

112 Ibid., f.396: “ne senza tanto disonore al Christianesimo che si faccia come fanno i turchi che menano li giovani.” See also Malcolm, *Forbidden Love*, p. 18.

113 Please note that the spiritual care of the *galeotti* on the Papal galleys was the responsibility and fell under the jurisdiction of the Vicar of Rome, as explained in Chapter Three. ASVR, Atti della segreteria, b. 74, *Giurisdizione dell'e.mo vicario sopra le galere pontificie ed, in Civitavecchia, sopra l'ospedale di S. Barbara e su di alcune chiese di Civitavecchia (1722–1773)*, *Acta visitationis triremus (1670)*, f. 62r: “Di vitij pubblici e scandalosi fra questi galeotti io ho osservato predominare e frequentarsi quella della bestemmia [...] L'altro vitio è la sodomia quale pure si castiga quando si sa ma che e materia occulta molti ne scappano impuniti la causa però di questa furfanteria procede principalmente dal mandarsi persone giovane in galera, e questi vagabondi ragazzacci, e questo è quanto posso riferire per verità e per la notitia che ne ho per essermi passati per le mani e per essere pubblico notorio.”

114 AAV, Misc. Arm. II, b. 116, *Ricordo per il buongoverno delli soldati nell'armata*, f.189: “Secondo perché il tempo della guerra non è per fornicare, se non per battagliaire animosamente senza innamoramenti.”

was strictly forbidden, as not only would they distract the crew from their key duties, but also because they were thought to indirectly foster more illicit sexual conduct. Since it was impossible to provide enough prostitutes to gratify the entire crew, the risk of too many men resorting to illicit practices to satisfy their sexual needs was considered extremely high.¹¹⁵

At first glance, this decision by the papal navy might seem surprising, given that, since the 14th century, prostitutes had been commonplace in land armies, often accepted, even welcomed, as a means of reducing sexual violence and deterring men from preying on civilians or each other, thereby helping to avoid incidents of war rape.¹¹⁶ As the anonymous author of the report observes, however, prostitution—long tolerated in Italian cities as a “necessary evil” to discourage men from committing such illicit acts—would have only created further problems aboard galleys. It was believed to encourage vice and weakness among the crew and, in the confined quarters of a ship, would have provoked moral scandal given the lack of private space for fornication.¹¹⁷

Alongside the presence of young men and prostitutes, sodomy aboard the galleys was further facilitated by excessive promiscuity and the freedom of their living conditions. Indeed, not only did their cramped spaces force oarsmen to sleep on top of each other, but it also appears that, contrary to orders, the convicts were often free to roam the galleys at night rather than being chained to their benches—enabling them to engage in forbidden acts.¹¹⁸

115 Ibid.: “Primo perché le meretrici sono poche, et non potendo tutti haverle, et vedendole li da occasione di cercare, et fare altri peccati nefandi;” BCR, Ms, 34D18, *Memorie e scritture diverse appartenenti alle galere Pontificie e condannati nelle medesime Principalmente in tempo del tesorerato di mons. Lorenzo Corsini poi cardinale, e papa col nome di Clemente XII*, f. 35: “Non permettere che entrino Donne nella darsena, e molto meno nelle galere. Ne meno ragazzi, o sbarbati scapoli sotto qualsivoglia pretesto, anche di cercar la limosina et in nessun conto permettere che vi dormino dentro di notte.”

116 Barbagli, *Comprare piacere*, pp. 118–130.

117 Ibid., pp. 182–184. AAV, Misc. Arm. II, b. 116, *Ricordo per il buongoverno delli soldati nell'armata*, f.189: “Quanto al terzo articolo delle meretrici, dico, che si permettono bene per la fragilità, et necessità nelle città, et terre grosse: ma nell'armata christiana sarebbe cosa perniciosia et scandalosa, et causa di più, et maggiori peccati.[...] Terzo perché li soldati, et altri vanno per mare, et per terra à pericolo della vita; quarto perché il luogo delle galere è stretto, et publico, et sarebbe grande scandalo attendere à fornicare; quinto perché il luogo è pericoloso del mare, et tempesta, et borrasche, et in terra fanno gl'huomini effeminati à combattere.”

118 ASVR, Atti della segreteria, b. 74, *Giurisdizione dell'e.mo vicario sopra le galere pontificie ed, in Civitavecchia, sopra l'ospedale di S. Barbara e su di alcune chiese di Civitavecchia (1722–1773), Acta visitationis triremus (1670)* f. 62v; BCR, Ms, 34D18, *Memorie e scritture diverse appartenenti alle galere Pontificie e condannati nelle medesime Principalmente in tempo del tesorerato di mons. Lorenzo Corsini poi cardinale, e papa col nome di Clemente XII*, f. 35; ASVR, Atti della segreteria,

Strikingly, the accounts do not express any degree of astonishment that the *galeotti* were engaged in sodomy. On the contrary, it was simply portrayed as a sinful practice to be eliminated, and there is no sense of dismay in their descriptions—almost as though such behavior was taken for granted. Over time, however, the tone of these reports switched from detached to increasingly desperate. Based on the sources, the prevalence of sodomy among galley rowers was attributed to criminals' amoral disposition. It was believed to reflect either their innate moral corruption¹¹⁹ or their heretical religious beliefs—particularly in the case of Muslims—which were thought to predispose them to such behavior.

Indeed, as a practice that violated the divine order of creation and disrupted natural law, sodomy was regarded as a rejection of God. It thus came to be treated as not only blasphemy, but as a heresy in itself. Accusing someone of sodomy thus became a way to purge the enemies of Christianity—not only for committing the act, but also for promoting the idea that it was not particularly sinful. The first public condemnation of sodomy as a form of heresy was recorded in Siena in 1262. The issue had nevertheless already been addressed thirty years prior: a 1232 Papal act signed by Pope Gregory IX authorized Dominican inquisitors to prosecute the “nefarious vice,” alongside witchcraft, on Austrian soil.¹²⁰ In the Sienese Statutes of 1262, the persecution of sodomites was explicitly tied to persecuting heretics. Using the analogy of the political body, both heresy and sodomy were likened to an infectious disease: getting rid of them was deemed necessary to prevent the rest of the social body from being corrupted.¹²¹ The association between sodomy and heresy is further evident from a simple analysis of the vernacular terms used across Europe to identify deviant sexual behavior. Thus, for example, in the Germanic world, the noun *Ketzerie*—which has its root in the term denoting the heretical group of Cathars—denoted both sodomy and heresy, while the verb form *ketzern* described unconventional sexual relations. Similarly, in England, France, Spain, and later in Italy, terms such as *bugger* (English), *bougre* or *bouggeron* (French), *bujrron* (Spanish), and *buggeratore* (Italian) were used to designate sodomites—words all derived from the Latin *bulgarus* which

b.74, *Giurisdizione dell'e.mo vicario sopra le galere pontificie ed, in Civitavecchia, sopra l'ospedale di S. Barbara e su di alcune chiese* (1722–1773), dossier n.n., 2 August 1781.

119 See, for example, ASVR, Atti della segreteria, b. 74, *Giurisdizione dell'e.mo vicario sopra le galere pontificie ed, in Civitavecchia, sopra l'ospedale di S. Barbara e su di alcune chiese di Civitavecchia* (1722–1773), *Acta visitationis tirremus* (1670) c. 62v: “Lo scandalo grave e commune in queste galere e il vizio nefando quale procede dalla mala inclinazione di questa gente condannata.”

120 Lavenia, *Eresia indicibile*, p. 14f.

121 Pastore, *Le regole dei corpi*, pp. 17–35.

referred to the Bulgarian heresy of Bogomilism.¹²² Likewise, the term *erite* could be used indiscriminately to label both heretics and sodomites.¹²³

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century revived Catholic anxieties surrounding heresy and sodomy as practices against God. The accusation of sodomy, with all its negative connotations, became a powerful weapon of religious propaganda. While Catholics hurled such accusations against heretics—a category that included Protestants, Jews, and Muslims—Protestant Reformers returned fire, often accusing Roman clergy of moral depravity and sodomitical conduct.¹²⁴ Martin Luther, for instance, was portrayed as a deviant reformer, intent on undermining moral standards, depicted either as a sodomite or a libertine intent on “defiling the nuns.”¹²⁵

Blasphemy, simony, and sodomy eventually fell under the jurisdiction of the Roman Inquisition, further reinforcing their theological link.¹²⁶ It was Pope Paul IV (r. 1555–1559) who included this vice among the offenses that the Inquisition of 1557 was authorized to pursue.¹²⁷ Interestingly, over time, the Inquisition’s concern narrowed, limiting its attention to cases that involved heresy. This is made explicit on 12 October 1600, when the Roman Inquisition, in the presence of Pope Clement VIII (r. 1592–1605), declared that “*super crimine nefando non proceditur in Sancto Officio*”—that is, the Holy Office would not proceed in cases of nefarious crimes unless heretical elements were present.¹²⁸

The association between sodomy and heresy found its most potent expression in the enduring stereotype of the “sodomite Turk.”¹²⁹ Throughout the early modern period, the term Turk did not specifically refer to someone from Turkey, but rather was used broadly to designate any Muslim, cast as Christianity’s quintessential enemy. Anti-Muslim accusations cast Muslims as embodying a range of demonic traits, chief among them sex against nature—a transgression viewed as the ultimate rebellion against God and the natural order.¹³⁰ This propaganda was particularly prevalent in Iberia, shaped by centuries-long *Reconquista* (ca. 718–1492), yet the sodomite Muslim trope eventually gained traction through-

122 Grassi *L’offizio*, p. 131.

123 Grassi, *Sodoma*, p. 55.

124 Grassi *L’offizio*, p. 133.

125 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

126 Baldassari, *Bande giovanili*, p. 113.

127 Cattaneo, “Vizio nefando,” p. 59.

128 Lavenia, *Eresia indicibile*, p. 48f.

129 See also Babayan/Najmabadi, *Islamic Sexualities*, Malcolm; *Forbidden Desires*; Massad, *Desiring Arabs*.

130 Grassi/Marcocci, *L’intreccio dei desideri*, p. 12.

out early modern Christendom, reaching its symbolic peak during the Cyprus War—a confrontation emblematic of the struggle between the Christian West and the Muslim East.¹³¹

The conflation of Islam with illicit sexual activity was initially articulated during the Crusades. One of the earliest depictions of Muslims as sodomites appears in a 10th-century hagiographic legend, the *Passio Sancti Pelagii*, according to which, around 925–926, the Emir 'Abd al-Rahman III was struck by the beauty of Pelagius of Córdoba, a 13-year-old boy who had offered himself as a hostage in exchange for the release of his uncle, Bishop Hermogius. The boy was martyred, courageously refusing to renounce his faith or submit to the Emir's carnal advances.¹³² Over the centuries, a genuine cult emerged around the figure of Pelagius, who was later canonized. Iberian anti-Muslim propaganda spread throughout Europe and the story of Pelagius eventually reached northern Europe, as demonstrated by the near-contemporary account of the subject written in Saxony by Hroswitha of Gandersheim.¹³³

Over time, anti-Muslim sentiment was further fueled by alleged reports of rape and violations of natural law by Muslims; these accounts had been circulating as early as the First Crusade, including a likely spurious appeal to Christian princes by the Byzantine emperor Alexius I Comnenus (r. 1048–1118), which accused Muslims of perpetrating atrocities, including homosexual rape. In the 12th century, the Abbot of Clairvaux, Henri de Marcy (1136–1189), invoked similar fears when he preached the necessity of a Third Crusade to prevent the nefarious vice from spreading westwards. Similarly, in his *Tractatus contra haereticos*, the theologian Alain de Lille (1125–1202) portrayed Muslims as obsessed with carnal pleasures.¹³⁴

Although these commentaries were clearly shaped by negative stereotypes harnessed for propaganda purposes, they often distorted a much more complex reality. While the Qur'an adopts negative positions toward homosexuality, Islamic societies had, for centuries, tolerated certain forms of homoerotic practice with varying degrees of discretion. This tolerance was recast by Western propaganda as open endorsement; Muslims were accused of indulging in the most unbridled sexual freedom and of disregarding the laws of nature—particularly in their perceived failure to uphold gender distinctions.

This fusion of moral panic and ethnographic distortion continued into later centuries. A widely cited example is the treatise written around 1318 by the French

131 Capponi, *Lepanto*.

132 Lavenia, *Sessualità, islamofobia*, p. 108.

133 Grassi, *Sodoma*, p. 63.

134 Lavenia, *Sessualità, islamofobia*, p. 109.

Dominican Guillaume Adam, in which the author denounced Muslims for their alleged indulgence in transvestitism and for buying young slaves to be turned into prostitutes. Here again, these claims reflect distortion: the *mukhannaths* [transvestites], held a recognized, though socially marginalized, place in many Muslim societies, while the recruitment practices of the Mamluk regimes in Egypt and Syria (1250–1517) involved the purchase of young non-Muslims as slaves, who were then converted to Islam, trained as soldiers, and incorporated into the ruling elites, and sometimes became court favorites.¹³⁵

However, the stereotype of the sodomite Muslim did not really take hold in the Iberian Peninsula until the 15th century, and Turks were never portrayed as effeminate. On the contrary, they were seen as a righteous scourge sent by God to punish the sins of Christians.¹³⁶ In time, sodomy came to be seen not as a sign of softness, but as yet another attribute of violent, evil masculinity. Notably, this trope was not exclusively propagated by Christian sources: various Arab authors and chroniclers also described the spread of sodomy in Muslim lands.

An especially illustrative example can be found in *Della descrizione dell'Africa et delle cose notabili che ivi sono* (1550) by Johannes Leo Africanus (c. 1485–1554). Born I-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad al-Wazzan al-Fāṣī, he was a Berber ambassador and geographer who, after being captured by Christian corsairs in 1518, was brought to Rome as a slave and entrusted to Pope Leo X (r. 1513–1521). Baptized and welcomed into his court, he was commissioned to write what was one of the most authoritative early modern text on Africa.¹³⁷ In it, several pages describe homoerotic practices as widespread, especially in large urban centers such as Fez, and notably in settings marked by alcohol consumption such as banquets.

What is most striking is not merely Africanus's description of these practices but his ambivalent attitude: he refrains from openly condemning them.¹³⁸ While Islamic jurisprudence prohibited a wide range of sexual behaviors, authorities in the Ottoman Empire were rarely as aggressive in prosecuting sodomy as their Catholic counterparts in Southern Europe.¹³⁹ This difference was partly due to greater leniency toward consensual homoerotic relations, and partly to Islamic legal norms, which—unlike those in Europe—forbade anonymous denunciations and disallowed confessions extracted under torture.¹⁴⁰

135 Rowson, *Omoerotismo ed élite mamelucca*, p. 24. On the *mukhannaths*, see Rowson, *The Effeminate*, pp. 671–693; *Instituzionalized Transvestitism*, pp. 45–72.

136 Grassi/Marcocci, *L'intreccio dei desideri*, p. 14.

137 Zemon Davis, *Leone l'Africano*, (translation) p. 3f.

138 *Ibid.*, pp. 218–221.

139 Malcolm, *Forbidden Love*.

140 Marotta, *Muslim Friend*, p. 232f.

The proponents of the anti-Muslim rhetoric soon felt the need to learn more about Islamic culture in order to attack it more effectively from within. After the Abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable (1092–1156), travelled to Iberia in 1142, his notary Peter of Poitiers, assisted by a group of translators and commentators, was tasked with compiling a collection of translated texts, known as the *Corpus Toletanum*. Among its central components was the Latin translation of the Qur'an by Pedro of Toledo, Herman of Carinthia, and Robert of Ketton.¹⁴¹ Once the compilation was completed, Peter of Poitiers proposed producing another text, aimed at exposing the errors of Islam, in which the sixth paragraph of the second book was to be devoted to refuting what Muhammad allegedly taught about “the foulest act of sodomy,” in the Qur'an, quoting: “Men, plough your women on whichever side you like.” Ketton's translation lent itself to a distorted interpretation of a passage in *Sura 2 (Al-Baqara, v. 223)*: “Your brides, for you, are like a field. Come to your field as you will”) which appeared to sanction unrestricted sexuality freedom—even sodomy—between spouses.

Peter of Poitiers's work was ultimately not included in the text that would be titled *Liber contra sectam sive haeresim Saracenorum* [Treatise Against the Sect or Heresy of the Saracens], but circulated widely in manuscript form and proved relatively influential. Its echoes can be found in subsequent works, such as Jacques de Vitry's *Historia Orientalis* (1219–1226).¹⁴² Peter of Poitiers' interpretation of the *Sura 2* was later revived and popularized by the friar Alfonso de Espina in his *Fortalitium fidei* [Fortress of Faith, 1458], whose sixth book, *De bello saracenorum* [On the War Against the Saracens], was entirely devoted to the crusade against Judaism and Islam.¹⁴³ In this work, Espina claimed not only that the Qur'anic verse authorized sodomy—including homosexual relations—but that this permission applied to all Muslims, who therefore were inherently prone to vice and, for that reason, deserved to be burned at the stake,¹⁴⁴ in accordance with the legal prescriptions found in Alfonso X of Castile's royal charter, *Fuero Real* (1255), which prescribed the death penalty for those convicted of sodomy, as a model to follow.¹⁴⁵

Despite the chaplains' and the galley officials' concerns—who both had to deal with inmates on a daily basis—no practical solutions were adopted at an institutional level, and official decrees concerning the efficient management of the Papal galleys made no reference to sodomy. This state of affairs changed, however,

141 Lavenia, *Eresia indicibile*, p. 17f; Grassi, *Sodoma*, p. 64.

142 Lavenia, *Sessualità, islamofobia*, p. 110 f.

143 *Ibid.*, pp. 115 f.

144 *Ibid.*

145 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

with the edict issued on 15 January 1709 by the General Commissioner of the Navy, Carlo de Marini, which specifically targeted the problem of sodomy and blasphemy among the *galeotti*.¹⁴⁶ While earlier proclamations had clearly condemned blasphemy, they had only implicitly censured sodomy. In contrast, more than half of the 1709 proclamation is devoted to the high incidence of illicit sexual activity among convicts and slaves. It remains unclear whether this frequency was due to an actual rise of such practices, or whether the edict signals a shift in institutional awareness—namely, a decision to confront the matter openly rather than suppress it to avoid public scandal. The latter explanation appears more convincing. The text of the edict offers the clearest expression of this shift.

Declaring sodomy an abominable vice, “by which one offends both the Creator and nature, and which, more than any other sin, provokes the wrath of God,” the edict called for decisive action. Those found guilty, whether active or passive participants, were to be condemned to the gallows. The death penalty also applied to accomplices, while those who failed to notify the authorities were to be fined and sentenced to five years in the galleys. This directive targeted, in particular, the bench-mates and the oarsmen on the fore and aft benches, who were instructed to denounce and report any transgressions to the *aguzzino*. Similarly, surgeons aboard were required to notify the authorities if any patient displayed signs even remotely suggesting involvement in sodomy.

Aware that this crime was committed in private and with the utmost discretion—rendering it difficult to detect—the naval authorities sought to establish a rigid and far-reaching system of mutual vigilance among crew members, combining severe punishments for offenders with generous rewards for informants.¹⁴⁷ In

¹⁴⁶ AAV, Misc. Arm. IV/V, b. 54, f. 105.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.: “l’estirpazione degl’altri vizij, anche con il mezzo de’ più severi castighi, & essendo tra essi il più abominevole quello della sodomia, con il quale offendendosi il Creatore, e la Natura insieme, più di ogni altro peccato provoca l’ira di S.D.M., perciò affinché ognuno si astenga dal commetterlo, siano Schiavi, Forzati, Vagabondi, Bonavoglia, Marinari, Soldati, & ogn’altro sottoposti alla nostra giurisdizione, con il presente pubblico Editto di ordine di Nostro Signore, come sopra; si notifica. Tutti, e singoli, come in occasione di tal delitto si procederà irremissibilmente contro di loro alla pena della Forca, agenti, ò pazienti, che siano, purché maggiori di anni dieci otto.

Nella quale sopraddeita pena di morte incorrerà ogn’altro, che farà mezzano, ò causa, ò in qualsivoglia modo darà aiuto, commodità, consiglio, ò in altra qualunque maniera coopererà al commettersi detto vizio.

[...] E per venire più facilmente in notitia de’ Delinquenti; si ordina à Comiti, Sottocomiti, Aguzzini, e Mozzi, & altri rispettivamente, che sopra i questo particolarmente invigilino, e succedono alcuno di detti delitti, ed in qualunque modo avendone da loro sentore, debbano subito

addition to harsh denunciations and exemplary punishments, further preventative measures included a ban on young men boarding the galleys, a prohibition against sleeping together under the same blanket and—most notably—the nightly release of convicts from their chains.¹⁴⁸ These strategies undoubtedly increased the levels of vigilance aboard the ships, yet they do not appear to have led to any meaningful reduction in sodomitical activity, which continued to be reported and condemned, particularly by the religious authorities charged with the *galeotti's* spiritual welfare.

4 Criminal prosecution of sodomy in 18th-century Civitavecchia

Despite the impossibility of fully eradicating sodomy aboard the Papal galleys, notable developments occurred in Civitavecchia during the 18th century. In the wake of the 1709 edict, and with the declared aim of punishing sodomy more effectively, such cases began being prosecuted through formal criminal trials held before the Court of the Governor of Civitavecchia. Among the surviving sources are 14 sodo-

denunciarlo nel Tribunale di Monsignor Governatore suddetto, sotto pena di scudi cinquanta, di anni cinque di Galera, & altre ad arbitrio di Sua Signoria illustrissima.

Nelle quali pene parimente incorreranno li Barbieri, Barbierotti, Chirurghi, & altri che cureranno, ò saranno richiesti di curare mali, che in qualunque modo possono essere stati causati da questo vizio ogni qual volta non daranno pontualmente la relazione in scritti nel Tribunale suddetto di chi li haverà richiesti per essere curati, ò di chi averanno medicato con la distinzione del nome, cognome, e luogo di permanenza, acciò meglio possa venirne in cognizione.”

148 See, for example, ASVR, Atti della segreteria, b. 74, *Giurisdizione dell'e.mo vicario sopra le galere pontificie ed, in Civitavecchia, sopra l'ospedale di S. Barbara e su di alcune chiese (1722—1773)*, c. 62v: “Lo scandalo grave e commune in queste galere e il vizio nefando quale procede dalla mala inclinazione di questa gente condannata, e dallo stare uno sopra l'altro a dormire, ma particolarmente perché si mandino ragazzi in galera;” BCR, Ms, 34D18, *Memorie e scritture diverse appartenenti alle galere Pontificie e condannati nelle medesime Principalmente in tempo del tesorerato di mons. Lorenzo Corsini poi cardinale, e papa col nome di Clemente XII*, ff. 35—36, 43—44: “Troppa libertà hanno i forzati, e così con pagare un grosso, o un giulio si sferrano e vanno dove gli piace per la calata della darsena, con soverchia facilità gli si permette che vadino anche nella città, se bene accompagnati. Così è in piacer loro di fare mille furfanterie in materia di senso, et altre anche più esecrande [...] di notte tempo stanno anche molti sferrati, si de forzati, come delli Buonavoglia, e schiavi, massime di quelli forzati, che hanno qualche officio, o che servono gli ufficiali, o che stanno a qualche servitio particolare, come da dispensa e così vanno a trovar chi vogliono e dormire con chi gli pare [...] XII. Non lasciarli dormire più sotto una comune coperta, ma darne una per uno. Mutargli spesso da banchi, massime li sospetti. Non permettere che li scapoli entrino nelle stanze delle galere, e che stiano sferrati alla notte.”

my trials and surgeons' reports initiated against convicts and galley slaves between 1738 and 1781.¹⁴⁹

In cases of suspected sodomy, it was the prerogative of the court-appointed physician to examine the defendant's anus. Venice was the first city in Italy where the central role played by doctors, surgeons, and barbers in attempts to eradicate this vice from the city was explicitly codified in law. On 8 August 1453, following news that a young boy had been sodomized and displayed lesions on his anus—and that the doctors treating him failed to report their findings to the judiciary—it was proposed that, henceforth, all physicians be required to notify the *Consiglio dei Dieci* if, upon inspection, they observed children with lesions suggestive of sodomy. Failure to notify such findings would result in a penalty of one year's imprisonment and permanent banishment from Venice. This proposal was not adopted, however.¹⁵⁰ Matters changed in 1468 following a proclamation issued on 7 January, which required the city's doctors and surgeons to report suspected cases to the *Consiglio dei Dieci* "just as they report gunshot wounds to the *Signori di Notte*, so they must denounce anyone who is injured in these parts [...] due to a laceration in the posterior parts caused by a male sexual organ."¹⁵¹ As Priori later reported, even in late 17th-century Venice "the Surgeon or Midwife who sees a boy or girl broken in those shameful parts [sign of violent rape] must notify the authorities under oath."¹⁵²

While Venice was unique in explicitly regulating the involvement of medical experts in such cases, recourse to a doctor's expert opinion in the prosecution of sodomy is also attested in other regions. Given that judges could not rely solely on the defendant's statements—as these were often categorical denials—medical examination became the only viable method of establishing the truth in cases of suspected sodomy.

Like other topics on which forensic medicine focuses, sodomy is also addressed in Paolo Zacchia's *Quaestiones medico-legales*. Although this alleged crime frequently required medical expertise—as attested by both contemporary archival sources and legal treatises, such as those by Farinacci and Savelli—no mention is made in the *Methodus Testificandi* of how the consummation of sodo-

149 The trials are conserved in ASR, Tribunale poi Governatore di Civitavecchia (1589–1913).

150 Canosa, *Grande paura*, p. 107.

151 Ibid., p. 115: "allo stesso modo in cui denunciano i colpi d'arma da loro riscontrati ai Signori di Notte, così essi debbono denunciare chi è rotto in quelle parti [...] per una lacerazione nelle parti posteriori causata da un organo sessuale maschile."

152 Priori, *Prattica criminale*, p. 11. "nel stupro nel putto, o nella putta per forza violata le parti vergognose rotte, le quali siano vedute per la Comare, o per il Chirurgo, riferendo il loro credere per giuramento."

mitic intercourse could be verified; even the space Zacchia devotes to male sodomy is limited to no more than a single page. He addresses the topic in Book IV, Title II, which is dedicated to virginity and rape [*De Virginitate, & Stuprum*], in *Quaestio* V focused on signs of rape in boys [*Constuprati Pueri signa*].¹⁵³

Significantly, sodomy is consistently referred to as *stuprum*—a term generally understood to mean penetration. In its original Latin usage, *stuprum* signified “dishonor,” and only over time did it acquire the broader meaning of penetration, and in particular “sodomitical anal penetration.”¹⁵⁴ According to Zacchia, a medical examination—conducted on the body of the individual who had been penetrated—could reveal a range of valuable information, including whether anal intercourse had taken place, whether it occurred recently or in the past, and whether it happened once or on multiple occasions.¹⁵⁵ The more frequently and the more recently the act had taken place, the easier it was to detect anatomical indications, often in the form of anal lacerations called *raghadiae*. These lesions typically resulted from violent penetration by an external object—especially when the boy was young and the *stuprator* [penetrator] possessed a thick penis.¹⁵⁶

Wherever possible, Zacchia recommended careful inspection of the victim’s anus and the perpetrator’s penis. The presence of bruising around the anus, dilatation, or fleshy protuberances called *carunculae* (or vulgarly, *crestas*) might also serve as indicators of anal penetration. Although such *crestas* could result from hemorrhoids, Zacchia argues that when other aforementioned symptoms were present, these bumps constituted compelling evidence that illicit sexual acts had taken place.¹⁵⁷ In support of his conclusions, he cites the authority of the Sephardic physician Amatus Lusitanus (1511–1568), who, in his *Curationum medicinalium centuriae septem* (1551), was likely the earliest—and for a long

153 Zacchia, *Quaestiones*, pp. 251–260.

154 Rousseau, *Policing the Anus*, p. 77.

155 Zacchia, *Quaestiones*, p. 260: “de recenti commissum, quaedam vero à multo tempore, & cursus quae stuprum unica vice patratum, aut de raro, quaedam quae fraequentatum ostendunt, oedem quoque quoque pacto de hujus stupri signum distinguendum est.”

156 Ibid.: “stuprum in puero, quod de recent patatrum fuerit, ut ante mensem, praecipue si fraequentatum sit, indicare manifeste possunt, Ani scissurae Rhagadiae dictae, qua facile ob illatam vim apparent, praecipue si puer tenoriis aetatis sit, & stuprator crassa mentula dotatus.”

157 Ibid.: “in lividum colorem [...] & partis dilatation, quae etiam multo post tempore perdurare potest, & indicare insimul stuprum frequentatum, etiam à multo tempore commissum, quod multò magis significant quaedam carunculae, seu carnae excrescentiae, quas vulgo cristas vocant, quae maxime ex frequenti Sodomia originem habent [...] quamplures Medicos pro ipsis haemorrhoidibus accipiantur.”

time the only—European author to investigate the potential medical consequences of anal intercourse between men.¹⁵⁸

In most instances, the available sources consist solely of medical reports or summary trials, in which both the verbal testimony of the accused and the criminal sentences are largely absent. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this research, these sources yield a significant amount of valuable information. First, they attest to a clear shift in the authorities' stance aboard the Papal galleys. While most proceedings were not brought to completion, the very fact that the judicial apparatus was activated demonstrates greater institutional commitment than in the past. It must be emphasized, however, that in the absence of final judgments in most cases, it remains unclear whether or how the offenders were punished, or whether they were sentenced to death, as prescribed in the 1709 edict.

These sources also provide insight into aspects of daily life aboard the galleys, revealing a reality in which structured violence coexisted with codified patterns of interaction, at times giving rise to genuine acts of solidarity among the rowers. The trial records also underscore the crucial role of medical expertise in both detecting and suppressing this nefarious crime—one that could not, and should not, have been permitted to occur within the confines of the Papal fleet. The following analysis will begin by focusing on the role of the medical professionals who were summoned to offer expert opinions in such cases.

The earliest available source—a report by Francesco Faraone, a surgeon at the Ospedale di Santa Barbara—dates from 1728 and concerns a Muslim slave from the *Patrona* galley, Amettino from Biserta. While the reason he was admitted to the hospital remains unclear, the surgeon's diagnosis is unambiguous: Amettino exhibited multiple excrescences around his anus, which, in his medical opinion, could only have been caused by the nefarious vice.¹⁵⁹

Faraone's diagnosis raised further questions. Were they truly the result of anal penetration? Could they have been mistaken for hemorrhoidal swellings? Alternatively, were they genital warts, a common symptom of venereal diseases such as gonorrhea and syphilis—both of which were already widespread throughout the Mediterranean region at the time, though not yet definitively linked to

158 Rousseau, *Policing the Anus*, p. 86.

159 ASR, Tribunale poi Governatore di Civitavecchia (1589–1913), b. 642, dossier 10, f. n.n.: “Io sottoscritto ho visitato nell'Ospedale delle galere di Nostro Signore Ametto di Biserta detto il tignoso schiavo della Galera Patrona et avendo viste e ben considerate le di lui parti posteriori e pudende, et avendo ritrovato in torno alla circonferenza del ano varie escrescenze carnose dette Porrifichi o creste le quali secondo la mia peritia dico essere stati prodotti da reiterati atti del vitio nefando.”

same-sex intercourse?¹⁶⁰ Since no record of the trial has surfaced, it remains uncertain whether one ever took place.

Exceptionally, Amettino's story has not been completely lost, as two other documents concerning him have been found within the same archival collection. The first, dating to 1724, predates the surgeon's report. It, too, was penned by Faraone and details a separate incident: Amettino had been hospitalized after being kicked in the stomach by the galley's subordinate boatswain—the *sottocomito*—an injury that caused him to spit blood and collapse. According to Amettino, the officer's aggression stemmed from frustration at his inexperience, as he had just recently joined the crew.¹⁶¹ While this earlier report sheds no light on the allegations of sodomy, it offers a revealing glimpse into the brutal and often violent conditions endured by slaves, helping to contextualize Amettino's life within the broader reality of maritime servitude.

The second source, dating from 1738, is more striking: it was written a full decade after the initial report that had confirmed Amettino's alleged sodomitic behavior. This time, however, the offense took place on dry land rather than at sea. Over the intervening years, Amettino completed his service aboard the galley and later spent five years working in the governor's palace in Civitavecchia. He maintained a shack in the city's dockyard and owned a cheese shop within the city. He was accused of repeatedly sodomizing the 15-year-old Antoniuccio Bengardi of Lucerne—an unemployed ex-servant who frequented Amettino's tavern, where he drank coffee and alcohol. The trial began after the city's *birri* raided Amettino's bedroom, where they discovered him wearing only a shirt, and in the company of the half-undressed Bengardi. The raid was justified by Amettino's bad reputation; he had been accused of "fornicating" and luring young boys to "satisfy his brutal libido."¹⁶²

That Amettino had engaged in sexual relations with other boys is corroborated by prior investigations, during which he had earned the nickname "Beauty of Tunis" [*Bella di Tunisi*]. What is especially striking, however, is how in this case his bad reputation was implicitly reinforced by his Muslim identity—thus perpetuating the enduring stereotype that associated Islam with sodomy. This is further reflected in the testimony of Nesan of Amor from Bizerte, Amettino's companion in the governor's palace. When asked why Amettino had been arrested, he initially feigned ignorance, but later admitted he had been present during the raid and

160 See, for example, Berco, *Syphilis and the Silencing of Sodomy*; Siena, *The Strange Medical Silence*.

161 ASR, Tribunale poi Governatore di Civitavecchia (1589–1913), b. 642, dossier 10, f. n.n.

162 ASR, Tribunale poi Governatore di Civitavecchia (1589–1913), b. 643, dossier 8, f. n.n.: "per sfogare la sua brutale libidine."

knew that Amettino had been found in bed with Bengardi. Unprompted, Nesan insisted that this “nefarious practice” was condemned not only by Christianity but also by Islam, adding that other Muslim slaves viewed Amettino with hostility because they disapproved of his conduct. As Achille Marotta suggested, Amor likely engaged in a distancing strategy—disassociating Amettino from the broader Muslim community in Civitavecchia, and thereby implicitly acknowledging how easily the accusation of sodomy could be extended to others within that group.¹⁶³

Further evidence of this underlying anxiety lies in the fact that Bengardi had previously been warned by local beer makers of the risks of associating with slaves—a social group widely regarded as both dangerous and immoral. In this case, the presence of eyewitnesses, Amettino’s bad reputation—as confirmed by multiple testimonies—and most significantly, Bengardi’s own confession were sufficient to establish the charge. Expert medical opinion was deemed unnecessary, as it would have merely corroborated what was already accepted as fact.

The trial concluded with Bengardi—already incarcerated—sentenced to exile from Livorno, under threat of corporal punishment should he fail to comply.¹⁶⁴ Surprisingly, Amettino was neither convicted nor formally acquitted, even though a harsher sentence might have reasonably been expected given his sexually active role. Nevertheless, this episode reinforces the prevailing stereotype of galley slaves as inherently immoral and fundamentally incorrigible individuals.

As the Amettino episode demonstrates, not every expert report or sodomy trial involving forced rowers preserved in the Civitavecchia governor’s fund refers to incidents that occurred aboard the fleet’s vessels. While convicts and oarsmen were theoretically isolated from broader society, in practice, opportunities for interactions with civilians were far from rare. These men were often allowed to work in the port of Civitavecchia whenever ships were docked for extended periods. Though regulations required them to remain in chains and under the watchful eye of their overseers—the *aguzzini*—the archival sources reveal a reality in which such constraints were routinely disregarded, and inmates frequently moved about the city with relative freedom.

In the 1763 criminal trial involving the rape of eleven-year-old Angelo, attempts were made to trace the identity of the accused convict. Following what could be described as a “traditional” procedure, the trial was instigated when the boy’s mother, Bartolomea Grassino, became suspicious after her son was unable to defecate properly and had been complaining of pain in his genital area for a month. She then took him to see the city surgeon, Bartolomeo Ridolfi, whose re-

¹⁶³ This hypothesis was first advanced by Marotta, *The Muslim Friend*, pp. 230–252.

¹⁶⁴ ASR, Tribunale poi Governatore di Civitavecchia (1589–1913), b. 643, dossier 8, f. n.n.

port confirmed the suspicion that the pain was the consequence of repeated rectal penetration. He instructed the mother to notify the governor. When questioned, Angelo confessed that he had been approached on several occasions by a convict, who had lured him with the promise of money and taken him behind the soldiers' quarters. He described in detail to the magistrates how the conscript had pulled down his trousers, forcing him to straddle on the ground, and then penetrated him anally, ejecting semen in the process—a matter of the utmost gravity, as rectal intercourse involving ejaculation was the gravest form of sodomy.¹⁶⁵ According to the boy's description, the man was around 40 years old, "fair" in complexion, stocky at the waist, with black hair and eyes. No fewer than seven inmates matched this profile. One particular telling detail emerged during the investigation: Angelo identified the man as a forced rower not by his chains—which he did not wear—but by his clothing. This small yet revealing observation starkly illustrates the extent of the freedom some galley rowers evidently enjoyed. He also noted that he had not seen the man in roughly two months, and had not been assaulted recently.¹⁶⁶ As with many other cases of this kind, the final judgment is absent from the archival records, leaving it uncertain whether the suspects were ever questioned or whether the matter was quietly dropped without resolution.

Returning to the central role played by medical expertise in suppressing sodomy, one particularly revealing episode concerns the six denunciations recorded in 1769 for the "supposed nefarious vice."¹⁶⁷ Each case originated with a report by the galley surgeon, who, during routine visits to galley slaves recovering in the dock hospital, had been explicitly instructed by the superintendent of the galleys to conduct meticulous inspections of the "posterior parts"—especially in those who complained of a "pain in the buttocks." These examinations formed part of a broader directive to "pursue every possible means to eradicate the nefarious vice, which is unfortunately deeply embedded" within the galleys.¹⁶⁸ In certain

165 ASR, Tribunale poi Governatore di Civitavecchia (1589–1913), b. 656, dossier 2, f. n.n.: "e poi mi fece vedere una manciata di denari che disse volermi dare, e che gl'avessi fatto fare quello lui voleva, cosich  mi cal  li calzoni, e poi mi fece mettere colle mani per terra a pecoroni, e lui calatosi il suo membro, che era duro me lo appunt  nel culo, e facendo forza me lo mise dentro sentendo del dolore, e lo menava avanti, e dietro, e poi mi sentii dentro del culo della materia calda, e del brugiore."

166 *Ibid.*, f. n.n.

167 ASR, Tribunale poi Governatore di Civitavecchia (1589–1913), b. 658, dossiers 4–9.

168 *Ibid.*, dossier 4, f. n.n.: "siccome il signor soprintendente alle galere ripieno di zelo per l'onore di Dio, tenta ogni strada di estirpare il vizio nefando purtroppo radicato."

cases, and in an effort to obtain greater certainty or to corroborate the initial assessment, the opinions of additional surgeons were also sought.

The complexity of the doctor-patient relationship in a setting such as the galley—situated somewhere between the will to rehabilitate and the will to control—is noteworthy here. I have discussed at length the importance of mutual trust in a patient's path to recovery. Yet in this context, such trust was all but nonexistent, or, at best, fragile. Physicians were acutely aware that they were treating criminals or heretics; thus, while they were obligated to care for them, they often did so reluctantly, and with a constant suspicion of deceit. Above all, physicians were expected to set aside their professional vows of confidentiality and denounce their patients should they detect any signs of violent injuries—and, in cases like this, signs of rectal trauma. One can imagine that medical professionals rarely hesitated to report such patients as individuals of dubious morality. The very precautions and attention meant to safeguard the health of the rowers were, in practice, turned against them—transformed into instruments of control, surveillance, and condemnation.

It is also striking that in most archival sources no testimony or depositions by the convicts can be found—except, in some cases, to answer the perfunctory question of whether they knew why they were in court. Evidently, such inquiries and the ensuing investigations were only initiated once sodomy was already suspected. If the offenders had been caught *in flagrante* and eyewitnesses were available, they were often condemned directly without further questioning. This was the case, for instance, in the trial held on 26 February 1762 against the life convict Andrea Pighi and his neighbor, the vagabond Luca Bianchi, who—thinking they could take advantage of the cover of darkness—were discovered by a companion “committing the sin of sodomy” on Christmas Eve and promptly denounced to their *sotto aguzzino*.¹⁶⁹

When the veracity of the act had to be ascertained, the governor's court proceeded in two stages: first, a medical report was commissioned from the galley surgeon who was instructed to examine the convict's anus for any signs of hernias, ulcers, ruptures, and other trauma indicative of penetration. Second, the accused and the witnesses were interrogated. From the sources examined, it is clear that the primary purpose for interrogating the accused was to extract a confession. If the convict's version of events deviated from the expected narrative, his testimony was considered worthless. Such silence—or compliance—is hardly surprising, given that the accused were not free citizens but individuals already

169 ASR, Tribunale poi Governatore di Civitavecchia (1589–1913), b. 655, dossier 24, f. n.n.

stripped of their liberty, and, by extension, of their civil rights—whether temporarily or permanently.

It is nonetheless notable that in every trial of this kind, the rowers consistently denied having been sodomized, often resorting to a remarkably similar justification: they claimed to have been wearing borrowed or ill-fitting shirts or trousers that caused irritation and itchiness around the anus, resulting in injuries from constant scratching.¹⁷⁰ This defense was repeated almost verbatim by the convict Giovanni Battista Petrini in 1769. Unsurprisingly, such excuses were rarely believed. As the surgeon's report explicitly stated in Petrini's case, "some excrescences and callosities around the orifice of the anus, produced by the *vitium nefandum*, were to be observed." So confident was the surgeon in his diagnosis that he even suggested resorting to "the operation of fire," a cauterization procedure believed to cure anal lesions caused by rectal penetration.¹⁷¹ What is perhaps most revealing is the standardized nature of the *galeotti's* excuses, thus raising the question: why was this particular defense—centered around borrowed clothing—so widely adopted? Was it rumored to be credible? And, if so, on what basis? Indeed, given the rowers' notoriously poor hygiene and wretched living conditions, it is not entirely implausible to believe that shared garments could have transmitted infections or fungus-related skin conditions. Nevertheless, in the eyes of the authorities, such claims were insufficient to override the surgeons' report.

As with many of these cases, the archival sources do not indicate whether the suspected *galeotti* were ultimately convicted or acquitted. Still, it is plausible to infer that most were found guilty, as the surgeon's report would have been taken as definitive. That many trials were left unresolved may also reflect pragmatic considerations: had the accused been convicted, they would have likely faced the death penalty—an outcome that would have been counterproductive for the operational capacity of the fleet, given the constant need for a steady source of manpower.

Yet the systematic involvement of medical professionals in these criminal proceedings underscores just how crucial their role had become in determining the truth. A case in point is that of convict Vincenzo Buganti, who admitted during his trial that he had once been sodomized—but only in the past, and not while he was

170 See, for example, ASR, Tribunale poi Governatore di Civitavecchia (1589–1913), b. 658, dossier 5, f. n.n.: "io sono tre giorni che sto ammalato in questo letto essendoci stato portato dalla galera Capitana dove sono forzato a tempo, per motivo che 20 maggio addietro essendomi un paio di calzoni che non so dirgli di chi fossero mi attaccarono al culo il male che è stato visitato."

171 *Ibid.*, dossier 6, f. n.n.: "ho riconosciute alcune escrescenze, e callosità intorno all'orifizio dell'ano, prodotte dal vizio nefando, per cui gli si deve fare l'operazione del fuoco."

serving aboard the galley. The surgeon's report, however, contradicted this account, attributing his injuries to "repeated sodomy," thus implying that the abuse had been recent.¹⁷² Similarly, the record is silent on the verdict, but the case vividly illustrates how medical testimony could decisively override the voices of those accused.

One of the rare instances in which significant space was afforded to the convicts' testimony dates back to 1773 in a trial that followed a convict's voluntary denunciation. Alessio Giovanni Celebrini presented himself at the Ospedale di Santa Barbara in February 1773, claiming he had been sexually attacked on board by another convict, Domenico Mortelli, who worked as a *mozzo*. The hospital surgeon's report confirmed that Celebrini's injuries were consistent with rectal intercourse. Once recovered, he was sent back to the ship to await trial, which took place two months later. The very fact that a formal trial was instituted raises an important question: why, unlike in so many other sodomy cases, was this particular instance investigated and the accused potentially punished? While a definitive answer remains elusive, one plausible explanation is that voluntary denunciation—particularly one supported by the testimony of trusted medical professionals—was more difficult for the authorities to ignore or suppress. Furthermore, this case was far from routine; it had the potential to disrupt the fragile equilibrium within the galley. Mortelli was not a common oarsman, but a *mozzo*, tasked with assisting the *aguzzino* in overseeing discipline among the crew. His role lent the case particular gravity: leniency was simply not an option. After all, how could the naval authorities expect order to be upheld if those entrusted with enforcing it were themselves the first to violate it?

Despite his initial voluntary denunciation, Celebrini altered his version of events during the trial. Contrary to the surgeon's findings, he now claimed that the irritation to his anus resulted from an overly aggressive cleansing and from a pair of poor-quality trousers he had purchased months earlier from a Bolognese merchant in the port—recycling a well-known and frequently invoked excuse. He formally withdrew his accusations against Mortelli, who, in turn, denied ever having any kind of relationship with Celebrini. Both men supported their revised accounts by claiming that the rest of the crew could vouch for them. The questioning of their shipmates, combined with Celebrini's retraction, strongly suggests that once back aboard the vessel, he was likely subjected to threats by his companions—indirectly revealing the existence of a tacit pact among crew members to

172 ASR, Tribunale poi Governatore di Civitavecchia (1589–1913), b. 658, dossier 8, f. n.n.: "per causa di reiterata azione sodomitica e non per altro motivo."

keep such practices hidden from the eyes of the authorities.¹⁷³ This is further supported by the fact that few sodomy trials appear to have been initiated by formal complaints from fellow crew members—at least not in the surviving records.

Ultimately, although the surgeon continued to insist that this was a clear case of sodomy, the trial culminated with the acquittal of both men and Mortelli's transfer to another galley, on the grounds that there was no evidence of any friendship between the two, and that Celebrini's now-treated injury could no longer be medically examined.¹⁷⁴

As before, the situation was not resolved through the use of force. On the contrary, it seems that none of the trials examined ended with the application of corporal punishment. Several plausible explanations can be proposed. At first glance, it might seem that aboard the Papal fleet the political and judicial authorities were indeed committed to suppressing sodomy—though not through violent means. What seemed to matter more—and perhaps proved more effective—was not punishing those who had already committed the offense but rather deterring others from doing so. It may have been enough to simply open an investigation or initiate legal proceedings—both to instill fear among the crew and to signal that a functioning apparatus of control was actually in place.

One could argue that there was, in fact, a reluctance to prosecute illicit sexual practices in earnest, and that the initiation of partial or unresolved trials was ultimately a performative gesture—meant more to deflect accusations of negligence than to genuinely root out the practice. Indeed, reading the archival sources, one is struck by the sense that the authorities were not seriously invested in eradicating sodomy among convicts. The archival evidence suggests that even when criminal proceedings were initiated, they were rarely pursued with any real vigor or with a clear desire to uncover the truth. A related possibility is that it was simply a period of transition during which the naval authorities hesitated about whether to prosecute sodomy rigorously, torn between the duty to administer justice and the desire to avoid scandal or risk the loss of skilled manpower aboard seafaring vessels.

It should not be forgotten that the galleys were a context in which the accused were forced laborers at the oars. Perhaps the authorities were reluctant to impose the death penalty, since doing so would simply have meant depriving the galleys of much-needed free labor. Moreover, the Governor's Court's lack of interest in prosecuting suspects may have stemmed from the social status of the accused—men already condemned to society's margins, such as convicts and slaves. In prac-

173 A similar hypothesis is suggested by Calcagno, "Brutale libidine," p. 180.

174 ASR, Tribunale poi Governatore di Civitavecchia (1589–1913), b. 660, dossier 8, f. n.n.

tice, the governor had little or no direct contact with the rowing crews or knowledge of their crimes. If the alleged act occurred aboard a vessel rather than in the city streets, it may not have elicited particular concern, despite falling under his jurisdiction. Nevertheless, the mere fact that procedural records related to sodomy committed by the rowing crews have survived—and that investigations were in fact carried out—points to a significant shift at the institutional and judicial level, and underscores the indispensable role that medical professionals played in prosecuting such crimes.

5 Theoretical gaps in early modern medicine: the case of sodomy

Trials against sodomitic galley rowers open up another crucial topic alongside the doctor-patient relationship: the relationship between medicine and sodomy. It is widely accepted that in the pre-modern era, Western European medicine offered no formal theorization of sodomy. The only setting in which it directly addressed the topic was legal—when physicians were required to physically examine suspected sodomites in search of indications of sexual intercourse. Recent historiography has revealed that a science of homosexuality—though both terms are anachronistic—already existed in the early modern period. They remain useful, provided homosexuality is understood as same-sex relations and science as a broad form of knowledge. Indeed, well before the 17th century, one finds medical and forensic discussions of anal intercourse, including anatomical, mental or physiological causes; classification of homoerotic relationships into sub-genders, proposed therapies, and more.¹⁷⁵

The persistent idea that same-sex relations were not subject to scientific investigation until the modern period stems from a historiographical tendency to privilege—perhaps to overemphasize—law and theology as the sole discursive arenas for addressing sodomy in the early modern period. This view underpins the *acts paradigm*, which holds that—prior to the 19th century—sexual deviance was understood solely in terms of individual acts, not as reflective of personal identity. From the modern period onward, however, the figure of the sexual pervert emerges. In the first case, one speaks of “sodomy;” in the second of “homosexuality.” This marks a stark dichotomy between the early modern “sodomite”—a legal and moral category—and the modern-day “homosexual”—

175 Borris, *The Prehistory of Homosexuality*, pp. 4–6.

conceived as an individual defined by an innate perversion of mind or body and therefore a subject of scientific scrutiny.¹⁷⁶

By the 19th century, sexual deviance was no longer framed in terms of isolated acts, but as the expression of membership in a particular social group—one defined by experiencing emotional and sexual attraction toward members of the same sex. Beginning in the 18th century, the study of same-sex relationships shifted from focusing solely on illicit anal intercourse to examining its perceived pathological effects on the body and the personality. Scientific interest in sexuality expanded, particularly with the rise of psychiatry, which sought to explain why and how one became “homosexual”—a term coined in 1869 by the Hungarian journalist Karl-Maria Kertbeny—and whether, and how, it could be “cured.” Throughout the 19th century, homosexuality increasingly came to be viewed not as a temporary deviation from the norm, but rather as a chronic, pathological condition.¹⁷⁷

And yet, a natural, identity-based conception of sodomy can be traced as far back as antiquity. Theories of innate same-sex affinities circulated in ancient Greek and Roman sciences, especially in medicine and astrology, and were later revived during the Middle Ages. Since antiquity, various authors had argued that the sin “against nature” had, if fact, natural causes. Given the sensitivity of the subject, however, such works were few in number, written mostly in Latin, and often censored. The moral, legal, religious, and social condemnation of sodomy was so severe that it discouraged scientific inquiry and prevented these texts from being translated into the vernacular. The risk of exclusion from the scholarly community was too high—even in the name of the love of knowledge.¹⁷⁸

Why, then, was it problematic to recognize sodomy as a subject worthy of medical attention? Didn’t the humoral theory, after all, allow for a natural explanation of such practices. As discussed in Chapter 1, an individual’s temperament was thought to be predicated upon a unique balance of the four humors. There was no single, universal temperament [*complexio*]; rather, it varied with sex, age, climate, and geographical region. As Borris has noted, “complexional physiology was widely applied to explain the range of human deviations from perceived norms of biological sex, gender, and sex roles.”¹⁷⁹

Given that health was not defined by strict humoral equilibrium, and that each individual was believed to possess a distinct constitution, it followed that dif-

176 Ibid.

177 Watson, *Forensic Medicine*, p. 117 f.

178 Borris, *The Prehistory of Homosexuality*, p. 9 f.

179 Ibid., p. 17 f.

ferent sexual orientations were not only possible, but not inevitably classified as pathological. Individuals whose inherent temperament led them to prefer same-sex relationships were not—within this framework—considered ill.¹⁸⁰ Even the Hippocratic-Galenic theory of sexual physiology allowed for intermediate sexual forms that challenged the male-female binary. According to this theory, there was only one sex—male—and female genitalia were simply internalized male organs, the result of insufficient heat during intrauterine development.¹⁸¹ Other disciplines, such as physiognomy and astrology, also contributed to normalizing individual idiosyncrasies. They reinforced the idea that certain tendencies, though contrary to the norm, were both natural and innate—attributed to malign celestial influences and visibly inscribed on the body.¹⁸²

What emerged from these diverse frameworks was a conception of nature not as a static system governed by immutable laws, but as dynamic and variable. Deviations from the norm were not exceptions to nature but expressions of it—which, by its very nature, never acted randomly, nor aimlessly.¹⁸³ This was the paradox of so-called monstrous creature: their “unnatural natures” were not “in keeping with nature” [*secundum naturam*], yet neither were they “contrary to nature” [*contra naturam*].¹⁸⁴

The answer is simple: recognizing sodomy as a medical condition required situating it within the realm of nature rather than that of morality. Yet to seek natural explanations for this crime *against* nature—to “naturalize the unnatural”—would have not only implied a teleological justification for such practices, but also risk placing them “beyond the boundaries of vice.”¹⁸⁵ As Aristotle argued in Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, moral virtue and vice are not innate but acquired through habit and training. If sodomy were deemed a natural condition—however defective, like blindness or disease—it could no longer be condemned as a moral failing, and thus not a vice in the true sense of the term.¹⁸⁶

Whether sodomy was attributed to physiology [*natural*], to a corrupted humoral balance [*egrotative*], or to habitual behaviors [*consuetudine*], it was consistently framed in medicalized terms, as though akin to illness. Fourteenth-century scholars such as Nicole Oresme and Heinrich von Friemar regarded same-sex acts as products of bad habits, no more morally significant than biting one’s nails or

180 Cadden, *Nothing Natural*, p. 152.

181 Laqueur, *Making Sex*; Montecón Movellán, *Oltre la repressione*, p. 149.

182 Borris, *The Prehistory of Homosexuality*, pp. 20–28.

183 Cadden, *Nothing Natural*, p. 35f.

184 *Ibid.*, p. 62f.

185 *Ibid.*, pp. 140–175.

186 *Ibid.*, pp. 144–146.

fiddling with one's hair.¹⁸⁷ Some argued that medicine should avoid these illicit practices due to the *turpitudinem*—the shame associated with the topic—others insisted that it was both the right and the duty of natural philosophers, including physicians, to investigate all phenomena in nature. As Walter Burley argued: “Nothing natural is shameful, all things in the world are pure.” For a philosopher, even the most repulsive and vile phenomena held intrinsic value in the pursuit of truth.¹⁸⁸

Despite such views, the stigma surrounding sodomy was so deeply entrenched across early modern European society that medical scholars largely avoided further investigating the subject. While there was no formal censorship, the implicit threat of undermining its moral and legal condemnation—and with it, the system of values underpinning social order—served as a powerful deterrent. Nevertheless, throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, some clerics accepted the possibility that sodomy might have physiological causes. For example, Manuel do Vale de Moura, the Lusitanian representative on the Inquisition, argued that it could stem from early exposure to vice, malign celestial influences or an inherent temperament—especially one found among “barbarians.” Moura claimed that some regions and individuals with humoral imbalances were predisposed to such acts. This naturalization of vice, however, did not mitigate moral judgment; rather, it served as a tool to reinforce religious condemnation and fuel hatred.¹⁸⁹

One of the earliest, and perhaps most noteworthy, attempts to understand the causes of sodomy in terms of natural processes can be found in the ancient text *Problemata* (Book IV) attributed to Pseudo-Aristotle. In Question 26,¹⁹⁰ he specifically addresses the issue of homosexual lust, beginning with the phrase: “Some individuals, compelled by nature, commit the sodomitical sin [*sodomiticum peccatum*].”¹⁹¹ This collection of questions [*problemata*], dealing primarily with natural phenomena, was divided into 38 books [*particulae*], each covering a specific subject. Book IV included 32 questions related to “venereal matters,” among which Pseudo-Aristotle seeks to answer: “Why do some men enjoy the passive role in sex, while others enjoy both active and passive roles?”¹⁹² He offers two explanations: some men are born with anatomical defects that divert semen from its proper path; others develop this inclination as a habit formed through past experiences. Thus, sodomy between men was included among those phenomena

187 Ibid., pp. 159–161.

188 Ibid., p. 182.

189 Lavenia, *Eresia indicibile*, pp. 34–38.

190 See Blair, *Autorship*, pp. 189–227.

191 Cadden, *Nothing Natural*, p. 35.

192 Ibid., p. 3.

which, though not inherently virtuous, were nonetheless part of nature—much like the sensation of dizziness when drunk or the tendency to fall asleep while reading.¹⁹³

Despite the renown of the author traditionally attributed to the *Problemata*, especially Book IV, it garnered scarcely any scholarly attention, likely due to both the subject matter and the work's excessively dense and complicated arguments. The first Latin translation of the text, by Bartolomeo da Messina in the mid-13th century, appeared much later than other works in the Aristotelian corpus.¹⁹⁴ Nevertheless, during the 14th century, a small number of eminent scholars began to engage with Book IV, notably Pietro d'Abano (c. 1250–1315), Jean de Jandun (c. 1285–1338), Walter Burley (c. 1275–1345), and Evrart de Conty (c. 1330–1405). These scholars—all natural philosophers closely linked to universities where medicine and natural philosophy were taught principally through the study of Aristotle's works—also spent considerable time in Paris.

The most prominent—and earliest—commentator on Book IV was Pietro d'Abano, a natural philosopher and physician, whose career spanned the universities of Padua and Paris. His works reflected and were shaped by the rationalist tendencies of 13th-century Padua, which aimed to provide causal explanations for all natural phenomena.¹⁹⁵ D'Abano's commentary on *Problemata* was likely completed around 1310, roughly contemporaneous with his influential *Conciliator* which sought to reconcile differences between medicine and natural philosophy.¹⁹⁶ His commentary begins with an inquiry into sexual pleasure, broadening from specific men's desires into a universal account, thereby laying the groundwork for understanding sodomy as a variation of a natural process. Sexual pleasure, in his view, results from the expulsion of superfluous matter—*semen*—through ejaculation, which helps maintain humoral balance. In this sense, ejaculation is akin to other expulsions from the body—such as defecation or the shedding of tears—all of which serve to ensure bodily harmony.¹⁹⁷

Under normal circumstances, semen is expelled through the penis. D'Abano, however, theorizes that some men's "pores" (which refer to channels in the body) may be "not constituted according to nature either because those pores in the penis are blocked [...] or alternatively the humidity flows into the anus and exits that way." In such cases, the passages for sperm—the "pores"—may be ar-

193 Ibid., p. 8f.

194 Ibid., p. 14f.

195 See Piaia, *Pietro D'Abano*.

196 Siraisi, *Medieval Renaissance Medicine*, p. 60; Ronzoni/Piaia, *Pietro D'Abano*.

197 Cadden, *Nothing Natural*, pp. 39–42.

ranged “not according to nature.”¹⁹⁸ He proposes two possibilities. The first is the vessels at the base of the penis may be blocked—a condition similar to that found in eunuchs or effeminates. The second is that moisture may accumulate and be discharged through the anus instead of the penis, resulting in the evacuation of semen through an anatomically incorrect orifice. He likens this anomaly to blindness, which he suggests may arise from a thick humor obstructing the optic nerve.¹⁹⁹

Thus, D’Abano identifies two types of anatomical deviations in the male sexual organs: one where the natural expulsion of excess bodily humors is obstructed and another where semen is misdirected to the anus, where, contrary to nature, the contraction during sexual intercourse does not take place in the buttocks but in the upper part of the penis. As a result, no pores open in the penis; instead the fluid is expelled through openings around the anus, flowing in the wrong direction.²⁰⁰

The desire to engage in sodomy could thus arise not only from anatomical defects but also from repeated practice, regarded as a form of “second nature.” According to D’Abano, individuals referred to as sodomites might become such after becoming accustomed to the act from an early age.²⁰¹ It is notable that the idea that one could become a sodomite through habituation in adolescence is also widely attested in archival sources. A deeply ingrained early modern belief held that one of the principal dangers of indulging in such practices—following the model of classical pederasty—was that it rendered young people effeminate and inured them to the practice.²⁰² D’Abano’s conclusion is clear: while sodomy is an abominable practice, it is a thoroughly natural phenomenon and “beyond the boundaries of vice,” while those who practice it cannot be considered immoral from an ethical standpoint.²⁰³ Though he acknowledges sodomy’s intrinsic criminal nature, his language remains notably ambiguous: he never explicitly states his opinion on whether these men and their inclinations should be condemned.²⁰⁴ Later scholars, on the contrary, argued in favor of condemning such acts and advocated censoring Book IV of the *Problemata* as too unseemly a subject matter for natural philosophy. Sex could—and should—only be discussed in the context of

198 Ibid., p. 46 f.

199 Ibid.

200 Ibid., p. 49 f.

201 Ibid., p. 74.

202 See Baldassarri, *Bande giovanili*.

203 Cadden, *Nothing Natural*, p. 159 f.

204 Ibid., p. 190.

promoting procreation and preserving good health, with all its other aspects relegated to morality.²⁰⁵

Over the course of antiquity, and, later, in the early modern period, two disciplines closely related to medicine sought to explain sodomy on a scientific and natural basis: astrology and physiognomy. As outlined in Chapter 1, medical astrology formed one of the key branches of ancient medicine. It was believed that the position of the planets could influence a person's state of health, and therefore, studying the stars could provide the answer in the search for the most appropriate remedy for physiological or psychological disturbances.²⁰⁶ In addition, horoscopic astrology was believed to be an essential tool not only in medical practice, but also in theories of generation. Since the Middle Ages, the notion that the stars—with their heat, light, and occult effects—influenced the creation of the embryo had become firmly rooted. An individual's mental and physical constitution was thought to be determined by their horoscope not only at the time of conception but also at birth.²⁰⁷ One's sexual orientation, too, was included among those innate traits subject to astral influences. As early as Ptolemy, in aphorism VIII of the *Centiloquium* and in book IV of the *Quadripartium*, harmful sexual inclinations were attributed to an inauspicious conjunction of Venus or Jupiter, unmediated by the presence of Saturn.²⁰⁸

Physiognomy—the science of interpreting bodily signs as indicators of personal character traits, state of health, and even life and death—was also condemned on similar grounds. Early modern physiognomy, based in part on ancient astrology and complexional theory, posited that internal conditions manifested themselves through physical signs that could be read on the body. At the same time, such signs could also indicate future changes. Consequently, one's sexual inclination—which was also a natural and internal characteristic—could be traced through external signs, which in turn could be identified and studied.²⁰⁹ Moreover, physiognomy was an even more deterministic science than astrology, as it assumed that the types and applications of the characteristics studied were fixed and universally applicable across all historical periods.²¹⁰

²⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 198–202.

²⁰⁶ Siraisi, *Medieval Renaissance Medicine*, p. 111.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Cadden, *Nothing Natural*, pp. 97–102.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

²¹⁰ Borris, *Sodomizing Science*, p. 137.

5.1 Medicine and sodomy in the courtroom: some reflections

In conclusion, when discussing the complex relationship between medicine and same-sex acts throughout the early modern period, we cannot avoid addressing the field of forensic medicine. Perhaps the only context in which these topics were unanimously seen as interlinked was in criminal trials involving suspicion of such offenses. The impossibility of readily establishing whether the illicit activity actually occurred meant that judges often had to rely on the opinions of doctors summoned to testify as medical experts. Although medical reports did not explore the motives and causes—whether natural or otherwise—underlying the act, they nonetheless reveal something about the early modern conception of the subject. From a purely legal standpoint—focused on its condemnation—same-sex intercourse was not an abstract or physiological condition but a specific act: rectal penetration, especially between men.²¹¹ Paradoxically, at a time this transgression was not widely regarded as a subject worthy of medical interest, medicine was the only discipline thought capable of providing certainty as to whether the act had been committed, thus placing this offense both within and beyond the competence of medical practitioners.

The analysis of same-sex offenses among early modern *galeotti* thus confirms the role of medical practitioners in the courtroom, demonstrating how the doctor's expertise was central in identifying and addressing this vice. First, doctors helped maintain strict discipline among rowers by notifying the naval authorities of any physical sign indicative of illicit sexual behavior—ulcers, lesions and similar indicators. A thorough examination of the suspected sodomite's anus could provide certainty about the alleged illicit activity, compensating for the lack of control by galley officials over the crew, and the ineffectiveness of punitive threats. The obligation for doctors to cure the patient, examine him carefully, and report their findings to the authorities was central in cases involving such infractions, demonstrating the intricate, and at times contradictory role medical practitioners played in maintaining social and moral order aboard early modern galleys. This intersection of medical practice, legal authority, and social discipline sheds light on early modern attitudes toward non-normative sexuality and underscores the deeper complexity of the doctor-patient relationship—both aboard galleys and within society at large—where medical expertise functioned as a tool of moral governance and a mechanism of control.

211 Rousseau, *Policing the Anus*, p. 78.