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“THE GREAT FEAR” IN VENICE AND FLORENCE
IN THE 15th CENTURY AND ITS POSSIBLE CAUSES

Venice and Florence, two largest — next to Milan and Naples — and most important Italian towns in the field of economy and politics, became the stage of an unprecedented eruption of homophobia, that is an irrational fear of homosexuality¹ and violent persecutions of homosexuals, known in the period as sodomites. The phenomenon of that “great fear” (*una grande paura*), which was somehow passed over by Jean Delumeau in his famous book *La peur en Occident (XIIIe–XVIIIe siècles)*², has been already in detail recognized and depicted by other historians, including Elizabeth Pavan³, Patricia H. Labalme⁴, Guido Ruggiero⁵, Gabriele Martini⁶, Michael Rocke⁷, and Romano Canosa⁸.

¹ Homophobia was first defined by G. Weinberg in his book *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*, New York 1972. Cf. *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*, ed. W. R. Dynes, vol. I, Chicago-London 1990, pp. 552–555.

² Paris 1978.

³ E. Pavan, *Police des mœurs, société et politique à Venise à la fin du Moyen Age*, “Revue Historique”, vol. CCLXIV, 1980, N° 536, pp. 241–288.

⁴ P. H. Labalme, *Sodomy and Venetian Justice in the Renaissance*, “Tijdschrift voor rechtsgeschiedenis. Revue d'histoire du droit. The legal history review”, vol. LII, 1984, N° 3, pp. 217–254.

⁵ G. Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros. Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice*, New York-Oxford 1985, pp. 109–148.

⁶ G. Martini, *Il “vittio nefando” nella Venezia del Seicento. Aspetti sociali e repressione di giustizia*, Roma 1988, on the situation in Renaissance Venice, pp. 15–37.

⁷ M. Rocke, *Il controllo dell'omosessualità a Firenze nel XV secolo: gli Ufficiali di Notte*, “Quaderni Storici”, vol. XXII, 1987, N° 66, fasc. 3, pp. 701–723; idem, *Sodomites in Fifteenth-Century Tuscany: the Views of Bernardino of Siena*, in: *The Pursuit of Sodomy: Male Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe*, ed. K. Gerard, G. Hekma, New York-London 1989, pp. 7–31; idem, *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence*, New York 1996.

⁸ R. Canosa, *Storia di una grande paura. La sodomia a Firenze e a Venezia nel Quattrocento*, Milano 1991.

Yet the question: what were the causes of this problem, still remains open.

In Venice in 1418, *Signori di Notte* were definitely debarred from sentencing in cases relating to homosexuality, as they were considered not zealous and efficient enough, and these cases were handed over as matters of utmost importance to the jurisdiction of *Consiglio dei Dieci*, the institution which was to protect the security of the state. Within the framework of *Consiglio dei Dieci* a special bench in these cases was appointed under the name of *collegium sodomitarum*. In Florence, where already in 1325 and 1365 laws penalizing homosexuality were enforced, and in 1403 *Ufficio dell'Onestà* was established in order to combat, among other things, sodomy, in 1432 a special office *Ufficiali di Notte* was formed, which was to repress homosexuals.

Thanks to well preserved archival documentation (files *Ufficiali di Notte* in Florence and *Consiglio dei Dieci* in Venice) one can assess the scope of the repression which affected homosexuals in both towns in the 15th century. According to the estimates made by Michael R o c k e, *Ufficiali di Notte* considered during 70 years of their existence between 15 and 16 thousand allegations of sodomy, sentencing in more than 2400 cases. As the allegations of homosexuality were also considered by other Florentine offices, in most cases by *Otto di Guardia*, the number of those sentenced for sodomy in 15th century Florence is estimated by Rocke as approximately 3 thousand⁹. Even if real homosexuals formed only a part of the tried and sentenced¹⁰, these figures testify to the scale of repression affecting homosexuals in 15th century Florence. These impressive results could be achieved by *Ufficiali di Notte* thanks to the fact that they were not obliged to obey court procedures, and they based their evidence merely on denunciation, in most cases anonymous ones (*notificatio secreta*). They also accepted the defendant's plea of guilty (which was often extorted through bullying or torture) as the only evidence, or the testimony of two eye-witnesses, which did not have to be supported by any evidence, or even only four people who would testify that the sodomy of the defendants was a public fact (so, as

⁹ M. R o c k e, *Forbidden Friendships*, pp. 47.

¹⁰ Cf. my critical comments on this issue: *Sodoma i Gomora we wczesnono- renesansowej Florencji (Sodom and Gomorrah in early-Renaissance Florence)*, "Przegląd Historyczny", vol. LXXXVIII, 1997, N° 1, pp. 146-147.

a matter of fact, a rumour, whose — as social psychology proves — creation is largely based on cognitive ambiguity). Thus, it was a perfect system of bullying society on the one hand, and on the other hand — of inciting a homophobic mistrust.

The ardour of Florentine *Ufficiali di Notte* in repressing homosexuals greatly outnumbered the activity of the Spanish inquisition, whose tribunal in Valencia sentenced 181 sodomites in one hundred years (1571–1670), whereas during the whole period of its existence between 1565 and 1785 it tried 320–350 homosexuals¹¹.

The figures which refer to Venice are less spectacular. According to the research of Elisabeth Pavan and Guido Ruggiero, between 1401 and 1500 *Consiglio dei Dieci* considered only 232 (or, perhaps 268) cases of sodomy (we are deducting cases regarding heterosexual sodomy, that is anal sexual intercourse with women), which entailed 464 persons¹². Nevertheless, the degree of repression is estimated not only by the number of the prosecuted, but also — especially in totalitarian states — the very existence of repressing institutions and their efficiency, ruthlessness, and effectiveness. And the Council of Ten was a ruthless and very effective institution.

Penalties varied. In Florence fines were most common (it was even said that homosexuals were punished with ardour in order to supply at that time emptyish town treasury), less often was imprisonment or exile, whereas quite common was public humiliation through lashing and pillory. In some cases the penalty was death through beheading or burning at the stake¹³. In Venice penalties included imprisonment or exile, condemning to the galleys, castration, quite common were also death sentences through burning at the stake¹⁴. It was a common practice to pass a sentence *in contumaciam*, as the defendants would rather sentence themselves to exile by escaping from the town and hoping for leniency elsewhere (however, laws which penalized sodomy were in force actually in almost all Italian towns).

The picture of homophobia which existed in 15th century Florence should be complemented through reminding a wave of

¹¹ R. Carrasco, *Inquisición y represión sexual en Valencia. Historia de los sodomitas (1565–1785)*, Barcelona 1985, pp. 69 and 72.

¹² E. Pavan, *op. cit.*, pp. 274; G. Ruggiero, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

¹³ M. Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, pp. 76–80, 237–241.

¹⁴ R. Canosa, *op. cit.*, pp. 100–132; G. Martini, *op. cit.*, pp. 28–32.

pamphlets and anti-homosexual satires (Stefano Finiguerra, called Za) from the beginning of that century, and recalling impassioned and fanatical sermons of Bernardino of Siena (1424–1425) and Girolamo Savonarola (1494–1497), which condemned, among other things, homosexuality and gathered a great number of adherents¹⁵. Repression of homosexuals in Venice and Florence was a 15th century phenomenon. In the 16th and 17th centuries it significantly diminished. The office of *Ufficiali di Notte* in Florence was abolished in 1502, and in Venice, from 1647 on, allegations of homosexuality ceased to be regarded as matters of the state.

The fear of homosexuality had both eschatological and realistic justification. Christianity, and earlier Judaism, instilled the conviction into their believers that sodomy was the gravest of sins, a terrible offense of God, and therefore deserved a severe penalty from Him. The unceasingly reminded history of Sodom and Gomorrah (the *Book of Genesis*, 19) served to exemplify this sin. All acts of God: earthquakes, floods, and plague were considered as such penalties. And while being afraid of God's anger, people were afraid of homosexuality, which provoked this anger. Not accidentally did the patriarch of Venice, Antonio Contarini call in his sermon of 27 March 1511, the day after an earthquake took place, for the expulsion of homosexuals from town¹⁶. And there were also more earthbound fears. Homosexuality was regarded as the reason why towns were depopulated, which in consequence led to their decline. It was also considered as posing a serious threat to the existing social order. This argument was augmented by tolerant opinions towards homosexuals, which were expressed by supporters of new philosophical, artistic and social ideas as well as by humanists who were critical of the old order. Even though all these fears were utterly irrational, they had a considerable impact on people's consciousness and caused homophobia which got in times monstrous in size and scope, especially when its reasons appeared simultaneously at the same time. This in consequence led to increased repression of sodomites.

¹⁵ R. Canosa, *op. cit.*, pp. 24–35, 55–64. M. Roocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, pp. 32–33; *idem*, *Sodomites*, *loc. cit.*

¹⁶ E. Pavan, *op. cit.*, p. 265; G. Scarbello, *Per una storia della prostituzione a Venezia tra il XIII e il XVIII sec.*, "Studi Veneziani" N. S. XLVII, 2004, p. 49.

In the 15th century, in Florence and Venice appeared several factors which could cause homophobia and, as a result, lead to increased repression. One of them was of demographic nature, namely the depopulation of towns, especially Florence, where the number of the inhabitants dwindled from roughly 100 thousand in about 1338 to slightly under 40 thousand at the beginning of the 15th century. The depopulation was caused by a series of plagues which attacked Florence, starting from the "Black Death" in 1348 (other attacks consecutively in 1363–1364, 1417, 1423–1424, 1430), but — as we know from the present research of historians–demographers) — it began even before this critical date. To the people of the period especially alarming must have been the fact that demographic losses caused by plague were replenished very slowly (it was not until the end of the 15th century than Florence reached the number of 74 thousand inhabitants)¹⁷.

It was homosexuals, as they did not contribute to procreation, who were blamed for this state of affairs which was catastrophic to towns and threatening their very existence. These accusations are absurd in the light of our today's knowledge of homosexuality and demography of towns, but in the eyes of 15th century people it seemed justified. There was also a belief that homosexuals could be persuaded or forced through penalties to start families and procreate. In order to achieve this goal women's prostitution was even considered to be supported, as there was a common belief that a wide range of sexual services on offer would make homosexuals be interested in women, and in consequence they would change their sexual preferences and engage themselves in family life and procreation. To implement this idea, a special office was established in Florence under the name of *Ufficiali dell'Onestà*, which was not only to act as a custodian of public morals, but also open doors for prostitution as an antidote against homosexuality. In 1415 a decision was taken to build a very large brothel in the town centre, and two smaller ones in

¹⁷ K. J. Beloch, *Bevölkerungsgeschichte Italiens*, vol. I, Berlin 1939, p. 148; E. Fiumi, *La demografia fiorentina nelle pagine di Giovanni Villani*, "Archivio Storico Italiano", vol. CVIII, 1950, pp. 106, 118; Ch. M. de La Roncière, *Florence, centre économique régional au XIVe siècle*, Aix-en-Provence 1976, pp. 693–696; D. Herlihy, Ch. Klapisich-Zuber, *Les Toscans et leurs familles*, Paris 1978, pp. 176–183; A. G. Carmichael, *Plague and the Poor in Renaissance Florence*, Cambridge 1986, pp. 10–107; M. Rocco, *Il controllo*, p. 702.

other districts. There was a plan to invite prostitutes and pimps¹⁸. Prostitution was also supported by the Church authorities, for example the archbishop of Florence and the patriarch of Venice, following the idea of Saint Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologiae*¹⁹. People of the period did not completely realize the fact — what we nowadays know thanks to the research by historians—demographers — that the increase of population in preindustrial towns (or, perhaps, before the demographic revolution in the 19th century) was strictly dependant not on its growth (this was always negative in that period) but on the immigrant population. The natives comprised only a fraction of town inhabitants of the period, the majority were the incomers, without whom the towns would neither be able to increase their population, nor to maintain the number of their inhabitants at the same level²⁰. Therefore, the repression of homosexuals, who lived in those towns, which was carried out in order to make them start family lives and procreation, was completely inefficient. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that, when towards the close of the 16th century the population growth took place in Venice, the persecutions of homosexuals considerably dwindled²¹.

Another aspect of the problem was a crisis situation which affected Venice and Florence in the 15th century. It was a demographic — which has been mentioned above — as well as social, political, ideological, and first of all economic crisis. It swept around a number of Western European countries²². The Floren-

¹⁸ R. C. Trexler, *La prostitution florentine au XVe siècle: Patronages et clientèles*, "Annales", vol. XXXVI, 1981, N° 6, pp. 983–1015.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 985; E. Pavan, *op. cit.*, p. 265; cf. N. Davidson, *Theology, Nature and the Law: Sexual Sin and Sexual Crime in Italy from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Century*, in: *Crime, Society and the Law in Renaissance Italy*, ed. T. Deane, K. J. P. Lowe, Cambridge 1994, p. 91; G. Scaramello, *op. cit.*, pp. 19, 49.

²⁰ R. Mols, *Introduction à la démographie historique des villes d'Europe du XIVe au XVIIIe*, vol. I, Louvain 1955, ch. IX and X.

²¹ P. H. Labalme, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

²² See on this issue: R. H. Hilton, *Y-eut-il une crise générale de la féodalité*, "Annales", vol. VI, 1951, N° 1; M. Małowist, *Zagadnienie kryzysu feudalizmu w XIV i XV wieku w świetle najnowszych badań. Próba krytyki* (The Issue of the Crisis of Feudalism in the 14th and 15th Centuries in the Light of Recent Research. A Critical Approach), "Kwartalnik Historyczny", vol. LX, 1953, N° 1; F. Graus, *Das Spätmittelalter als Krisenzett. Ein Literaturbericht als Zwischenbilanz*, "Mediaevalia Bohemica", vol. I, 1969; J. Le Goff, *L'apogée de la chrétienté v. 1180 v. 1330*, Paris 1982, ch. VI; *Europe 1400. Die Krise des Spätmittelalters*, ed. F. Seibt, W. Eberhard, Stuttgart 1984.

tine cloth industry, which was fundamental to the town's economy, was severely hit. Also, the economy of Venice was from the 1350s in recession which the town did not overcome until the 1450s. Venetian merchants were under pressure from the Ottoman Turks in the Mediterranean Sea basin. Both republics led wars, either in self-defense (the war between Florence and the Visconti family), or to gain new lands and subjugate new territories — the wars which were successful but costly and exhausting the treasury. The medieval municipal form of government in Florence, based on the system of guilds, became anachronistic, and was replaced by a new merchant and banker oligarchy. A strong polarization of the Florentine society, divided into a rich and influential minority and poor lower strata with no middle class, took place, which provoked the feeling of lack of stability, and incessant fear of the reoccurrence of the *ciompi* revolt. It was even magnified by the threat of external aggression. The social situation in Venice was stable, but also gradually changed: the merchant aristocracy transformed themselves into the land aristocracy thanks to their acquisition of land on Terraferma. It was all overlapped by ideological unrest: a collapse of the authority of the Roman Catholic Church as a result of the long-lasting schism, disputes over primacy of popes and Councils, corruption, and moreover, new intellectual and artistic trends — humanism and early Renaissance²³.

The accumulation of so many economic problems, social and political tensions, and difficult or impossible to solve conflicts, rendered mechanisms of searching for "scapegoats" — individuals or groups of people who could be made responsible for harm, misfortunes and failures, and who could let everybody relieve

²³ An in-depth analysis of the economic situation of 15th century Florence was made by R. A. Goldthwaite, *The Building of Renaissance Florence. An Economic and Social History*, Baltimore-London 1980, pp. 29–66. See also: *Florentine Studies. Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. N. Rubinstein, London 1968; A. Molho, *Politics and the Ruling Class in Early Renaissance Florence*, "Nuova Rivista Storica", vol. II, 1968, pp. 400–420; R. C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, New York 1980; M. S. Mazzi, *Cronache di perfertia dello Stato Fiorentino; reati contro la morale nel primo Quattrocento*, "Studi Storici", vol. XXVII, 1986, N° 3, pp. 609–635. On the situation in 15th century Venice see: *Renaissance Venice*, ed. J. R. Hale, London 1975; A. Venturi, *Le trasformazioni economiche nel Veneto tra Quattro e Ottocento*, "Bollettino CISA", vol. XVII, 1976, p. 127; D. Romano, *Patricians and Popolani. The Social Foundations of the Venetian Renaissance State*, Baltimore-London 1987.

their frustration through vengeance on them²⁴. And in the late Middle Ages and early modern history, among “scapegoats” in charge were always and everywhere: heretics, lepers, Jews, witches and homosexuals²⁵.

As a matter of fact, there were no heretics in 15th century Italy, and the Church was preoccupied with its own internal problems, for example: the rebuilding of the authority of the papacy. Leprosy was at that time subsiding, whereas new categories of the affected by other diseases, who could qualify to be discriminated (syphilitics, mentally ill persons), had not appeared yet. Anti-Jewish threads appeared in sermons by Bernardino of Siena, John Capistrani, and Savonarola, but the anti-Jewish actions or against any other ethnic or religious minorities did not pose a threat when Italian towns were experiencing their demographic crisis and had to do their utmost to encourage foreigners to settle on their territories. Witch-hunts did not begin until the close of the 15th century.

Homosexuals were therefore the only group left. The background for their repression had already been created before, through secular legislation to penalize sodomy in a number of Italian towns (in Florence, a penalty for sodomy was stipulated already in the statute of Podesta from 1325), and firm condemnation of homosexuality by the Church²⁶.

The scholars who have researched this period in history, also underlined the fact that the 15th century was the time of a particularly intense struggle for power, especially in Florence²⁷. In this rivalry, the accusation of sodomy and handing over the rivals to courts, jailing, deprivation of political rights, and even burning at the stake, were exquisite instruments to eliminate

²⁴ E. Aronson, *Social Animal*, San Francisco-London 1972, ch. 6; R. Girard, *Le Bouc Emissaire*, 1982, ch. III and XII.

²⁵ Cf. J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality. Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, Chicago 1980, pp. 271-302; R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society. Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250*, Oxford 1987; J. Richards, *Sex, Dissidence and Damnation. Minority Groups in the Middle Ages*, London-New York 1991.

²⁶ Cf. M. Goodich, *The Unmentionable Vice. Homosexuality in the Later Medieval Period*, Santa Barbara-Oxford 1979; J. Boswell, *op. cit.*

²⁷ D. V. Kent, *The Rise of the Medici: Faction in Florence (1426-1434)*, Oxford 1977; N. Rubinstein, *Il governo di Firenze sotto i Medici (1434-1494)*, Firenze 1971; *idem*, *Florentine Constitutionalism and Medici Ascendancy in the Fifteenth Century*, in: *Florentine Studies*, pp. 442-462.

competitors and opponents²⁸. In early 15th century Florence, yet before the *Ufficiali di Notte* were established, there had been several demands not to appoint sodomites to any offices, and this ban also referred to single men, as potentially suspected homosexuals²⁹. Presumably, it was not accidental that among the first sentenced by *Ufficiali di Notte* for homosexuality were Antonio di Leonardo dell'Antella and Doffo di Nepo Spini, both former priors and political opponents of the then reaching for power Medicis³⁰. Also, the handing over in Venice in 1418 the judgement of homosexuals into the hands of *Consiglio dei Dieci*, the national security office, proves meaningfully the attempt to make this practice a political case³¹.

On the other hand, there have been no attempts made in general by scholars to consider the possible causes of homophobia and repression of homosexuals in 15th century Venice and Florence on other grounds, namely culture and ideology. And indeed, it was in Venice and Florence where in the 15th century a confrontation took place between an old medieval way of world perception and a new, humanistic ideology, an encounter between old late-medieval culture and new culture of the Renaissance³². Even though in the history of culture a continuous development is what matters, and there is no doubt that the early Renaissance was born on the base of Italian culture of the late-Middle Ages, Giotto's painting, the Pisanis' sculpture, Dante's, Petrarch's, and Boccaccio's writing. But nevertheless, it was in contrast and negation to the culture of late Gothic, and reached for antique patterns, those of ancient Rome, and ancient Greece in particular, which were all forgotten in the

²⁸ M. Rocke, *Il controllo*, p. 703; P. H. Labalme, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

²⁹ M. Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, p. 35.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 56-57; R. Canosa, *op. cit.*, p. 43; A. Zorzi, *L'amministrazione della giustizia penale nella repubblica fiorentina. Aspetti e problemi*, Firenze 1988, p. 61.

³¹ M. Macchi, *Storia de Consiglio dei Dieci*, vol. I, Genova 1875, pp. 64, 396; E. Pavan, *op. cit.*, pp. 268; P. H. Labalme, *op. cit.*, p. 224; G. Ruggiero, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

³² H. Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance. Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*, Princeton 1966; E. Garin, *Cultura filosofica toscana e veneta nel Quattrocento*, in: *Umanesimo europeo e umanesimo veneziano*, ed. V. Branca, Venezia 1963, pp. 11-30; B. Nardi, *La scuola di Rialto e l'umanesimo veneziano*, *ibidem*, pp. 93-139 (the school of logic and philosophy was founded in 1408 by Tomá Talenti, a Florentine who settled in Venice).

Middle Ages. Italian humanists adored *The Divine Comedy* by Dante and poetry by Petrarch, but also studied works of Platon and other Greek authors. They looked for the *joie de vivre* where the ancient found it: in the beauty of nature and a human body, and also in eroticism, including homoeroticism. They reevaluated heretofore binding canons of truth, beauty, and morality. Sexuality, earlier considered as sinful and pushed into the darkest corners of human's consciousness³³, then became — as it was in ancient Greece — something natural and obvious, the source of joy, pleasure, happiness, and fine feelings. It also applied to homosexuality³⁴. The art of the early Italian Renaissance — sculpture and painting — is full of homoerotic motifs, perhaps unlike in any other period in the history of European art. This tendency was not even overlooked by religious art, which can be exemplified by the iconography of St. Sebastian, transformed by 15th century painters (Piero della Francesca, Sandro Boticelli, Antonello da Messina, Cima da Conegliano, Giovanni Bellini, Vincenzo Foppa) from the medieval pattern of a hoary Roman officer into the figure of a beautiful naked epebe³⁵. Michelangelo painted in 1503 (or, perhaps, between 1505 and 1510) the Tondo Doni, whose subject is the Holy Family with a group of five naked youths in the background (some critics believe that two of them were homosexual lovers), trying, perhaps, to express through painting philosophical views upon a man and love by Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola³⁶. And even before (approx. 1492), he carved for a befriended prior of the convent of *Santo Spirito* a crucifix with a figure of completely naked Christ (housed at present in *Casa Buonarroti* in Florence)³⁷.

³³ V. L. Bullough, *Sexual Variance in Society and History*, New York 1976, pp. 175–201 (*Early Christianity: A Sex Negative Religion*), pp. 347–413; J. Boswell, *op. cit.*, pp. 119–164; *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church*, ed. V. L. Bullough, J. Brundage, Buffalo 1982.

³⁴ V. L. Bullough, *op. cit.*, pp. 413–420.

³⁵ D. von Hadeln, *Die wichtigsten Darstellungsformen des H. Sebastian in der italienischen Malerei bis zum Ausgang des Quattrocento*, Strassburg 1906; A. Wyrobisz, *Appollo chrześcijański — renesansowa metamorfoza świętego Sebastiana (Christian Apollo — the Renaissance Metamorphosis of St. Sebastian)*, in: *Mowa i moc obrazów (Language and Power of Paintings)*, ed. W. Baraszkowski et alii, Warszawa 2005, pp. 165–168.

³⁶ M. Levi d'Ancona, *The Doni Madonna by Michelangelo: An Iconographic Study*, "The Art Bulletin", vol. I, 1968, № 1, pp. 43–50.

³⁷ M. Lisner, *Michelangelos Crucifix aus S. Spirito in Florenz*, "Münchener Jahrbuch der Bildenden Kunst" dritte Folge, vol. IV, 1964, pp. 7–36.

There are also a number of references to homosexuality in Italian literature of the early Renaissance. Antonio B e c c a d e l l i (*il Panormita*), the author of a collection of Latin epigrams, entitled *Hermaphroditus*, whose first part praises love and sex between men, dedicated his work to Cosma Medici, hoping, perhaps, that he would stop the growing then in Florence (after the actions of Bernardino of Siena) wave of homophobia³⁸. This did not happen, quite the contrary — as it was mentioned above — the Medici family made political use of the repression of homosexuals introduced by *Ufficiali di Notte*. This was not a hindrance for the Medicis to open doors to other Florentine humanists who praised homosexuality.

Marsilio F i c i n o (1433–1499), one of the leading Florentine humanists, the “discoverer” and popularizer of Platon (he translated his works into Latin), and enthusiastic supporter of his philosophy, was also the explorer of the theory of love by ancient Greeks. Following Platon, he stated that through the beauty of a human body one can learn about and admire the beauty of God himself, and that a human body is a link between the physical world and God, and only through love can the nature of God be experienced. This view led Ficino — in his comments on the *Symposium* by Platon — to the approval of homosexual love between men, regarded by him as an innate and natural phenomenon. It was to be a highly refined form of relation between sophisticated individuals³⁹.

Marsilio Ficino was presumably a homosexual himself, he formed a man to man friendship with 10 years younger Giovanni Cavalcanti. And also other representatives of the humanist Florentine elite: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Girolamo Benivieni, Pomponio Leto, Nicolló Lelio Cosmico, did not hide their man to man friendships and openly praised “Socratic love”⁴⁰.

Matteo Bandello could a few decades later express through the mouth of one of the characters of his novels, a Porcellio, an opinion that a sexual intercourse with boys was neither

³⁸ M. Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, pp. 42–43; N. Davidson, *op. cit.*, pp. 74–75.

³⁹ V. L. Bullough, *op. cit.*, pp. 415–416; G. Dall’Orto, “Socratic Love” as a Disguise for Same-Sex Love in the Italian Renaissance, in: *The Pursuit of Sodomy*, pp. 36–39.

⁴⁰ G. Dall’Orto, *op. cit.*, pp. 43–45.

a sin nor anything unnatural, quite the contrary — it was like eating or drinking for a man (written before 1540)⁴¹.

One cannot be surprised that such a view met with opposition and strong reactions from those people and groups, or institutions they represented which were still embedded in and wanted to remain within medieval social structures, continue to respect old values, and perceive the world as it had been seen before. The whole 15th century Venetian art, and in particular architecture, formed a picture of coexistence between and rivalry between the late Gothic and the Renaissance⁴².

The rivalry between the old and the new order also applied to the sphere of moral standards and sexuality. Guido Ruggiero, while researching sexual life of 15th century Venetians, noticed in it a traditional role of a family, marriage, and procreation next to a new libertarian world of prostitution, raped women, seduced nuns, and homosexuals⁴³.

Was a fierce attack of homophobia in 15th century Florence and Venice not opposition to humanism and the attempt to refute the then arising new current in art, culture, and tradition, to annihilate the then forming new ideology? Gabriele Martini wrote outright that this was an answer of the ruling elite, which was still identifying itself with traditional social and moral values, to innovative ideals and influences⁴⁴. The point is, though, that this answer was somehow prior to the very phenomenon which it was to confront. For the repression of homosexuals began to suddenly escalate earlier, before humanism and art of the early Renaissance took form. Nevertheless, if we assume that it was Petrarch and Boccaccio who were the precursors of

⁴¹ M. Bandello, *Novelle*, ed. L. Russo, E. Mazzali, Milano 1990, p. 125: *Il trastullarmi con fanciulli a me è più naturale che non è il mangiar e il ber a l'uomo.*

⁴² R. Gallo, *L'architettura di transizione dal gotico al Rinascimento e Bartolomeo Bon*, "Atti dell'Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti", vol. CIX, 1961–1962, pp. 187–204; N. Carboneri, Mauro Codussi, "Bolletino CISA", vol. VI, 1964, part. 2, pp. 188, wrote: *quando le persistenti nostalgie gotiche espresse sopra tutto in termini decorativi, ancora contrastavano le prime caute accettazioni del Rinascimento.* Cf. A. Wyrobisz, *Budownictwo i architektura w Wenecji w XV wieku. Koegzystencja bizantyjskiej, gotyckiej i renesansowej sztuki budowania (Building Construction and Architecture in 15th Century Venice. The Coexistence of Byzantine, Gothic and Renaissance Art of Building)*, "Przegląd Historyczny", vol. LXXXIX, 1998, N° 2, pp. 189–198.

⁴³ G. Ruggiero, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–10. Cf. reviews by A. Bray and R. Trumbach of this book in: *The Pursuit of Sodomy*, pp. 500 and 506–507.

⁴⁴ G. Martini, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

humanism, and that the ferment against the old order began to grow much before humanists started to verbalize and promulgate their views, and painters and sculptors to create, based on antiquity, homoerotic works of art — then, perhaps, that homophobic atmosphere was not that premature. And the struggle between the old and the new in the sphere of ideology, culture, mentality, with reference to social life and politics, took place across the whole 15th century, which was the period of great transformation, the passage from the Middle Ages to modern times. This fight may have taken the form of the "great fear". The causes of this phenomenon were most certainly very complex. We have listed the most important ones. But, one cannot neglect the causes of ideological and cultural nature.

It is also amazing and highly educative that in this atmosphere of repression and homophobia (at times hysterical one, like in Florence during the rule of Savonarola) exquisite intellectuals and artists, who were openly homosexuals or at least did not hide their support to homosexuality (Leonardo da Vinci, Donatello, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Ficino, Pico della Mirandola), were able to work and create absolutely freely. And censorship did not concern them.

(Translated by Robert Bubczyk)