

Views on Sexuality in Croatian Medieval Sources

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We analyzed attitudes towards sexuality during the medieval period in Croatia. For that purpose we investigated numerous medical and literary texts, statutes, and specific natural philosophical work entitled "Lucidar". Contrary to medical books, which had a low impact on the broader community, literary texts were important in spreading messages on sexuality, as well as in shaping medieval mentality and creating sexual taboos. Consequently, a specific perspective and culture influenced rules and practices for community protection, as well as various levels of social systems. Within the three large groups of sources, we selected those typical both in their content (ideas) and forms, and representative in shaping attitudes toward sexuality on our territory. The first group of sources (examples from literary genres) were identified as an important vehicle in transferring messages of morality, moral obligation and sexuality in general. Deeply rooted in Christianity they became a pattern according to which the way of life and value were measured, a specific view toward sexuality was shaped, and notions of stigma and taboo articulated.

Key words: Croatia; culture; Europe; history of medicine, medieval; sexuality; taboo

To explore sexuality in the Middle Ages is always a challenge, leading the investigator through a complex area of controversies. This is partly because medieval writers were not explicit and often used cryptic language, mostly to avoid committing sin by talking about issues, which, as they thought, were essentially corrupted. Although there is always some kind of "caveat" for the people writing about sexuality, medieval Croatian authors did not restrain from dealing with the topic, the hidden presence of which shines through the lines written in Croatian medieval Glagolitic script. In the Middle Ages, human sexuality fell within the domains of physicians, natural philosophers, moralists, and theologians, and the voices of the latter two are preserved in Croatian Glagolitic texts.

In medieval times, literary texts were important in spreading messages and shaping mentality regarding sexuality as well as in creating sexual taboos. Medical books, on the other hand, had a low impact on the broader community. Consequently, this specific mentality and culture influenced the community rules and practices regarding sexual issues. Stigmas and taboos as well as negative attitudes towards women pervaded the intellectual, medical, legal, and social systems in Europe during the Middle Ages, and survived in different shades and expressions until today.

Textual Sources on Sexuality Preserved in Croatia

Written sources preserved on the territory of Croatia regarding topics on sexuality form two main groups: medical texts and other sources.

The first group consists of the oldest preserved medical texts, mostly compilations or translations of different medical textbooks, which were brought to Croatia by foreign priests, physicians, or surgeons. These mostly Latin records, deeply rooted in Greek and Hellenistic culture, were later translated usually by Arabic authors and brought to different parts of Croatia. Many of these Latin medieval texts on sexuality can be found under the common title *Regimen*, meaning rules of hygiene and the way of life in the broadest sense (1). According to these sources, it is clear that every lack of modesty and temperance at that time had medical implications. Some of the texts were shaped by theory and practice of Salerno's practitioners, who had a strong impact on medieval medicine (1). Although sparse in their quantity, such preserved compilations serve as an indicator of the "demand" of medical texts in our region at the time. They represent a general medieval medical view on sexuality rather than genuine ideas created in or specific for our territory. Issues of reproduction, respective roles of male and female partners in conception of a child,

and embryology received much attention and frequently relied on astrology to explain various phenomena (2). Medieval medicine was eloquent on the anatomy, physiology, and psychology of heterosexual coitus, and the desire and pleasure associated with it. Their view was a teleological one – sexual pleasure was a necessity in the service of reproduction (3). In these texts, sexual physiology is presented in morally neutral terms and intercourse is seen as a healthy activity important for the continuation of the species.

In the realm of sexuality, medical writings were only one aspect of the medieval literate culture, not necessarily the most important one (not many were reading medical books, thus their impact on the population was marginal). Interaction among popular beliefs, religious teachings, medical, and – since 13th century – Aristotelian philosophical ideas permeated the way sexuality was described and understood both within and outside medical community.

Our aim was to explore a broader aspect of sexuality specific for our country. We selected some medieval texts preserved in Croatian Glagolitic books dating from the 15th and early 16th centuries, which fall into the domain of literature, ie, belong to the genres of hagiography, visions, exempla, and the so-called "miracles of Our Lady" (4). Works belonging to the categories of penitentials and to "moralistic" writing were also considered, since they could shed some light on how sexuality was dealt with in medieval societies. All these sources were written in Glagolitic script in vernacular tongue by native speakers of Croatian.

We also intended to identify recognizable concepts and language of sexuality specific for our setting. In addition to literary texts, we analyzed a natural-philosophical source Lucidar and the earliest medieval codex of law, The Act of Vinodol, where penal law nomenclature pertains to the offences against personality, including sexual violence (5,6). We focused on the language used in these sources and their relation to preserved medical compilations. The notions of sex and punishment, body and soul, disease and sin were identified.

The second, non-medical group of texts was originally intended for a wider audience of lay people, most of whom were illiterate. Glagolitic priests compiled such texts and delivered them orally as part of liturgy or on other special occasions. Therefore, they are simple in form and dramatic in the message they had to convey.

Literary Sources: (Female) Body, Lust, and Language

Croatian medieval literary works that we studied converged with and reinforced lay piety and concerns. There was clearly a negative view of women, which is typical of the late Middle Ages. There was a notion (inherited from Aristotle, but also the Old Testament) that women, being moister and colder than men, were always ready for intercourse and insatiable. This was clearly and bluntly verbalized in a mor-

alistic text in which a father instructs his son on life, and says: Beware, my son, for all women are harlots (in Croatian: kurbe) (7). The uncontrollable nature of the female sex drive is defined by male authorities – there was no man so virtuous to withstand the temptations of a woman, and there was no woman whose virtue could compensate for the risk of a man's souls. The words related to sexuality, encountered in circumspet allusions, were sin, lust, and evil. Things were almost never directly called by their names. Circumscribed by references such as perilous love or filthy sin, sexuality had a condemnatory label. Although authors employed cryptic language to talk symbolically about sex, the epithets were unequivocally harsh: "filthy sin", "the stench of adultery", "the evil act" – not naming it explicitly, but qualifying it morally. There seems to be a conventional element in their rhetoric, as reflected in use of dubious expressions, such as "shameful act." In a confessional, there is an oblique question about adultery: "Did you use to ... with other women?" – both the confessor and the penitent knew what the penitent referred to although he omitted the verb, to avoid committing an even worse sin by pronouncing the "filthy" word itself (8).

Exempla, as one of the most popular medieval literary genres (9), present the sexuality in a sinful manner, opposing chaste people against harlots, fornicators, and adulterers. The devil, eternal enemy, is always ready to instigate a mischief. One of the most poignant Glagolitic texts tells about a nun who breaks off her Sunday prayer and throws a rope to a young knight under her window. He climbs up and they commit the contemptuous sin and perilous love. After the act the knight disappears and the nun is left with a feeling of guilt and misery. She is so ashamed of having been "tricked by the devil" and she does not dare to confess her sin. So, after her death her soul is sent to purgatory. This was the one and only sin she did not confess for shame, and hence was condemned to the pains of purgatory (9).

In the prologue to the early medieval Legend of St Paul – the First Hermit, attributed to St. Jerome (Fig. 1), there is one of the most vivid, poetic, and – we could argue – the most erotic texts in Croatian medi-



Figure 1. Legend of Saint Paul the First Hermit. A page from the 16th century Glagolitic manuscript (Zagreb, Archive of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts).

eval literature (10). A pious young Christian is put to the test by heathen Roman officials who paid a prostitute to seduce him. When the young man feels dangerously close to committing a sin because "his body was elevated toward sin," he bites his tongue off as a desperate act and spits it into her face. Hence, his soul is saved. The language employed in the description of the bed, the silk shawls tying his ankles and wrists, and the beautiful woman are quite unique among preserved Croatian Glagolitic works.

As the above examples show, there was not much hope for those who committed sexual sin. Perhaps the only genre in Croatian medieval literature that offered help and comfort was the *Miracles of Our Lady* (11). While humans were portrayed as ready to punish and condemn, the heavenly mother Mary was gentle, compassionate, and willing to help any person, finding a grain of good in everyone. Her generosity and goodness of her heart reflected in her every deed. For example, when a nun sinned with a monk and was with child, Holy Mary safely delivered her and gave the child to an infertile woman. Or another example: a young and beautiful young lady was put into a convent by her father against her will. She fell in love with a knight and "burning with evil desire" eloped with him. When she realized that he only wanted to satiate his physical desire, she refused him: "I shall do whatever you ask, but I shall keep my virginity." Disillusioned by the shallowness of male desire and the deceptive lure of worldly goods, she returned ruefully to the convent only to learn that Mary had taken on her appearance and her nun's habit for nobody to notice her elopement. However, women in need were not the only ones Mary helped out. On the other end of the spectrum, there is story of a beautiful young man who lived a pure life of devotion to Mary, but had a mistress who wanted to coax him into sin. In a desperate attempt to refute her advances, he smeared his body with poisonous plants and his beauty turned into a hideous sight as leprous sores covered his entire body. The girl left him instantly, whereas Mary restored him to health.

Established Virtues and Roots of Taboos

Croatian Glagolitic sources were ideally suited for the edification of devout readers of modest intellectual accomplishments. There predominated Augustinian view that the body is good, but certainly less valuable than the soul, as well as the profound sense of fallen human nature (9). In the medieval period, the body had multiple meanings, including the mind/soul-body relationship, as well as the bipolar opposites such as male vs female, beauty vs purity, and adornment vs self-mutilation. These formed a wide range of relationships in a culture that seemed to be defined by clashing opposites. Nevertheless, Christianity exerted a vital and diverse hold over the imagination of people.

Chastity and virginity were virtues specially valued (at least in principle) as symbols of sacred power. Late medieval piety paid much attention to virgin saints, so legends of St. Catherine, Barbara, Lucy, Margaret, Agnes, and Apollonia were immensely po-

pular. In these stories, men who attempted to degrade female martyrs simply did not succeed sexually. Saints-martyrs were always saved from embarrassment by divine intervention (12). On the other hand, the cult of St Anne perceived human sexuality as positive in as much as it included the fertility of a family into which the Savior was born.

Temptation seemed to be the common underlying danger of pleasure and desire. The seeds that the devil plants in human hearts and minds can bear terrible fruit. No matter how devout and clean human souls might be, they were always susceptible to corruption. This view is depicted in the legend of John Chrysostom the Hermit, who lived a self-denying life but once succumbed to temptation. Overpowered by wine, he violated a princess and subsequently even killed her in attempt to hide his crime. Realizing the horrendous nature of his deed, he decided to live in a total self-mortification. Eventually, God forgave him for his sins and that resulted in the princess being miraculously restored to life and virginity (13). In addition to obvious ambivalence of the themes of virginity and defilement, there are also echoes of the misogynous approach that can be read between the lines of the princess' body description- the more beautiful, the more dangerous.

These literary sources document clearly the medieval mentality and philosophical view of sexuality in our past. The fact that they were written in the vernacular language made them easily accessible and comprehensible to the wider religious audience. The coming of Christianity marked a fundamental turning point in the way sexuality was conceived and practiced in the West by establishing a connection between the flesh and sin. To illustrate how such attitudes were reflected in the regulation of life within medieval community, we selected paragraphs from Croatian earliest medieval statutes.

Statutes: Sin, Disease, and Stigma

In a society where the female body was an object of both desire and fear, moral institutions shared by the ruling male elite were lead by two principal concerns: first, the need to maintain the good order in the household and its role in a broader community (by keeping purity and honor of families), and second, the application of measures needed to protect against disorder and threatening powers of the female. While in ancient Greek polis (city-state) philosophical moralists led open discussions on ethics in Greek tradition, it was elite in medieval Christian Mediterranean cities that articulated the language of moral obligation, making the city become its framework. Evidently, the Christian practice was to bind people with claim of authority, which became a measure of life and value, and a way to abstain from sins (14).

Early statutes of all Croatian cities and counties quote long lists of punishments for those who would not respect the rules. The Act of Vinodol from 1288 (6), written in Glagolitic alphabet, is the second oldest legal text of Slavic people documenting a transition from the common to written law. It defines primarily the penal and legal protection of the duke and other

officials, death punishments, corporal punishments, confiscation of all property, and fines in money or cattle, and contains description of 33 types of delict, including those against honor and reputation (15,16). Two of these offences are of particular interest for this investigation: Zlonamerno zbacivanje hovorlice ženi s glave (throwing off the cover from a woman's head with ill intent) and the paragraph on rape (6,15). In medieval times honorable women had to have their heads covered. If someone would take the cover off the woman's head, the message such an act conveyed to the public was that this woman lost her honor or chastity (meaning, she had unlawful sexual intercourse). This paragraph corresponds closely to some aspects of mentality of medieval morality that were incorporated in all spheres of life, including regulations. It also shows a deep and fundamental connection between outward appearance and its perceived symbolic meaning. Furthermore, the punishment was more serious if the cover was taken off by a man than by another woman. The other paragraph that deals with rape uses direct terms to describe the act of rape, unlike the one in the Act of Vinodol where the nature of crime was only implicitly defined. The rapist was punished by paying 50 libras to the duke and 50 libras to the victim of rape. In comparison with this, uncovering of a woman's head (48 libras to the woman and 2 to the duke) was actually very strictly punished. It is interesting that the Act of Vinodol did not make differences between married and unmarried women where rape was concerned. This practice was not accepted by all medieval statutes in Croatia. For example, the paragraph 32-34 of the Trsat's Statute, created on the same basis as the Act of Vinodol in the later period, strictly differentiated between the two crimes (15).

During medieval time, punishments for sins were articulated at two levels, one concrete and expressed through organization of life within the community and the other connected to the transcendental. The Divine was behind every punishment and the most threatening one was disease (closely linked to stigma). As an illustration, we present an entry from the Statute of the Municipality of Ragusa (Dubrovnik) from 1272 (17). It was written in Latin, as majority of Croatian medieval statutes. In English translation, it reads as follows: "We demand that leatherworkers, who live in the place where lepers have used to live, should build themselves solid houses so they would not pose a threat to the commune. Lepers cannot live there anymore and they have to move further away from the city" (17). The suburb of Ragusa where lepers lived was called Peline (semantically close to Latin and Italian pelle) and it was named after leather, which was dried and manufactured there. The vernacular name of this part of the Ragusa suburb was Giudecca (as a symbol of isolation and punishment for sin). All mentioned elements, ranging from isolation measures to semantic expressions and toponyms (Peline, Giudecca), reveal a mosaic of complex aspects pertaining to the phenomenon of the much-feared disease. During medieval period, the disease was seen as a moral category. Therefore, even diseases that were not strictly sexually transmitted, such as leprosy, were also understood as a consequence of

sinful life, which included, among other sins, immoderate sexual behaviour. Lustful acts were fraught with dangers for the body (diseases and afflictions with skin lesions, which bore a social and Biblical stigma) and with even greater dangers for the soul. It was believed that leprosy was sent by God as a punishment for sins and this belief was so strong that it remained deeply rooted in human memory long after leprosy vanished from Western Europe (18).

Stigmatization was based on the notion of a spoilt identity, implied accusation and guilt, and represented disgrace and threat for the community. Yet, sometimes some aspects of stigma led to interventions and programs of social policy related to social and health care. One such example was an orphanage in Dubrovnik, founded in 1432 (19). Due to increasing infanticide and large number of unwanted and abandoned children, the city authorities decided to establish an institution where these children would be accommodated and taken care of – an orphanage. Thus, personal drama of women stigmatized by delivering illegal children was also avoided, or postponed. Of course, discretion was assured. Here, the power of social stigma is reflected in women's consent to such a desperate act, as abandoning one's own child is, to avoid social punishment, disgrace, and isolation.

Natural Philosophy – Lucidar: toward Rational Explanation

Medieval natural philosophers discussed fertility and pregnancy as part of "sexuality" in a broad sense, using a specific, almost codified language within given models. The issues they dealt with were mostly sterility and reproduction, explained and described within works on "gynecology" or encyclopedic compilations. One of the most popular medieval encyclopedias in Europe was *Elucidarium*, or *Lucidar* in Croatian (5). Around 300 manuscripts and later printed versions have been preserved to our days. *Elucidarium* was written around 1100 by the Benedictine monk Honorius Augustodunensis. It was translated into different vernacular languages, including Croatian (Fig. 2), and immensely popular between the 12th and 16th century. The Croatian Glagolitic *Lucidar* was compiled after a Czech matrix, which itself was translated from German. The author of the German version, which dates to the early 12th century, drew from various sources, such as *Gemma animae*, *Imago mundi*, and *Elucidarium* by Honorius Augustodunensis, *Philosophia mundi* by Guillaume de Conches, and *De divinis officiis* by R. von Deutz. The text of *Lucidar* is kept in two Croatian Glagolitic manuscript codices: in the Petris miscellany (AD 1468) and Žgombić micellany (early 16th century). The latter text was published in Cyrillic transcription, together with a paleographic and linguistic study (20).

One passage from the *Lucidar* deals with reasons why some people have healthy offspring and others do not. The answer is short: when a man and woman of good breeding and high moral are "together", but enjoy too much drink and food, the child will not be perfect. The language used implies a righteous affection, ie, if parents' sexual inclinations are chaste, they

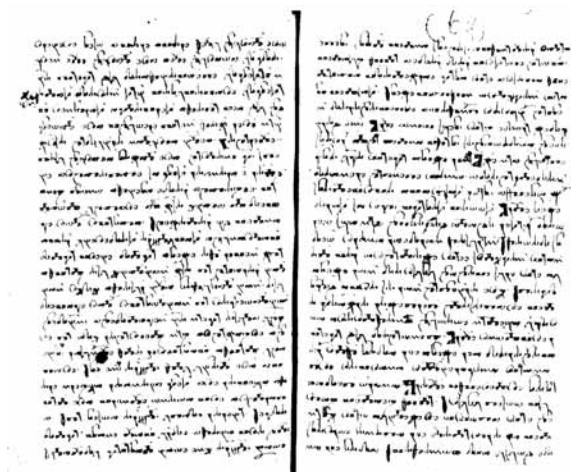


Figure 2. Lucidar – a natural philosophical Glagolitic manuscript from the 16th century (Zagreb, Archive of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts).

will have a healthy offspring. This is an illustration of the balance of natural science and moral concerns, weighed toward the latter. The author instructs people that they "must beware of such gluttony if they are to have a sane, perfect, and prudent child" (21). Obviously, the physical and spiritual /intellectual features of the child were defined not only by features of the parents, but also on their behavior (including sexual).

Discussion

The purpose of Croatian Glagolitic writing was clearly pragmatic, ie, moralistic and educative. Therefore, it is not surprising that views expressed in literary works corresponded very closely with those in religious texts, penitentials and sermons. This is quite different from some other European sources, such as medieval French literary texts, for example, "Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles" (22). Although it would be misleading to think that all medieval authors in Croatia adhered to a single theory or model, the texts that have been preserved and survived until today indeed conveyed an almost uniform view. The language used in literary sources is cryptic and indirect, reflecting typical Central European medieval religious mentality. Upon the first glance, all virtues seem folded into an engulfing discourse on sexual purity. What is striking from a narrative viewpoint is the lack of causal explanations – we do not see why someone did something. In the story of the nun who sinned with the knight, we do not know where he came from or why she allowed him to seduce her. The motivation is hidden; one of the reasons is that the central "character" of these works is not the actor, but the moral, the message of the text. If a negative attitude towards sexuality prevails in Croatian Glagolitic texts, it is because of the usage and context of the works. Although they did not name the act, the authors/scribes used adjectives that morally qualified it: "the filthy sin and perilous love" – it is the soul that is under peril! "The stench of fornication" – a paregmenon, a symbol and an attribute at the same time.

Firmly established in Christian belief, the analyzed literary sources and statutes are equivalent in their principal moral message. This is clearly visible in the statute of the Act of Vinodol on the delict against honor and reputation. However, the discourse of statutes is very direct, concentrated on punishment for sins and strict regulation of life in the community, and often using very explicate expressions (e.g., rape).

Medieval medical and scientific categories are not quite congruent with our modern concepts of "sexuality" (23). The studied sources show considerable similarities in expression. If we compare them with the style or language used in present legal texts vs medical vs philosophical vs literary - it shows that similarities, which we noticed in medieval texts, stem from the fact that all written works were immersed into the all-engulfing discourse of Christian philosophy. The offered outlook was monolithical, as opposed to the modern, scattered, open view of the world and life (albeit not stigma- or taboo-free).

Absence of female voices was a general phenomenon of deep impact of the views on sexuality, women's rights, and women's health in general. Issues of vital importance for women have been on the public agenda only since recently (equal pay, domestic abuse, or breast cancer). These achievements are, as Poullain de la Barre has pointed out, the results of the recent appearance of the other voice (female voice) in contradistinction to the first voice, the voice of the educated men who created medieval Western culture (24). A single exception in the written material we analyzed was the natural philosophical source of Lucidar, where women were also mentioned as potential consumers of natural philosophy: "These issues are to be disclosed only to wise and prudent ladies and men" (17). Lucidar is characterized by a discourse that balances natural phenomena and moral standards of medieval society. Coitus was permitted to produce offspring, whereas education, on the other hand, included teaching of moderation, chastity, and piety.

The image of a woman as portrayed in Croatian literary tradition is negative (women were mostly lustful and deceitful, and chaste woman could scarcely be found), which is identical to general Christian viewpoint reflected in European literary tradition. Even Giovanni Boccaccio could not resist the "fashion", writing his antifeminist text *The Labyrinth of Love* in 1355 (25), although his other works pioneered in Renaissance thoughts.

It is important to emphasize the long persistent link between disease and sin, and between sexuality and guilt, and their influence on our mentality. Nevertheless, in all three kinds of investigated sources (literary texts, statutes, and a natural philosophical text), silence, indirect expressions, vernacular or medical terms demonstrated tight connections with taboos concerning sexuality. Recent examples of stigmatization of patients with acquired immunodeficiency syndrome offer ample proof of that (26).

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Received: September 24, 2003

Accepted: December 17, 2003

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