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Main content

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The cultural norms of Renaissance Italy demanded that hierarchy was ever present and that equality was abhorred. According to Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships. Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (New York/Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1996; pp. x+371. 35 [pounds sterling]), this behavioural prescription extended to male homosexual sex. Rocke's study of sodomy in Renaissance Florence, a model of measured prose and good historical practice, illustrates that sex was not something that took place between equals even when both participants were male. Most of the younger, 'passive' partners were between fourteen and eighteen; the vast majority of the older, 'active' partners were between twenty and forty. Sex was an indicator of power relations, and in the absence of submissive and hierarchically inferior females, boys who (as the saying went) 'let themselves be sodomised' were...

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During the Renaissance, Florence developed a reputation for being pervaded with homosexuality - "sodomy" in the language of the time. Smarting from this reputation, reeling from population loss suffered during the Black Death, and pressured by homophobic clerics, in 1432 the city government set up a judicial panel called "The Office of the Night" exclusively to solicit and investigate charges of sodomy. These facts produced a large population of young, unrooted, sexually vigorous males in a city where many women were sheltered by their families or otherwise inaccessible. This led many men to engage in sex with other males. Unsurprisingly, most of those accused of sodomy, or who voluntarily confessed, were younger than 35 or unmarried older men. The men of Renaissance Florence were so renowned for sodomy that "Florenzer" in German meant "sodomite." Indeed, in the late fifteenth century, as many as one in two Florentine men had come to the attention of the authorities for sodomy by the time they were thirty. In the seventy years from 1432 to 1502, some 17,000 men--in a city of only 40,000--were investigated for sodomy; 3,000 were convicted and thousands more confessed to gain amnesty. Michael Rocke vividly depicts this vibrant sexual culture in a world where these same-sex acts were not the

deviant transgressions of "Forbidden Friendships adds an important chapter to the history of homosexuality and through it places Florentine politics in the Renaissance in a new perspective."--Speculum. "A sort of Kinsey Report for Renaissance Florence...A must-read for gay scholars, [the book] is the first attempt to clearly quantify sexual norms for Renaissance Florence or, indeed, any other place at such an early date...Rocke certainly establishes bisexual and homosexual relationships long before John Addition Symonds's usage of the terms."--Journal of Homosexuality. About the Author. Michael Rocke's tome on male culture and sexuality in Renaissance Florence is a tremendous work that provides exceptional insight into male sexuality.