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Published by: The Department of Historical Studies, University of Toronto Mississauga
Stable URL: http://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/prandium/article/view/25693
St. Kentigern and the Sodomite: Constructions of Medieval Masculinity and Sexuality in 12th-Century Scotland*

Brent L. Kopfensteiner¹

Saint Kentigern of the 6th-century is a fundamental character in the religious history of Scotland. He defined the Church in Scotland in its formative years and served as a building block of the ecclesiastical independence of the Scottish Church itself, achieved and maintained throughout the medieval period and after. His life, recorded by the 12th-century hagiographer, Jocelin of Furness, transmitted St. Kentigern’s story to the audiences of the medieval and modern periods. The hagiographical *Life of St. Kentigern* was a highly politicized tool used for nation-building purposes as well as for supporting the ecclesiastical independence of the Scottish church. It was commissioned and written for certain reasons, all in the effort to further the ends of the monks, secular leaders, and the religious leaders who were involved. It is within this context that the *vita*, and more importantly the passage about the sodomite and heretic clerics, was written and as such the meanings imbued into the chapter are significant for the understanding of same-sex sodomitical relationships in medieval Scotland. Chapter XXVIII of Jocelin’s work, *The Life of St. Kentigern*, discusses something that has not been adequately investigated: Scottish masculinity and sexuality. The chapter elucidates medieval opinions of sodomitical same-sex relations and their social acceptability, as well as how this acceptability was tempered by the variety of social constructions of masculinity that existed in 12th-century Scotland. The social constructions of masculinity exposed in the *Vita Kentigerni* exposes how sodomy was not treated with rabid disgust but was viewed with indifference; it was just one aspect of the way a medieval man could gender identify.

A series of terms must be explained in order to provide the appropriate context for analysis. The term “homosexual” is a modern invention and to apply it to sodomitical relationships in medieval Scotland would be anachronistic using the theory proposed by Michel Foucault. Foucault argued that a paradigm

* The original paper from which this article is derived was submitted to Professor M. Cowan for her HIS499H5S: Construction of Sexuality and Masculinity in 12th-Century Scotland course. This work is a truncated version of the original, much longer paper.
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shift occurred at the end of the 19th-century that changed sexuality from a private concern to a public one, creating for the first time a discourse that enabled the understanding of sexuality.  

This allowed for the emergence of a homosexual subculture that never before existed as distinctly “homosexual”; what existed before was simply the sexual act. As Foucault stated,

Homosexuality appears as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgy, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.

In the medieval world there were no homosexuals, there was only the act of sodomy and the men who performed it: the sodomites.

On the contrary, John Boswell argued that homosexuality (sodomy and the lifestyle associated with the act) did exist in the medieval period and is not a modern conception. Boswell makes incorrect assumptions on the medieval male friendship. Alan Bray, however, argues that the medieval male friendship was not sexualized. Instead, two men were closely bonded and associated, and shared a life together platonically. Though the medieval male friendship could be construed as potentially homoerotic, it was not necessarily so, and thus Boswell’s definition of medieval homosexuality is unreliable as it projects a generalized picture of sodomitical relationships that was not necessarily the societal norm. The result in the scholarship is an overt sexualization of relationships that by definition did not need to be sexual to exist.

In the medieval context, sodomy did not simply mean the single, isolated act of anal penetration; rather it was a term compounded with additional negative meanings and as such it was seen as socially destabilizing. Sodomy was often known as the “effeminate disease” precisely because of its ability to confound sexuality and gender norms. As Elizabeth Keiser notes, “[sodomy] distorts the proper symbolic gender hierarchy of male governing female,” as it introduces the element of a passive male in the relationship. Though originally applied to both men and women, sodomy became associated only with the medieval interpretation of the homosexual, as it was seen as worse than simply not being chaste; it was on par with murder. Sodomy was socially threatening because of its rejection of gender and sexual conformity. This definition of sodomy was predominant in the medieval period and would continue to develop into a much more pejorative term.

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3 Ibid., 19-23.
8 Boswell, 277.
Masculinity in the medieval context was also different from the modern interpretation. Medieval men gender identified and constructed their masculinity through two means: violence and sex. As Kristen Fenton argues, “violence and its expression are often seen as fundamental in explaining what it mean[t] to be a man because they involve[d] the dominance of others, including social peers and women.”

These means of gender expression produced a conflict between the laymen and the clergy. Jocelin’s text exposes the dynamics this conflict, the medieval conceptions of sodomy as a form of sexual expression, and the ways in which medieval masculinity was reinterpreted by the clerics of the Church.

Chapter XXVIII of the Vita Kentigerni is a short passage that depicts St. Kentigern’s rejection of two men who were not suited to be members of the clergy for different reasons. The first of these men, the sodomite, is of particular interest to this paper; however when held in juxtaposition to the second, the heretic, it reveals significant details that would, and have otherwise, been excluded from medieval scholarship.

The passage includes a number of interesting details that elucidate the interpretation of a sodomite in medieval Scotland. The sodomitical cleric is clearly constructed as the “other” from the outset; he is a Briton educated in Gaul. His separation from the community clearly demonstrates the perceived infective influence of sodomy on the morality of the people. The sodomite is of “elegant form, [and] of great eloquence” implying his affability could lead to the spread of his disease. In addition to this, the scents and smells are clearly associated with hell: sulphur, flames, destruction, and the Five Cities (i.e. Sodom and Gomorrah). Jocelin wrote of the sodomite as a dangerous outsider that could corrupt the rest of the community, however this was not necessarily the reality of the situation.

Jocelin’s description of the sodomitical cleric includes a line of interest: “the vice which reigned in his body.” The Latin translation for this passage reads: “Ex qua visio Spiritu revelante, intellexit quo vicio laboraret in corpore.” The most important point to note is the word “corpore” (i.e. corpus), which translates to “body”. The definition is clear; corpus clearly denotes the body, or the physical realm rather than the mental or spiritual. Sodomy was believed to reign over the body rather than the spirit; it was a biological contaminant similar to a disease. The distinction demonstrates a tempered view of sodomites. Sodomy was their affliction, not their choice.

The second part of the passage in the Vita Kentigerni describes the dangers of sodomy in its historical context. A description of the act and its dangers indicate sodomy was a societal rather than an individual problem. The passage reads:

11 Rev. 21:8, Gen. 19:1 (Authorized (King James) Version).
12 Jocelin of Furness, 85-86.
13 Ibid., 210.
14 Ibid.
Then said the saint to those who stood around him, “If the sacred canons forbid women, on account of the infirmity of their sex, to which in noways[sic] is blame attached, to be promoted to the rank of the priesthood, much more is it our duty to banish to the rank and office so sacred, men who pervert their sex, who abuse nature, who in contempt of their Master, in degradation of themselves, in injury of all creatures, cast off that in which they are created and born, and become as women. Nowhere read we of punishment exercising a graver vengeance than against that monstrous race of men among whom that execrable crime first began.15

This part of the chapter is much more vehement in its description of sodomy and of sodomites themselves, very much contrary to the passage above; however when combined with the remainder, it becomes clear that this wording is not true to the actual treatment. Again the importance of separating the “other”, the sodomite, from the Scottish clergy is demonstrated with the phrase, “it is our duty to banish to the rank and office so sacred, men who pervert their sex.”16 His physical separation is complete when the passage concludes: “after this the cleric aforesaid departed by the way that he came, and, as the report goeth, he died, cut off by a sudden destruction.”17 This incredibly vague passage suggests a number of possible endings to the cleric’s life; it is assumed that the cleric continued to live, as Jocelin did not write that he was dead, and thus it can be assumed that the sodomitical cleric continued to live as a sodomite. Because of this lack of punishment, the passage can thus be interpreted as, while not being a declaration of support towards sodomy, a tacit acceptance of the act and its implications to society despite all of the vehement language and explicit condemnation of the act.

This ending is crucial to understanding the treatment of the sodomite. The cleric was sent off and at some point died suddenly in the future. Kentigern did not witness his death, nor did Jocelin describe it in any detail, and this stands in stark contrast to the ending of the heretical cleric. Jocelin wrote,

A man that is an heretic, after the second admonition, avoid; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and trying to cross a certain river, choked in the waters, he descended into hell.18

The graphic description of a terrible ending was a punishment fit for the heretic’s crime. Compared to that of the sodomite, the heretic’s death is definitely worse. The sodomite was not punished with eternal damnation, but rather expelled with a simple rejection.

The passage suggests that sodomy was a less dangerous crime than heresy. Rather than the treatment of the sodomite as purely evil, here is a tacit acceptance of the act. The sodomitical cleric therefore illustrates that men who practiced sodomy in twelfth-century Scotland were viewed with indifference rather than the rabid disgust. This was because the act of sodomy was tempered by the construction of medieval masculinity.

15 Ibid., 86.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 87.
The epitome of masculinity was based primarily on men’s aggression and strength. It was through this combative masculinity that medieval men constructed their gender.19 Clerics, despite their inability to act out violence, were not isolated. Instead, clerics repurposed language as the tool to reassert combative masculinity. As Kristen Fenton argues, it was through “religious language that such men gain their power.”20 The motif of the warrior was very present in medieval texts and was used to construct the monks as being “in combat against temptations sent by the devil, which could take various forms and involve surmounting the desire for food and physical comforts, or riches and renown, as well as other kinds of passion such as anger.”21 Monks were depicted as entering into tournaments, wrestling, and fighting, all graphic associations with physicality and strength, their own temptations all in an attempt to prove themselves faithful, or under the new construction of masculinity, to prove themselves men.22 The most important of these temptations was the battle against sexual desire.23

The Church sought to “‘masculinize’ religious life characterizing ascetic self-denial and the struggle against sexual desires as performances of manliness.”24 Sexual indulgence was seen to decrease a man’s masculinity as they became expected to conquer their body and its urges to truly be men.25 This conquering of the sexual urges became quite clearly linked to masculinity in this text. Despite the sodomitical cleric being clearly depicted as the passive partner, the one to, “cast off that in which they are created and born, and become as women,” these sexual roles did not factor as greatly as one would expect.26 Rather the feminization was graded. What ultimately mattered most was that clerics were expected to remain celibate now and if they failed that they became feminized; any further infringement upon clerical masculinity was entirely secondary for no matter what the cleric was feminized by participating in sexual activity.

Masculinity was defined not simply by sexual role or gender; it was complicated further by a number of additional variables, including the fact that gender was undergoing a transformative period as dictated by the Catholic Church. For clerics, what sexual role was taken did not matter; what mattered was that sexuality must be conquered for the lapse of this made the cleric one who embraced femininity because of their inability to control their sexual urges. Lewis argues, “women and men [must] overcome the feminine side of their nature, and conquer worldly temptations (particularly sexual lust) in order to maintain a properly spiritual lifestyle.”27 Using this construction of masculinity, as well as the fact that

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20 Fenton, 73.
21 Lewis, 114.
22 Ibid., 114-117.
23 Ibid., 114.
25 Lewis, 120-121.
26 Jocelin of Furness, 86-87.
27 Lewis, 123.
this image was contained in the hagiography of the time, makes a convincing argument that the Vita Kentigernii was tool used to aid in this clerical masculinity reconstruction.

With this link between sexual activity and masculinity, the passage on the sodomitical and heretical clerics comes to be better understood. Jocelin seeks to establish a distinct dissonance between St. Kentigern and sexuality, depicting Kentigern as a non-sexual figure in order to aid in the reconstruction of masculinity on the Church’s terms, as redefined by the Gregorian Reforms of the Lateran Councils.28

Clerics were, by the implication of Jocelin’s vita, excluded from becoming fully masculine, especially following the Gregorian reforms that governed clerical celibacy and the enforcement of the rule. The Alexandrian Rule was implemented in these reforms and it became Church doctrine that any sexual activity not directly for procreation was a sin.29 Therefore clerics were stripped of their masculinity by these reforms and given alternatives to reclaim their masculinity: celibacy.

Chastity became the new monastic male identity, contradicting the wider medieval notion of masculinity defined by, “virility and sexuality.”30 The removal of violence and sex from the formal definitions of clerical masculinity meant that clerics could be considered no longer masculine. Arguments have been made that clerics were “an ungendered or even as a feminine group” or otherwise constructed as a “third gender or ‘emasculinity’.”31 Clerics in medieval Scotland did not fit these definitions for a variety of reasons but primarily for the simple fact that violence and sex were never completely removed from the equation. Rather, the repurposing of violence through language and abstinence from sex became the new male gender identification for clerics.

This new construction of celibacy, if broken, constructed the cleric as “feminine” once again. Therefore the sodomitical cleric was feminized multiple times over— he was not celibate, he did not have sex with a woman, and he took on the passive (or feminine) role in sodomitical intercourse. He was therefore more dangerous than simply committing the first two indiscretions alone, as he would retain an older social construction of masculinity. The treatment of the cleric, despite this negative-value construction of his masculinity, was not as one would expect given the language of Jocelin’s Kentigern when describing him. Instead his treatment is mediated by other medieval ideas.

One of these medieval ideas was that of clerical marriages. In the early medieval period, women and clerical men could live in “unmarried cohabitation,” and in doing so these women were accorded the status of a married woman and provided the stability and support that was not extended to a woman who was simply a mistress.32 These relationships went through a “public ratification of legitimate marriage” rather than a formal ceremony and as a result the children that resulted from such unions

30 Thibodeaux, 47.
31 Fenton, 65.
32 Kelleher, 349-351.
were no less valid than any other in the eyes of their local communities.\textsuperscript{33} With the passage of the Gregorian Reforms, the Church expressly forbade clerical marriages and clerical concubines, but the practice remained common.\textsuperscript{34} Despite the ban and the expectation of celibacy, clerics continued to have families and wives; more importantly, they continued to construct themselves as masculine through the act of sexual intercourse. The religious communities were very much aware of the actions of their priests and as such a sodomite would be threatening, if one viewed sodomy as an infection.\textsuperscript{35} This is supported by the fact by Jocelin’s omission of the fate of the cleric. There is no death and so it is entirely possible for sodomitical cleric to have become a priest in another diocese; it just simply was not allowed in Glasgow.\textsuperscript{36}

Despite negative perceptions of the act of sodomy, sodomitical priests could still be integrated into the Church by virtue of the \textit{ex opere operato} condition found in the doctrine of the Catholic Church. \textit{Ex opere operato} is defined as “in virtue of the action” or the administering of a sacrament that is independent of the priest, as opposed to \textit{ex opere operantis}, “in virtue of the agent” whereby the sacrament is dependent upon the priest for validity.\textsuperscript{37} This could be easily applied to a sodomitical priest; if he was morally lacking, a community could still accept him because of the \textit{ex opere operato} device. Therefore avenues existed to integrate sodomitical priests into the Church.

New constructions of masculinity imposed upon the clerics by the Gregorian reforms forced men in these religious orders to reconstruct their own definitions of masculinity. Saints served as models to the communities in which they were featured.\textsuperscript{38} As such, saint’s lives needed to be carefully edited by hagiographers to elicit the appropriate response from the laity. Through the presentation of masculinity as piety and control, the hagiographers shaped both the opinions of the laity and reconstructed the masculinity of the clerical orders.

In order to ensure the image of Kentigern as a holy man, Jocelin described the saint’s lifestyle as the epitome of austerity and self-control. Kentigern’s monastic lifestyle is implicitly juxtaposed with that of the sodomitical priest for whom sodomy was an indication of a loss of self-control. Jocelin wrote that, “[Kentigern] abstained entirely from feast and from blood, and from wine, and from all that could inebriate.”\textsuperscript{39} Should he ever overindulge, Kentigern would subject himself to corporal punishment all in an attempt to purify his soul and make himself in the image of Jesus.\textsuperscript{40}

The contrast between the lifestyle of the medieval sodomite and the saint was made very clear by Jocelin, almost painstakingly so, and as it was a hagiographical text, it contained a grander message and

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid.}, 353.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, 350.
\item Jocelin of Furness, 86-87.
\item Lewis, 112.
\item Jocelin of Furness, 56-59.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, 60-64.
\end{enumerate}
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meaning. This is incredibly important as the lack of sexuality will come to play with Kentigern’s treatment of the sodomitical cleric, and it clearly demonstrates that there was a message Jocelin attempted to make clear: Kentigern was not linked with sex. The vita therefore was intended for a greater purpose than simply publicizing a saint’s life and his accomplishments; it was intended to satisfy a greater political motive and therefore whatever was contained within this text is crucial for understanding what was the overarching purpose of the vita.

The hagiographical texts were not written in isolation from the general population for the clergy alone; the texts were to be disseminated amongst the laity. As Richard Newhauser states, “the writing of saints’ lives had served the purpose of exciting the minds of Christian readers to imaginative association with the paradigmatic deeds of holy men and women.” Hagiography had a mass appeal in the middle ages, as it was used for both entertainment and for religious purposes. As Justin Lake argues, hagiography was written to “promote the cult of particular saints, advertising the power of their relics, encouraging donations to the institutions that housed them, and warning potential malefactors tempted to encroach upon their patrimony.” As such, the Church did not undertake these writings without consideration or evaluation.

In the medieval period, a large number of works were deliberately authored by anonymous writers within monastic orders, anonymity imposed as a means to preserve the humility of the monks. Despite this, Jocelin was specifically named suggesting a specific politicized meaning attached to Jocelin’s name, or the importance of Jocelin’s association with the Cistercian order. The bishop who sponsored Jocelin of Furness was a fellow member of the Cistercian order, as were a number of previous bishops, suggesting a strong link between the order and the Scottish Church. The Cistercians were a reformist order, with a “strong emphasis of clerical morality,” that lived, “quite soberly, justly, piously, and most contently, just like St. Kentigern.” The vita can be read as propagating the Cistercian agenda and ultimately those of the orthodox Catholic Church. There is a link between the recognition of the individual abbot and the religious community, therefore all work would need to bolster the image of the affiliated order so as to protect and improve the reputation of the church. This was further reason to present Kentigern as the epitome of holiness as there existed political motivations behind the recording of Kentigern’s life.

Jocelin’s affiliation with the Cistercian order is important for the understanding of sexuality and masculinity. As Birkett states, “Kentigern’s monastic status allowed Jocelyn [sic] to depict him as a

42 Ibid., 7.
44 Newhauser, 5.
paradigm of the Rule of St. Benedict,” and therefore as an exemplar of monastic living; in effect he was depicted as a representation of an exemplary Cistercian monk.\textsuperscript{47} This is made more significant because the Cistercian order decried the recruitment of boys into the monastic order.\textsuperscript{48} Michelle Sauer argues that monasteries were the first “queer spaces” and encouraged the development of same sex sodomitical relationships between older monks and these boys as an outlet for their sexuality (i.e. to prevent them from having sex with women).\textsuperscript{49} Therefore the Cistercians, in adopting a child-exclusionary policy, prevented and rejected sodomitical relationships that would have developed and this carried over into the vita.

Clerics did not construct themselves as a third or a non-gender demographic, but rather they reconstructed the masculine identity to suit their needs, or some disregarded certain aspects expected of their monastic lifestyle (i.e. clerical marriages and procreation), and continued to consider themselves as men in a similar way as the laity. Some adopted the new construction of masculinity supported by the Church and constructed themselves as more masculine and more powerfully virile without sexuality, with their control of themselves being a tool to be more masculine than the sexually active laity. As Lewis argues, “virginity, or celibacy, is a prominent theme in establishing the holiness of these English male saints.”\textsuperscript{50} This shift in Church doctrines governing sexuality came to “provide the official justification for the oppression of gay people in many Christian states.”\textsuperscript{51} Without this shift and the influence of the ascetic sect of the Church, Catholicism could have been, as John Boswell argues, “focused on the quality of love, not the gender of the parties involved or the biological function of their affection.”\textsuperscript{52} Therefore the depiction of Kentigern without any connection to sexuality confirms the application to greater holiness with the removal of the men who were tempted to sin against the ideal of monastic asceticism.

In conclusion, the depiction of Kentigern in the Vita Kentigerni was explicitly tied to the reconstruction of clerical masculinity in the aftermath of the Gregorian reforms. The text deliberately removed sex from the clerical masculinity equation; instead it promoted abstinence from sex. For it was in the control of bodily urges that a cleric truly expressed his masculinity. While this went directly against the previous constructions of masculinity based on violence, sex, and procreation, clerical masculinity incorporated these elements. Violence translated into a battle for the soul against the demons of desire and the body; sex became chastity and the conquering of these biological urges; and procreation went to the adoption of the parishioners as the spiritual family that needed the cleric’s paternalistic guidance. The Life of St. Kentigern was a very useful tool in aiding in this transition. The passage of the sodomitical cleric and the heretic demonstrates the degree to which this was a convoluted process. Despite perceived dangers, in medieval Scotland sodomy was seen as an expression of sexuality; though it was admittedly not the ideal, it was still an expression of a sexual urge and served to further the masculinity of the participants.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 194.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 196-197.
\textsuperscript{50} Lewis, 119.
\textsuperscript{51} Boswell, 137
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 136.
Sodomy provided clerics with the same sexual outlet through which they could construct their masculinity. Writing in the context of Church reforms directly targeting clerical lifestyles and sexuality, Jocelin could not write an explicit condemnation of sexuality still the predominant means by which a man, laity or religious, exercised his gender identity. The sexual role did not matter because that the sodomitical cleric being feminized thrice over, what mattered was that the cleric was not chaste, for under the new construction of masculinity, that was how a male cleric was supposed to gender identify. It was this ambiguous means of gender construction that demonstrated the tacit acceptance of sodomy in the *Vita Kentigerni*, not the vehement vilification expected of medieval society. Boswell stated, “the belief that the hostility of the Christian Scriptures to homosexuality caused Western society to turn against it should not require any elaborate refutation,” and what is seen with the *Life of St. Kentigern* is the beginning of this reorientation of biblical interpretation that would redefine clerical gender identification and masculinity as a whole.53

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53 *ibid.*, 7.