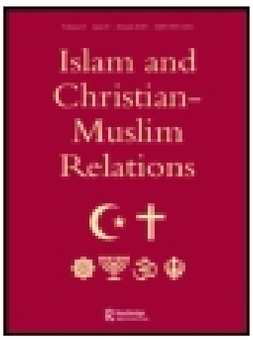

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Conquerors, Brides, and Concubines: Interfaith Relations and Social Power in Medieval Iberia

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BOOK REVIEW

Conquerors, Brides, and Concubines: Interfaith Relations and Social Power in Medieval Iberia, by Simon Barton, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015, 264 pp., $59.95/£39.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-8122-4675-9

In *Conquerors, Brides, and Concubines*, Simon Barton examines the complexities of politics, culture, and social structures in medieval Iberia by viewing them through the lens of interfaith marriages and sexual encounters. Monographs devoted to the study of medieval communal identity formation are no longer novel, but Barton's work is unique because of its narrow focus. By restricting his investigation to interfaith marriage and sexual encounters, he demonstrates how sexuality impinged upon politics in medieval Iberia and was used to construct boundaries between Muslim and Christian communities. Barton also shows how laws regulating interfaith marriages and affairs helped to police these boundaries.

There can be many kinds of identity – ecclesial, political, or ethnic, for example – and any number of strategies might be deployed in order to assert or enforce them. Similarly, a myriad of different kinds of sources – legal, theological, or historical works among them – could be investigated in order to elucidate these identities. In light of this variety and the attending complexity, studies devoted to communal identity formation risk significant pitfalls should they overstate their case for a community's identity but neglect important sources or ignore the overwhelming nuances present in frontier zones of interfaith contact. The historical precision with which Barton writes helps him to avoid such pitfalls. Further, by restricting his investigation to interfaith marriages and sexual relationships, he provides greater clarity to one of the ways medieval Iberian communities formed and enforced the boundaries that defined part of their identities.

In Barton's first chapter, he considers the ways in which sexual relationships were used as a strategy of power. In particular, he shows that interfaith marriage and sexual mixing, whether with wives or concubines, between Muslim invaders and the indigenous Christian female population was a tool used to drive 'the process of social and cultural change in postconquest Iberia' (14). As one example, Barton shows how Muslim invaders used interfaith marriage to secure Visigothic land and wealth. By collaborating with Muslim invaders, the Visigothic élite avoided much of the political and economic upheaval that other indigenous communities could face. But by entering into such marriages, they ensured that future generations would be raised as Muslims (19). And so the process of change would move in the ruling class's favor.

In Chapter 2, Barton shifts from considering sexual relationships as a tool of power to the question of why interfaith marriages, political strategies that they were, declined in Iberia after 1050. The focus centers on how regulating sexual encounters became a matter of marking boundaries between religious communities in an attempt to restrict cultural assimilation. In this way, proscribing certain kinds of inter-communal interaction may have been connected to other attitudes being expressed in the Latin West after the eleventh century toward 'social pollution' (69, 73). Here, Barton is careful not to force laws restricting interfaith sexual interaction to represent normative behavior in medieval Iberia. Rather, Barton helpfully argues that 'sexual control was viewed as an appropriate mechanism by which relative positions of power might be demarcated and Christian superiority upheld' (70).

Chapter 3 is the book's strongest chapter and consists of a series of accounts in which Christian women are dishonored by Muslim men. The accounts of these events vary in detail, but they appear in historical chronicles, hagiography and other literary genres in order to 'elicit

pity and indignation' (110) among readers and 'to foster solidarity among their intended audiences' (6). The story of the *Voto de Santiago* and the charter known as *el Privilegio del Voto* (Barton offers a translation of one of the charter's manuscripts on pages 153–163) can serve as one example. According to the twelfth-century account, in order to avoid harassment, some Christians in the time of King Roderic (d. c. 711) agreed to pay Muslim invaders an annual tribute of 100 women. In the ninth century, King Ramiro I of Asturias (d. 850) decided to put an end to the tribute. Despite great adversity and being outnumbered, Ramiro and his men, aided by St James, defeated a vast Muslim army. The authenticity of the charter is a matter of debate (83–86), but an ideological function emerges in what is likely a forged document: Muslims are portrayed as debased and lustful; certain Christians are portrayed as willing to betray the honor of their women for the sake of peace; triumphant Christians are those who persevere and demonstrate that 'Christian identity and power are intimately linked to the sexual purity and honor of its women' (88). Hence, the besmirched honor of Christian women was a rallying call for a Christian community to declare its power. This story was taken up again and again by later chroniclers for the sake of asserting Christian identity vis-à-vis non-Christian communities (89).

Whereas women appear in Chapter 3 as victims of interfaith sexual encounters, they appear in Barton's final chapter as the violators. In the accounts examined in this chapter, sexual encounters are presented in terms of symbolic submission. Stories of Christian women who seek out Muslim partners, usually with unfortunate consequences, or Muslim women who surrender to Christian men, are symbolic of military surrender. The function of such stories, regardless of their historicity, was to convince readers that 'sex, power, and cultural identity were at all times closely interrelated' (7). In other words, cavorting with the religious or cultural 'Other' violated a boundary that was meant to mark out identity. When this happened, communal identity was exposed to outside threats. Hence, accounts depicting women engaging male partners and converting to Islam demonstrated to readers the dangers of certain kinds of interfaith contact. In contrast, Muslim women who converted to Christianity because they loved Christian men demonstrated power. 'In the literary imagination', Barton writes, 'love and conversion were envisaged as tools of domination, the means by which the Islamic "Other" could be both tamed and assimilated' (137).

Throughout his book Barton is careful to acknowledge that interfaith contact in cultural frontier zones was enormously complex and nuanced. As he clarifies in his conclusion, the written records of interfaith marriage and sexual encounters cannot be taken as normative of human behavior in medieval Iberia (148). Equally important, the written accounts examined in the book 'overwhelmingly reflected the views of the patriarchy' (146) and the figures portrayed in them almost all function symbolically (145–146); they are used by authors to reinforce the formation of communal identity. These clarifications, along with other similar ones that appear in the book's introduction (11–12) are of immense importance and demonstrate the care Barton takes to articulate the ways interfaith marriage and sexual encounters formed *one* way that *part* of communal identity in medieval Iberia was shaped and demarcated. As a result, *Conquerors, Brides, and Concubines* marks a significant contribution for medievalists and historians interested in medieval Iberia in general and medieval interfaith relations in particular.

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