

Simon Barton, *Conquerors, Brides, and Concubines: Interfaith Relations and Social Power in Medieval Iberia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015). Print, 280 pp., US\$59.95, ISBN: 9780812246759.



R e v i e w

Simon Barton's book comes at a time when the study of sex and its cultural significance is coming to the forefront of medieval studies. That this book combines studies of sex with questions of power, religion, and politics and a reimagining of *convivencia* makes the book all the more relevant to the spheres of medieval Iberian studies as well as the study of Christian-Muslim relationships.

Barton begins the book with a discussion of interfaith sex and its significance socially, politically, and culturally. The purposes and consequences of these sexual relationships are discussed and examples from Spanish historiography, Islamic law and biblical epistles are used to conclude that interfaith marriage was a tool frequently used in colonisation in the years following the Islamic conquest. Barton also discusses the marriage of Christians and Muslims across Spain's regional borders, a continuation of his earlier research published in the *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies*. The lack of legitimacy regarding Christian wives to Muslim husbands is interwoven with a discussion of cross-border slave trade and Christian women captured during Muslim military operations. Barton's first chapter concludes with a discussion of the rationale for this sexual mixing. For Christian men marrying Muslim women, the action served to bolster their autonomy and security of against other regions. Muslim men marrying Christian women used the unions as diplomatic tools to stabilize relationships with northern Christian states. An excellent reference to Ruth Mazo Karras, a prolific author in the field of studies of medieval gender and sexuality, is given: 'Penetration symbolizes power.'

Barton's second chapter deals with the restrictions and regulations imposed by the Christian church on interfaith sex and the consequences of this prohibition.

Using Spanish charters, *fueros* (law codes), as well as Christian laws, Barton catalogues the vilification of interfaith relationships which led to an increase in prohibitions on the practice following the Islamic conquest. Barton notes that the increase in legislation was the result of anxiety about the submissive nature of Christianity to Muslims as well as the effect of Christian expansionism. Barton's second chapter also discusses the imbalance between prohibitions on Christian women and minority men, and those between Christian men and minority women. Examples of court cases, legislation and punishment associated with each of these unions are given. There also occurs a discussion of the regulation of these relationships as regards Muslim prostitutes, as well as an examination of the differences between prostitutes and concubines which needs further investigation by Barton.

The third chapter discusses the representation of interfaith sexual relationships in literature. Barton divides the chapter into tropes commonly seen throughout Christian literature by from the twelfth century onward which were used to united Iberian Christian communities over shared indignation of treatment of their women. He begins with the theme of the reluctant bride, a refrain reflective of the anxieties surrounding interfaith marriage. The next section, focusing on the tribute of the hundred maidens, is less well structured; though the theme of the tribute is mentioned, Barton focuses more on the *Voto de Santiago* and its implications than he does on theme of the tribute in literature. Someone researching the tribute of the hundred maidens would not find this section helpful. The following section looking into reiterations on the tribute in poems, charters, and legends is much more detailed and straightforward. The last section covers the theme of women affected by violent conflict between the two faiths. Barton discusses examples of Christian women held captive by Muslim soldiers and the anxiety this gave the Christian church. One thing conspicuously missing from the section is any representation of

unions by Muslim writers, resulting in a one-sided chapter that does not provide a full view of topic.

Barton's last chapter covers the more intimate aspects of interfaith relationships, focusing on literary examples of women seeking out partners of the other religion, often with dire consequences. The chapter begins with a discussion of the legend of 'The Treacherous Countess' and its appearance in various Spanish chronicles. Barton then discusses the 'Legend of the Gaia' and its reiterations in various Portuguese works. Both legends focus on cross-border sexual relationships and share common themes of adulterous women, kings masquerading as beggars, men captured by femme fatales, and women pretending to be dead. *Cantigas* with male adulterous leads as their focus are also briefly examined, though no literature authored by Muslim writers is discussed. The section concludes that these texts demonstrate the fragility felt by patriarchal authorities witnessing interfaith adultery, leading to the harsh punishments on those who engaged in the practice.

The next section discusses on the sexual relationship between King Alfonso VI and Zaida and the theories, retellings, and speculation surrounding it. Barton uses the partnership and its motif to show the connection between love and war as strategies for political domination but the section is so short that a reader cannot get a full grasp of the topic. The story of the *Siete Infantes de Lara* is also covered, though Barton's connection between it and the theme of the chapter is flimsy at best; it is only the very ending of the story that is remotely relevant to a discussion of interfaith marriage.

The continual discussion of boundaries, geographical, social, and religious, in *Conquerors, Brides, and Concubines* is a fascinating follow-up to Barton's work on marriage across frontiers. The book is important for those scholars working in the field of Iberian studies, particularly those concerned with Muslim-Christian relationships, but the book is disappointing in its narrow Christian perspective, and cannot therefore be considered to have really covered the topic of sex and power in

post-conquest Iberia until literature from both sides are included. Barton would do well to go back and search for literature by Muslim writers of the time period expressing their views on interfaith sex, power, and political domination.

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