



The Myth of Lot in *Genesis 19* and its Implications in Sexual Education  
During the Middle Ages  
El mito de Lo en *Génesis 19* y sus implicaciones en la educación sexual  
durante la Edad Media  
O mito de Ló em *Gênesis 19* e suas implicações na educação sexual  
durante a Idade Média

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**Abstract:** An accurate understanding of sexual relations described in Lot's parable in Genesis 19 constitutes an interesting key to the analysis of this episode and to its exegetic interpretation throughout the Middle Age. In this essay we will focus on two distinct moments of the account: first, the attempted rape of Lot's divine guests by the populace of Sodom, then destroyed by God's anger; second, the incestuous intercourses between Lot and his daughters in a remote cave, far from the burning cities of the Dead Sea's plain. By comparing this passage with similar episodes in the Old Testament, we will try to explain those *topoi* in their historical and geographical context, by stressing the ethnic and genealogical background of this episode. Then, we will show different readings by exegetes of all the revealed religions during the Middle Age. Finally, Supported by textual and iconographical analysis, we will study the social and cultural implications of such readings in response to these violent behaviours and to the role played by facts and characters.

**Resumo:** uma compreensão precisa das relações sexuais descritas na parábola de Ló, no Genesis 19, constitui uma chave interessante para a análise deste episódio e para sua compreensão exegética durante a Idade Média. Neste artigo focaremos em dois momentos distintos deste relato: primeiro, a tentativa de estupro dos hóspedes divinos de Ló pelo populacho de Sodoma, sendo assim

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destruídos pela cólera de Deus; em segundo lugar, o intercuro incestuoso entre Ló e suas filhas em uma caverna remota, longe das cidades quem queimavam na planície do Mar Morto. Através da comparação com alguns episódios paralelos do Velho Testamento, tentaremos explicar estes *topoi* em seu contexto histórico e geográfico, reiterando o pano de fundo étnico e genealógico deste episódio. Então, mostraremos diferentes leituras de exegetas de todas as religiões reveladas durante a Idade Media. Finalmente, aportados em uma análise textual e iconográfica, estudaremos as implicações sociais e culturais de tais leituras em resposta a estes comportamentos violentos e ao papel exercido por estes fatos e personagens.

**Keywords:** Allegory – Homosexuality – Hospitality – Incest – Cave cult.

**Palavras-chave:** Alegoria – Homossexualidade – Hospitalidade – Incesto – Culto da caverna.

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The aim of this article is to throw light on one of the most intriguing chapters in *Genesis*, the nineteenth, where the story of Lot and his family is told. The text is composed by two separate narratives: the destruction of Sodom and the incestuous intercourse between Lot and his daughters.<sup>2</sup> The most striking fact is that the whole plot is filled with explicit sexual misbehaviours from both the heroes and the villains. Moreover, none of the ‘positive’ characters demonstrates any moral coherency by switching from the role of the victim to the one of the judge in each of the two parts.

It seems natural that the particular difficulty of such an exegesis along with the strong visual impact of the account has made this text very fertile for literary criticism and heavily iconic for art. My intention is to describe these social and private interrelationships, observing the persistence of these practices in historical times through the Middle Ages, toward modern times and today. But for a fully historical reading of this text, it is essential to be aware of the changes in common moral sense and ethic priorities during time.

The reason behind these violent acts is an ethnic one. In the text it is clearly reported that sexual abuse was intended to keep the supremacy of their own

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<sup>2</sup> Gen. 19. 1-29 and 30-38.



people – as with the Sodomites – and to preserve the continuity of family purity in genealogical descent. All this happens in a wasteland of natural desolation, where the protagonists live in a condition of social isolation from the beginning of their flight. None of the sexual acts contained in it, is directly related to individual pleasure and they are always perceived by characters as necessary to fulfil a higher duty.

The logic of ethnic survival and prosperity, on one hand, and sex, on the other, as an instrument to reach this purpose, have been the terms of moral evaluation of facts by exegetes of all revealed religions for centuries. In fact, a self-centred reading of the moral conduct of these actors as if they were real (or verisimilar) personalities with independent thoughts, is a modern one. During the Middle Ages, however, they were seen more as instantiations of philosophical concepts and mental dynamics under negative external circumstances.

First, we will focus on the last days of Sodom. Today, the popular Western imagery connects this particular episode to a very serious social matter, that is, the presence of homosexuality into an urban context. In common beliefs, ‘Sodom’ has taken the place of any city with dissolute sexual mores and ‘Sodomites’ is a derogatory term for ‘homosexuals’ in general. But, as it stands from the texts, no such indication is found into the Bible.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, until very recent times, none of the commentators of this passage has attributed the cause of the destruction of the town to that specific guilt. On the contrary, most medieval critics agreed that the real sin of the people of Sodom was the betrayal of the right of hospitality.

However, the destruction of the Dead Sea Plain was strictly related to the following part of the account, and the two parts of the story had been red *together* as two elements of a common logic. This second part constitutes an independent legend into the ‘cycle’ of Abraham. This literary tradition was passed from one generation to the next in the land of Canaan and it dealt with the begetting in a Cave of two semi-divine sons, founders of peoples, from a primeval god in the shape of an old man and from two primeval women. Compared to the first part, the protagonists are the same but their roles are inverted: while in Sodom, Lot was an authoritative father, disposing of the lives of his virgin daughters, vice versa, in the tale of the incestuous rape, he

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<sup>3</sup> See BOSWELL, J. *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp. 91-118.



served to his daughters' plans for progeny without even knowing it. The major exegetical problem was to give a reason why Lot was indicated as 'righteous' elsewhere in the Bible, and recognised as 'saint' by his local worshipers from Jerusalem and the Eastern Valley of Jordan River. Sex and the transmission of biological features and cultural heritage to the new-born are two faces of the same coin and in this respect, the entire segment has been read as a desperate attempt by the daughters to carry on the 'paternal seed', granting a future to the progeny. In terms of moral priorities, sexual impurity was preferable to the disappearance of family blood.

Finally, I will use the conclusions that have been drawn from the two passages, to look at the survival of this myth, today, both in the literary and artistic representations and in contemporary societies. For the first part, the refusal of the common bias that equates 'sodomy' to 'homosexuality' will lead us to observe another major social problem: rape in war, as a war strategy. I argue that the particular form of crowding of the Sodomites in front of the Lots house, corresponds indeed at such a military practice. After that, we will notice that the 'Lot and his daughters' myth and its formal types, survives in Western society within a particular kind of social relationship: the one between very powerful aged men and very young and clever women who aim at their independence.

## I. The Sin of Sodomy

Like any other story in the Torah, the tale of the destruction of Sodom is not an episode which stands in isolation. Its formulas and narrative dynamics recur in several other episodes in the Hebrew Bible. In the context of rabbinical studies, finding linguistic recurrences and narrative resemblances in the text was the primary duty of investigation and the way to find a common logic behind such an abundance of very different particular situations in the history of Israel.<sup>4</sup>

The first part of the plot is divided into two distinct moments:

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<sup>4</sup> For an introduction to Jewish exegesis and its methods, see FISHBANE, M. *Biblical Myth and Rabbinical Mythmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); HASKELL, E. 'Metaphor, Transformation and Transcendence: Toward an Understanding of Kabbalah Imagery in Sefer Hazohar'. In: *Prooftext*, 28, 2008, pp. 335 - 362; IDEL, M. *Absorbing Perfections*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.



- a) The hospitality of Lot towards the angels. (Gen. 19. 1-3)
- b) Sin and punishment of Sodomites with the total destruction of their land and kin. (Gen. 19. 4-29.)

The opening part of the chapter reflects almost identically the opening part of the previous chapter, in which the hospitality of Lot's uncle, Abraham, was shown.<sup>5</sup> Since his departure from Carran to found a new lineage, Lot is told to always travel on Abraham's side.<sup>6</sup> His sister, Sars, is Abraham's nephew and wife, proving that inbreeding was still not a taboo in patriarchal times.<sup>7</sup> But when the two arrive in the land of Canaan, due to some problems of property, they consensually decide to split the family and the land. Lot chooses to settle in the Eastern Valley of Jordan River, while Abraham moves to the West Bank.

Uncle Abraham shows on many occasions his great esteem toward Lot, actually rescuing him from imprisonment during a war against Assyrian kings and by trying to mitigate God's intention to burn down the Plain.<sup>8</sup> When the 'men' – the angels sent by God to destroy the city – arrive to both Abraham's and Lot's houses, they receive an almost identical welcome. Through verbal

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<sup>5</sup> Gen. 18. 1-15.

<sup>6</sup> The company of Lot during Abraham's travel to the Promised Land is often repeated using similar formulas that places, from time to time, Lot at his uncle's side, see Gen. 11. 31, Gen. 12. 4-5, and Gen. 13. 1; The *Bereshith* (HORNE, W. *The Sacred Books and Early Literature of the East IV*. London: Parke, Austin, and Lipscomb, 1917, p. 62) names four benefits received by Lot for Abraham's proximity, followed by as many injuries from his descendants, (the Moabites and Ammonites), toward the people of Israel. This proximity between the two will be exalted particularly in the Islamic tradition.

<sup>7</sup> Endogamy was a common feature both for Israelites and for the neighbouring people of the Middle East, when the narrative of Genesis takes place. This is testified *a silentio* by the elision of this prohibition in the rules in Leviticus' against impurity and by the literary recurrence of these close-kin relationships, both in Bible and in Mesopotamian epics (*Atrā Hasis, Gilgamesh*). See ARCHIBALD, E. *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 1-8.

<sup>8</sup> In that case too, Abraham's favour is shown by the fact that he names Lot his 'brother' and for he let him to choose first the half of the Negev Plain that he prefers. Lot settles in the wealthiest and more fertile part. Before the destruction by means of sulphuric rocks from the sky, the Jordan Valley is said to be irrigated 'as the Garden of the Lord, as the Land of Egypt, up to Soar' (Gen. 13. 10). Jewish commentators do not fail to note the greed of Lot and his indifference in abandoning his family education and customs. Some *midrashim* report this statement made by Lot during separation: 'I do not have anything to spare for Abraham or his God!'



and narrative parallels, a strong connection between Abraham's and Lot's personalities is set in the framework of a common family education that has taught them to welcome strangers and give them refreshments before they leave. Early Jewish and Christian commentators already linked the two scenes and recognised to both Abraham and Lot this same virtue.

Still, in comparing their behaviours, they found some differences as well, noticing many imperfections in Lot's manners. It is frequent, especially in Hebrew exegesis, to see Lot described as a 'weaker Abraham', while the Islamic tradition emphasised their contiguity in both moral behaviour and spiritual life.<sup>9</sup>

However, hospitality is the key to interpreting the next part of the story. The vile acts that follow are the response of the whole populace of Sodom. They demand, in fact, to have the guests of Lot, 'so we can abuse them'.<sup>10</sup> This pretension echoes another episode within the *Tanakh*, that is, the story of the Levite and the crime of Gab s in *Judges*.<sup>11</sup> The situation is nearly identical. The Levite and his concubine arrive as strangers in a town. They are hosted by an old man, who was himself a resident foreigner, and his virgin daughter. The men of the town request the owner to surrender the guest for the crime of sexual abuse.

In both cases, the two fathers try to calm the crowd and offer a replacement. Lot offers his two daughter's virginity instead of his guests, while the Levite's host offers his own daughter and the concubine herself. Both the Sodomites and the Gaabites initially refuse the exchange. The major difference is that, while the angels save the situation by striking the Sodomites with blindness,

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<sup>9</sup> According to rabbinical tradition, the prime imputation toward Lot was that he has passively adopted foreign customs since when he has moved to Sodom. So this inferiority is noted in his manners – he was too obsequious, though harassing – and in his lack of trust in God's messengers - when they told him to flee – always comparing his behaviour to his uncle's best. Lot is figured side by side with Noah and Abraham in Sura XXI (*Al-Anbiyá'*, The Prophets) and in some other early Christian text (*Saint Paul's Apocalypse, Second Epistle of Peter*). In Palestinian and Trans-Jordan local legends about Lot, he is believed to be reunited with his uncle after having disappeared from the text. This is confirmed by the location of his tomb (on the West Bank at Beni Na'im) that is at the top of the mountain from which Abraham had seen the plain burning. See below, no. 30.

<sup>10</sup> Gen. 19. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Jgs. 19. 1-30.



the Levite has no other options than to cede his beloved to the fury of the crowd that in fact rapes and then kills her.<sup>12</sup>

In two different chapters of the Bible, we witness the harassment of strangers by a large delegation of citizens and to their wish to abuse indistinctly both women and men, as long as they had come that very day from out of town. This proves that we are not witnessing a collective orgiastic instinct, but a precise and defined form of civic claim against someone who is not accepted, which is expected to end with sexual humiliation. According to the text, this was the offense that manifested in their sin and in no other place in the Bible was the Sodomites' fault identified as *lust*. It is said that Sodom perished for its 'pride, fullness of bread, idleness' and, of course, for not assisting 'the poor and the needy'.<sup>13</sup> Not once are the sexual habits of its inhabitants mentioned. Some later texts, external to the Bible affirmed the 'impurity' of the Sodomites but even in these cases this does not necessarily mean that the crime was understood as sexual, much less that it was homosexuality.<sup>14</sup>

The idea that the assault of the Sodomites was more a punitive police action than deliberately gay harassment is confirmed by figurative evidence.<sup>15</sup>

Very frequently in manuscripts from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries, either from the Byzantine East or the Latin West one can see the men in front of Lot's house at least in arms, when they're not directly wearing armour, even if this detail is not mentioned in the text. In the Jewish rabbinical tradition, there is no doubt that Sodom was destroyed for its lack of hospitality, which Flavius Josephus translates in Greek with the term '*miso xenia*'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Some exegetical readings seem to suggest that the blindness in which the Sodomites fell was not a purely optical one: AMBROSE OF MILAN *De Abraham*, SCHENKL, C. (ed.). CSEL 32, Prague: Academia litterarum Caesariae Vindobonensis, 1897. I. 6.

1; 614; Carolus Schenkl ed.

described it as a form of collective madness, while in the *Biblia Picta Valislai* (Prague, Narodni Bibliothek, MS XIII C 124) the Angels are represented decapitating the Sodomites.

<sup>13</sup> Ez. 16. 44 – 58.

<sup>14</sup> Such as the *Book of Jubilees* XVI.

<sup>15</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. Lat 10125 Psautier Royale de Saint Louis. 1270 ca. A.D; New York, Pierpont & Morgan Library, ms 739. XIII A.D; Pierpont & Morgan Library, ms. 268 XIC A.D.

<sup>16</sup> FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS. *Antiquitates Judaicae*, NIESE, B. (ed.). Flavii Iosephi opera Berlin: Weidmann, 1887.



In early Christian exegesis, however, where the sexual aspects of this narrative were emphasised far more than in the rabbinic school, no connection is made between the end of Sodom and a sexual crime. Even Ambrose and Augustine, the only ones who seem to have noted the homosexual nature of the request, placed it in the context of a lack of the town's laws in protecting strangers, and of the cruelty of the townspeople against them, rather than making a judgment on the sexual inclinations of the subjects.<sup>17</sup>

We have to wait until the fourteenth century to find an explicit illustration of the sexual life of Sodomites. The dramatic rise of intolerance against ethnic groups and social minorities taking place in Europe from the twelfth century, provoked the Catholic Church to assign, for the first time in its history, ecclesiastical sanctions against any 'impure' sexual act, including homosexuality, both for laymen and for priests.

Moreover, the crusades helped in the spreading of horrible tales of war, in which Muslims raped both women and men after the conquest of Christian villages, recalling their presumed near-Eastern ancestors and reinforcing popular associations between Sodom and sexual impurity and profanation. In this picture from the *Egerton Genesis* (Fig. 1) we can see both assumed defects of the Sodomites represented: one being the refusal of hospitality to strangers and the other being lust inside the walls.

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, I. 194.

<sup>17</sup> See AMBROSE OF MILAN *De Abraham*, SCHENKL, C. (ed.). CSEL 32, Prague: Academia litterarum Caesaræ Vindobonensis, 1897, I. 6. 52.

ST AUGUSTINE. *De civitate Dei*. DOMBART, B and KALB, A. (eds.). CC, 47-48 Brepols: Turnhout, 1965, XVI. 30.





Figure 1. MS. Egerton 1894 (Egerton *Genesis*) London, British Library, 16th c.

But again, the charge is not towards homosexual acts: we can see, even despite censorship, a heterosexual assault and a scene of masturbation, but no homosexual offense. Only from the thirteen century onward, did the term ‘sodomy’ begun to be associated with ‘homosexuality’.<sup>18</sup> But for the most part,

<sup>18</sup> Or, more precisely, to homosexual relationships between members of the same community. This marks a major change in Western thought because, for the first time, affective relationships implying sexual intercourses are attributed to this passage of Genesis, contradicting (or freely interpreting) the overall sense of the story. The strength of this association was sustained by the homiletic identification of Sodom with any ‘modern’ city (a fascination that has not yet ceased in our days). In an early national system (as Europe was in the thirteen century), the proximity of different communities was no longer something to fear but something to benefit from, and foreigners were generally less perceived as actual threats. Conversely, as the urban population on European soil grew, it grew in complexity too and different communities began to live side by side into the same town. Social interactions between individuals changed profoundly: personal contacts with neighbours became more difficult, while their proximity was tighter. As an international commerce network developed, different ethnic groups were forced to live peacefully one next to the other, requiring in almost every part of Europe a revision of civic laws and a global re-thinking of social life and services. As Boswell has pointed out, concepts as ‘urban’ or ‘rural’ are absolutely primary in defying individual’s sexual identity and social



the term kept its original meaning of ‘*heresy*’ and its generality to all impure activities. In most of Western law codes ‘sodomy’ is condemned not *per se*, but along with the laws that intended to separate the Christians from the infidels in the same city.<sup>19</sup>

## II. The Cave Incest and Medieval Exegeses of *Genesis 19*

As for the account of the destruction of Sodom, it is part of a literary genre common in Mesopotamia, the so-called ‘tales of total destruction’, which includes the well-known narrative of the Flood and the salvation of Noah’s family.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the two episodes follow the same basic structure and they both have verbal references with the same narrative function.<sup>21</sup> The patriarchs’ families were saved for being the only people to have maintained the morals of their fathers and the law of God in their world. Both of them were finally deceived by their sons and daughters into drunkenness and abused by them.

The incest part of the two narratives is separated from the main narrative, and it derives from locally-rooted legends, later introduced into the text in order to explain the mythical origins of the neighbouring peoples of Israel.<sup>22</sup> If the rape

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judgment of it. One may think that homosexual love could be favoured in an urban (more anonymous) culture, but this is not true when we consider that the preservation of an ancient, pre-Christian, life-style and moral code (one that doesn’t considered homosexual intercourse – and either homosexual love, as an abomination) was far easier in the countryside than in the city. See BOSWELL. *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, pp. 31-39 and 119-36.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31-39.

<sup>20</sup> This definition came from an article by Alster Baruch, which traces the common features of some ancient myths from Mesopotamia and Canaan, both in the narrative continuum and in literary reprises. See BARUCH, A. ‘The Destruction of Sodom in Light of the Flood Tradition’. In: *Acts from the 15th World Congress of Jewish Studies*. Jerusalem, 2009, pp. 6-10.

<sup>21</sup> Meaning some words that have the same role into the plot. Baruch identifies them as: ‘Finding favor’, ‘Destruction’, ‘Rain’, ‘Closing’, ‘Remembering’, ‘Mountain’, ‘Knowledge’.

<sup>22</sup> The story of the incest of an old father and two young daughters giving birth to a new generation of men strictly recalls some of the legends of the land of Canaan which date to around the sixth century BC. Particularly there is one from Ugarit, which deals with an old El (Semitic main deity) and two daughters performing a complex sexual ritual. From their union two deities (Dusk and Dawn) will be born and subsequently two semi-divine beings –giants, which travel the earth looking for food and wine, counting on peasants’ hospitality. This and other similar myths were performed every year in harvest festivals. The presence of the vine is certainly from this narrative, whatever form it takes throughout time. See VIROLLEAUD, Charles. ‘La naissance des dieux gracieux et beaux’. In: *Syria*, 14, 1933, pp. 128-51; PORTER, J. R. ‘The Daughters of Lot’. In *Folklore*, 89, 1978, pp. 127-41; STARR,



by Ham, however, is universally condemned by critics, the daughters of Lot have been treated with much more respect. The reason for this is that while the deed of Ham had nothing to do with reproduction, the act of the daughters did, because they found no one else 'of their kind' but their father to procreate with.<sup>23</sup> Christian and Jewish exegetes tended to place all responsibility on Lot himself, who was said to be unconscious because of the wine during the embraces.

Particularly in the rabbinical traditions, while Lot is regarded in a very unfavourable light, his daughters are seen as morally stainless and the true heroines of their people-progeny, that is the Moabites and the Ammonites. In one *Haggadah* code (Fig. 2), we see a common place in midrashic tradition which emphasises the fact that the girls were lying on top, as a sign of Lot's inferiority.<sup>24</sup>

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O. M. 'An Apotropaic Incest Ritual in the Baal and Anath Cycle'. In *Folklore*, 95, 1984, pp. 231-44.

<sup>23</sup> The daughters are perceived by them to have had no choice at all. Medieval commentators have often argued that the daughters believed that the whole humanity had been destroyed, but what about the citizens of Soar? Why did the family flee from them? Modern scholars (PORTER. 'The Daughters of Lot', p. 128 and H. GUNKEL, *Genesis*, 6th edn. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964, p. 218) have stressed the ethnic side of the story. It is probable that this passage (Gen 19. 31-33) and the one that explains the name of Moabites and Ammonites (Gen 19. 36-38) generated within the same ethnic groups, to be a strong statement of national pride by which they asserted the complete refusal of sexual impurity through isolation. They may have absorbed this topic from native cultures and reshaped it to legitimate their presence in the area (i.e., the East Bank of the Dead Sea). The insertion of this national foundation myth into *Genesis* could have had different functions for the Israelites becoming a moral warning in the light of the Law which formally forbid incest (although there is no explicit prohibition for a man to have sex with his daughter, because the prescriptions in the Bible are always in the child's perspective). Moabites and Ammonites are repeatedly reported in the *Tanakh* to have had promiscuous habits in their sexual and family life (for example in Num. 25. 1). The text reports that because of their impurity none of the Moabites or Ammonites were to enter the Assembly of Israel, though Lord forbade to move war on them or to overrun their lands. As members of Abraham's family (and not of Sodom's according to Hebrews) they have right to an heir who is sacred. It is particularly interesting that this prohibition was not extended to women, which may have been married to an Israelite and joined the community. It is the case - decisive for most of the medieval tradition - of the prophetess Ruth who was Moabite, the mother of David and, therefore, a direct ancestress of Jesus' lineage.

<sup>24</sup> This Jewish argument was taken by Hrabanus Maurus and eventually depicted in the thirteenth century. This detail was in fact represented in the iconography of the North-



Figure 2. MS. Or. 2884 ‘*Barcellona Haggadah*’, London, British Library, 11th c.<sup>25</sup>

In Christian exegesis, the biblical material was soon used in allegories for the purpose of meditation and self-examination, by seeing behind facts and characters mental dynamics and philosophical concepts of the Hellenistic mind.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, in Origen’s lecture, Lot is the Individual Mind while his daughters represent Counsel and Consent: the incest is then a symbolic projection of a faulty reasoning inside human logic.<sup>27</sup> Augustine applied the allegory to a

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West portal of the Cathedrale de Saint-Jean of Reims, where a tile was sculpted with a representation of the same subject. That tile, differently from the picture of Sodom in the Egerton *Genesis*, was not subjected to censorship but it was left uncarved and, therefore, it rather went through a stylistic choice of the creator or through *preventive* censorship. Other manuscripts of late German *Weltchronik* shows the same treatment.

<sup>25</sup> See also: ‘The flight from Sodom compared with the withdrawal of the monk’, MS. fr. 9561, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, 16th c. This is an example of a Christian visual metaphor on the subject. Very often, the history of the flight from Sodom has been viewed as a type for the flight from world’s temptations of the monks. Here, the incest is compared with study, which makes the true advancement of knowledge possible.

<sup>26</sup> This is the case with the illustration found in MS fr. 9561 of the BNF (*Bible historiée toute figurée*, 14th c.) where the flight of Lot’s family and subsequent incest is paired with the withdrawal of the monk and his union with Wisdom, represented by a book. This is the only medieval example I have been able to find of a typological approach to the scene. All the other representations of the subject are in fact inserted in the chronological cycle of illustrations of the Book of Genesis, as I will discuss in an upcoming article)

<sup>27</sup> ORIGEN. *Homilies on Genesis*, MIGNÉ. J. P. (ed.) PL 12, V



social context: Lot is the Law and his daughters are examples of a purely exterior adhesion to the Law itself, representing therefore the Jews and the Gentiles.<sup>28</sup>

This attitude is continued especially by Latin writers, and the daughters gradually turn from being heroic saviours of their people to a couple of intriguing women. One of the earliest Greek examples of this kind is seen in the *Vienna Genesis*, which shows the sisters leading two lines of people out of the town, contradicting the text itself, in order to emphasise their role of leaders of their progeny.<sup>29</sup>

In Byzantine iconography Lot is usually represented as a nimbed saint and his daughters as veiled virgins while the crucial deed is never shown. Latin iconographers are indeed more explicit in representing the sexual act itself. In another English text from the eleventh century, the *Hexateuch of Ælfric* (Fig. 3) we can distinctly see the older sister who pulls back her hand-covering sleeves, which symbolise virginity, and copulate with his father into an undefined mass with a highly symbolic value.



Figure 3. MS. Cotton Claudius B IV (*Ælfric's Hexateuch*), London, British Library, 11th c.

<sup>28</sup> ST AUGUSTINE, *Contra Fausto Manicheo*.

*Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, ZYCHA, J. (ed.) CSEL 25.1 1891, XXII. 42.

<sup>29</sup> See MS. Cod. Theol. gr. 31 (*Vienna Genesis*). Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, probably 6th c.



Even in the essential forms of the *Pamplona Bible*, their role as progressive and positive young females is visually opposed to the retrospective figure of their mother, turned into a pillar of salt as a Sodomite.<sup>30</sup> This book was conceived to be a real ‘translation in images’ of the Bible, a text composed without any writing. Its drawings, like those of the Hexateuch, were intended to be faithful illustrations of what the text actually said, with no other attributes to complicate the reading.

In line with the new sex-centred reading of the sins of Sodom, however, the daughters begin to lose their innocence and they are depicted confabulate and pouring the wine.<sup>31</sup> Their malice grew significantly in later representations of this episode, as can be seen in numerous examples.<sup>32</sup>

Islamic commentators refuse to acknowledge that this part of the story even exists. Lot is regarded as a perfectly righteous man and a prophet, and his daughters have a secondary role.<sup>33</sup> While disappearing from the Koran after the flight from Sodom, a set of folk tales place the continuation of Lot’s story in Palestine, where he is supposed to have reunited with his uncle Abraham<sup>34</sup>.

His mosque-tomb is located on the top of the mountain from which Abraham saw the plain burning. Other places on the Eastern shore of the Sea of Lot (the Arabic name for the Dead Sea) are also connected with his cult.<sup>35</sup> The

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<sup>30</sup> See MS. 0108 (*Pamplona Bible*), Amiens, Bibliothèque nationale de France, 12th c

<sup>31</sup> In an illustration from a manuscript from Jean de Sy, the act of pouring wine is emphasised as sorcery, (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS. fr. 15397). This ‘pouring gesture’, which was uncommon before (it is represented especially in Greek manuscripts), became almost a constant in modern representations.

<sup>32</sup> Bibliothèque Municipale. Ms. 0148. XV A.D; New York, Pierpont & Morgan Library, ms. M.394. ‘Bible Pierpont’, XIV A.D; Stuttgart, Landesbibliothek, XIII (6), ‘Weltchronik von Rudolph von Ems’, XIV A.D.; Linz, Landesbibliothek, cod. 186 (2) XIV A.D.; Poitiers, Eglise de Saint Pierre: XIII A.D.

<sup>33</sup> According to the great majority of exegetical readings in Islam, the daughters were not related to Lot by a blood relationship. Islamic tradition insists in defining Lot as a local Sodomite and never is he identified as a stranger. He calls the people of Sodom ‘his people’ and the daughters here were intended to be ‘daughters of the people’, which Lot proposed as the ‘right’ alternative to the preferred homosexuality of his fellow citizens.

<sup>34</sup> See, LEEMHUIS, F. ‘Lut and his people in the Koran’. In NOORT, Ed and TIGCHELAAR, Eibert (eds.), *Sodom’s Sin: Genesis 18-19 and its Interpretation*. Leiden: Brill, 2004, pp. 97-115.

<sup>35</sup> It is interesting to note that every place associated with the cult of Lot is located on the top of mountains that permit an overall view of the Plain of the Dead Sea. All those

Byzantine cave-monastery of Saint Lot at Deir ‘Ain ‘Abata (Fig. 4) attests the wholly positive valence assumed by the story in the local Christian community, which is testified by the ‘*kalos telos*’ (‘happy ending’) inscription found at the entrance of the Cave.



Figure 4. The Monastery of Saint Lot in Deir ‘Ain ‘Abata.<sup>36</sup>

The cave entrance is located at the end of the left nave. This site has always been a place of worship of cave-deities from the Bronze Age onwards, and their ancient cult was certainly rooted in a specific place where the race of its inhabitants was supposed to be born.<sup>37</sup> They have changed names and challenged moral fluctuations, but they remained there, where they belonged.

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mountains share the *topos* of patriarchs nostalgically contemplating the Land of Israel: Abraham at Beni Na’im, Moses on Mount Nebo (the physical border of the Kingdom of Moab, according to the ‘Moab Stone’ in the Louvre and Isa. 15, 1-3), Lot himself from the Cave at Deir ‘Ain ‘Abata.

<sup>36</sup> The Monastery of Saint Lot in Deir ‘Ain ‘Abata. Image by Happa:  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lot\\_monastery.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lot_monastery.JPG)

<sup>37</sup> See POLITIS, K. ‘Excavations at the Monastery of Saint Lot at Deir ‘An Abata’. In: *Ricerca storico-archeologica in Giordania*, 11, 1991, pp.517-518

### III. Sodom Today

In conclusion, we have seen that the sexual assault of the Sodomites was a military one. This practice has nothing to do either with individual pleasure or with sexual identity. Humiliation of the stranger is not concerned with the gender of the victims, but with their surrender. In 2001, at Abu Ghraib, both women and men with a 'civilian' heterosexual identity, indulged in sexual abuses of Iraqi male prisoners with the very same intention.<sup>38</sup> The rape of local population as a war strategy has been recently recognised by the UN as a war crime, but the extent of such a tragedy are still far from being known.<sup>39</sup>

It is important to consider that such an abomination is not directed toward other soldiers but accomplished through civilians: these planned and calculated mass rapes are meant to be a cultural action of repression, establishing the superiority of a new race's on the land. Another horrible example of this kind is the so-called 'Marocchinate', the rapes perpetrated by the Moroccan *goumiers* of the French Army toward the people of both sexes of several villages around Rome, during World War II.<sup>40</sup> In both examples, the acts of violence were followed by religious profanation and the destruction of sacred symbols.



<sup>38</sup> See STEMPLE, L. 'Male Rape and Human Rights'. In: *Hastings Law Journal*, 60:3, 2009, 605-646 and STORR, W. 'The Rape of Men'. In: *The Observer*, 17 July 2012.

<sup>39</sup> See SAGHAL, G. and SMITH-SPARK, L. 'In Depth: How Did Rape Become a Weapon of war?'. *BBC News*, 8 December 2004 ([news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/in\\_depth/4078677.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/in_depth/4078677.stm)).

<sup>40</sup> See ANDRIOLA, F. 'Come ti umilio il liberato'. In: *L'Italia settimanale*, N° 7 anno III, 23 February 1994, p. 46.





Figure 5. Bill Clinton (left) and Silvio Berlusconi (right).

What do these two gentlemen have in common (Fig. 5)? At the end of their political trajectory they were both involved in a sex scandal involving very young and independent women. I think that one reason for such an interest of public attention lies in the way in which media had presented these episodes. Their stories shared a common structure that can be traced back to other figures of European imagery. In the beginning, these girls were subjected to their master and attracted by his power.

However, as their ruler's power declined they saw a chance to gain their independence and therefore did not hesitate to pass over his reputation. Taken as literary types in the eternal quest for entertainment, the events of their lives are narrated recalling a whole series of similar episodes of both the Bible and the classic heritage. This is the Power of Women or *Weiberlisten* that contains the very same elements: sex and drunkenness. Its forms have been well studied by Smith and it will be a main argument for an upcoming article about our iconography in the Reformation<sup>41</sup>.

Sex is still a place for public judgement, and a powerful motor of social discussion. The recently-sentenced Berlusconi used to call himself '*papà*' (dad) and his prostitutes, 'my little girls'. While this quotation from the Lewinsky-Tripp tapes shows, unconsciously, all the types of our myth: a frigid wife, the forgotten daughter, the desolation and the weakness that pushes the powerful man into decline:

Lewinsky: 'Right, and then I said... 'Well, don't you get any warmth and da da da from your wife?''<sup>42</sup>

Tripp: You didn't.

L: I did. He said, 'Of course I do'.

T: Yeah. What he really told you was the truth before that, Monica: 'I have an empty life?'

L: But Linda, that's [redacted]. What about his daughter and all the things he does and, you know...

T: No. No. What he's saying is his compulsion for female intimacy is the void that's the void. And whatever motivates him to behave the way he does, and

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<sup>41</sup> See SMITH, L. M., *The Iconography of Lot and his Daughters in the Sixteenth-Century European Art: an Orientation*, forthcoming.

<sup>42</sup> This onomatopoeia is curiously recurrent in many of the literary reprises of the theme: James Joyce uses the wonderful expression 'dadad's lottiest pearldaughter' in *Finnegan's Wake*. See POLHEMUS, R. *Lot's Daughters*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 3.



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then obviously, he has to pull back and say: 'I can't do this' is because of the void [...].<sup>43</sup>

As we have seen, the myths about Sodom and Lot have been the ground for the moral evaluation of impure sexual acts. The definition of what was really considered as 'impure' in the people of Sodom or in the daughters has been variable according to social changes in time and to geographical movements in space.

Nowadays, it reflects a particularly self-centred and sexually-explicit sense and imagery as it becomes clear from contemporary treatments of the subject.<sup>44</sup> But, in any case, it has not ceased to fascinate us and to renew its appearances and its meanings in our consciousness.

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<sup>43</sup> 'The Lewinsky-Tripp Tapes', *WGBH American Experience*, accessed 23/02/2014 (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/lewin-sky-tripp/>).

<sup>44</sup> Newton-Souza, *The Daughters of Lot*, 1982; R Guttuso, *Le Figlie di Lot*, 1968; R. Crumb. *The Book of Genesis illustrated* by R. Crumb, 2010, M Chagall. *Le filles de Loth*. 1931.