The Rise of Eunuchs in Greco-Roman Antiquity

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In this article I would like to show that eunuchs gradually gained prominence in Greco-Roman society from the second to fourth centuries C.E.1 In so doing I would like to add fresh material to recent discussions of this period's sexuality—discussions illuminating a curious and fascinating shift in sexuality from ancient to more modern views. A brief...
of eunuchs into the Greco-Roman world. We are fortunate that the ancient jurists have left us exact definitions of assexual men in antiquity. Roman law presents us with a precise catalog of eunuchs in the high empire, though its foreign terminology burdens us with some need for extrapolation. The inheritance law divided eunuchs into four categories: spadones, thibiae, thalaidae, and castrati, of whom all but the castrati could pass on an inheritance—the legal essence of Roman patrilinearity. The last three terms seem to refer to processes of sexual mutilation. Thibiae in Greek refers to the “pressed.” Thalaidae refers to the “crushed.” And castrati in Latin refers to those whose gonads (and possibly penis also) were surgically detached from the body. The digest itself states: “Spado is the generic name under which those who are spadones by birth as well as thibiae, thalaias and whatever other type of spado exists, are contained.” These spadones are contrasted with castrati. “It has been discussed if he who cannot easily procreate can leave an heir. Both Cassius and Iavolusus write that he can, since he can take a wife and adopt a son. Labeo and Cassius also write that spadones are able to have a heir since neither their age nor their sterility is an impediment. But Julian follows the opinion of Proclus that one who is castrated cannot take an heir, which ruling we follow.” Therefore it seems that the crushing and pressing were procedures somehow not associated with the more drastic castration. This leaves three groups: those born without

it. Homosexuality and heterosexuality, as we currently understand them, are modern, Western, bourgeois productions. Nothing resembling them can be found in classical antiquity. A certain identification of the self with the sexual self began in late antiquity; it was strengthened by the Christian confessional. Only in the high middle ages did certain kinds of sexual acts start to get identified with certain specifically sexual types of person” (p. 8). For examples of recent work on sexuality in the empire, see Judith P. Halpert, “Female Homoeroticism and the Denial of Roman Reality in Latin Literature,” Yale Journal of Criticism 3 (1989): 209–27; and John Boswell, Same Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe (New York, 1994). A good place to become familiar with the ongoing debate on method within the fields of history of sexuality, classics, and feminism is Amy Richlin, The Garden of Priapus (Oxford, 1992), esp. in her preface and bibliographies. I am indebted to her.

The term “patriarchy” has been stretched beyond recognition in the last few decades—see Gerda Lerner, The Creation of Patriarchy (Oxford, 1986), p. 239, for a succinct and precise definition. For an overview, see Richlin, pp. xvii–xviii.

See Ernst Maas, “Eunuchus und verwandtes,” Rheinisches Museum für Philologie 74 (1925): 432–76, who gathers an impressive array of linguistic evidence in defining the variety of Greek and Latin terms for “eunuchs.”
strong sexual characteristics, those “moderately” emasculated, and those surgically emasculated. These legal definitions of course did not arrive until the flowering of written corpora of laws in the high empire. As will be seen, the earlier Romans would not have discussed eunuchs so passionately.

The central problem for an understanding of Roman eunuchs originates in the strong Roman sense of nature, and their sharp definition of what is natural and unnatural. It will come as no surprise to those familiar with the Romans that they were not initially fond of the practice of castration. Since my goal is to demonstrate the development of the eunuch’s prominence in Greco-Roman culture, it will be useful to start at the beginning and sketch out the Roman resistance to this age-old institution. After this resistance is discussed, the rise of eunuchs can be covered in its appropriate context.

Roman religion since time immemorial had worshipped the father’s generative power in the genius of the paterfamilias, or the fertility principle behind the whole household. Since the Romans thought that the survival of the family, and hence the society, relied not only on the fertility of the father to generate children (or exploitable labor for the farm), but also for his fertility to infuse the crops, cattle, sheep and swine, this genius demanded the highest status. The Roman state in turn developed its system of rule through patres or fathers based upon the importance of the paterfamilias for survival. The terminology was retained right into the time of Augustus (and throughout the principate) who claimed the title “father of the fatherland” (Pater Patriae) upon consolidating power in 27 B.C.E. The foundation of this concept of “father” seems to be deeply rooted in the fertility or potency of the father. If this potency is the root of the Roman conception of power, we would expect the Romans to banish such an impossible “pater” as a eunuch from access to power or prestige.

And this is, of course, how the historical Romans reacted. For instance, when they accepted Cybele into the state cult in 204 B.C.E., the senate apparently refused citizens the right to participate in the rites of the mother goddess as her castrated priests: that is, they could not imagine allowing a Roman to be castrated—a procedure necessary for initiation in the priesthood of Cybele. Catullus’ poem number 63 presents the experience of castration for the priesthood of Cybele. In this striking poem the mutilated initiate himself expresses regret at his action and thus probably speaks for many Roman males in articulating their collective castration fear.13 Finally, as the number of eunuchs apparently increased enough to demand imperial attention, Emperor Domitian declared all castration illegal within the boundaries of the empire.14 Whether he did this out of fear of their ambiguous sexuality, out of a sense of conventional Roman morality, or out of concern for the depopulation of the empire, he left us no record.15 We are left to ponder his motivation.

A curious strand of Roman discourse seconded Domitian’s disapproval of eunuchs.16 Several authors of satirical bent dwelled on a sexually threatening aspect of eunuchs. Medically it can be explained that a eunuch, if castrated after puberty, would lose fertility but retain sexual desire and the capability to gain erection and enjoy genital pleasure.17 According to our sources these eunuchs would even have exorbitantly heightened sexual desires. In this satire attacking the conduct of Roman wives, Juvenal seems almost to fear eunuchs’ “virility”:

There are girls who adore unmanly eunuchs—so smooth, so beardless to kiss, and no worry about abortions! But the biggest thrill is one who was fully-grown, a lusty black-quilled male, before the surgeons went to work on his groin. Let the testicles ripen and drip, fill out till they hang like two-pound weights; then what the surgeon chops will hurt nobody’s trade but the barber’s. (Slave-dealers’ boys are different: pathetically weak, ashamed of the empty bag, their lost little chickpeas.) Look at that specimen—you could spot him a mile off, everyone knows him—displaying his well-endowed person

14I consulted Theodor Mommsen, Römisches Strafrecht (Graz, 1955), p. 637, for a detailed documentation of Domitian’s law.
16See also Celsus (e.g., De medicina 4.31), a medical writer, and Pliny the Elder (e.g., Naturalis historia 11.269), an encyclopedist of sorts, who discuss eunuchs with familiarity in the middle first century.
17See Galen De unum partium 4.190.16 for a discussion of this medical phenomenon.
at the baths: Priapus might well be jealous. And yet he’s a eunuch. His mistress arranged it. So, let them sleep together—yet I wouldn’t bet on a handsome, passionate youth with his first beard sprouting to better that performance.  

Clearly eunuchs were both well known in Rome by Juvenal’s time (early second century B.C.E.), and perceived as randy, if the poet’s lines were to be effective. The outrage here, though embellished, concerns the flagrant infertility of eunuchs (and their sexual partners)—a theme that could easily have been heard in the discussions of the third-century C.E. senate. Thus Juvenal’s response fits well into the Roman tradition that highly values male fertility. According to this tradition it is “unnatural” for women to enjoy sex without potential procreation. Thus it seemed doubly unnatural for men, the very loci of Roman fertility, to provide this sterile pleasure.

Martial (40–104 C.E.), a well-known composer of epigram by the time of Domitian’s reign, affirms Juvenal’s opinion:

It used to be a game to fool around with our holy marriage, a game also to mutilate pitiful males. Caesar, you prohibit both and so do well by future generations whom you order to be born legitimately. Now as long as you reign there will be neither eunuch nor adulterer: but before—the times!—the adulterer was a eunuch.  

Though there is a clear attempt to flatter Domitian in these lines, there is also a point. If the poem were to make sense to its audience, there would have to be a presumption among Romans that eunuchs were involved in adultery. This suspicion of adultery would follow Juvenal’s opinion that these sterile men represented the married woman’s best birth control, therefore eunuchs must have been enjoying sex with married women. We can never know whether or not eunuchs were widely involved in adultery in the late first and early second century. Nevertheless, it is apparent that Romans disapproved of eunuchs at the time. It could, however, be argued that these satirists are merely exaggerating for humorous purposes. For example, Quintilian, a sober and respectable court rhetorician under Domitian, states in his section on the rhetorical usefulness of jokes the following: “I will add another example [of humor caused by the unexpected] although out of respect to its

author I withhold his name: ‘You are more lustful than a eunuch,’ where we are surprised by the appearance of a word which is the very opposite of what we should have expected.”  

Quintilian’s sentiment contradicts what Juvenal and Martial say by implying that eunuchs have very little libido. Could it be that Juvenal was joking in the manner described by Quintilian? If Quintilian were in fact representing a common Roman opinion, then we could explain the jokes in the satirists as attempts to surprise their audiences with unexpected sexual scenarios.

I do not think, however, that Quintilian’s statement can hold enough weight to subvert the satirical passages, especially that of Juvenal. Quintilian presents himself as somewhat stuffy and prudish throughout his book on education. Furthermore, we can suspect that he lived the sheltered, distant life of the courtly elite, rarely even meeting with anyone who would be acquainted first-hand with the behavior of a eunuch. The other authors of the time, and especially those closer to the “streets,” as Juvenal and Martial repeatedly characterize themselves, describe eunuchs as lascivious. Most important, Martial was in no position for absurd joking when he addressed the poem quoted above to Domitian himself, an emperor who legislated against eunuchs.

A later author, Apuleius, leaves us a different view of eunuchs: that they solely desired anal penetration and, thus, took on the Roman feminine sexual role, that is, that they were “effeminate.” His novel The Golden Ass recounts the adventures of a man turned into an ass. In the section of interest to us, he has been sold to a group of castrated eunuchs serving as priests of Cybele. In this passage the chief eunuch has just bought the ass and brought him back to the other eunuchs. The narrator is the ass:

As soon as he reached the threshold, he cried out, “Girls, troop up and spy the darling slavelet I’ve bought you.” The girls, however, turned out to be a band of eunuchs, who at once began squeaking for delight in their splintering harsh womanish voices, thinking that it was really a man brought home trussed to do them good service. When they saw their mistake (not a stag as proxy for a virgin, but an ass for a man) they turned up their noses and sneered at their chief, saying that this wasn’t a servant for them but a husband for himself. “But please,” they added, “don’t keep the

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19 Martial Epigrammata 6.2.

20 Quintilian Institutio oratoria 6.3.64.
21 See, e.g., ibid., 2.2.14, where he commands all teachers to separate the older boys from the younger boys, not only to prevent sexual encounters, but especially to prevent the suspicion of these. Could the unnamed joke in his passage above have been Domitian? Could Quintilian have missed the point of the emperor’s line? It is difficult to resist these speculations.
pretty beast all to yourself. Make sure to share him with your little lovey-doves.”

Even if we allow for the almost fantastical imaginings proper to comic literature, this passage would have little point if there were not a general belief throughout the empire that eunuchs were effeminate and enjoyed anal penetration immoderately. At the beginning of the novel the narrator calls attention to the fact that he is not only not Roman but did not learn the Latin language until adulthood. And yet his calling attention to the feminine failings of eunuchs sounds quite Roman; he implies that eunuchs, just like Roman women, have an immoderate desire for sterile sex. It is reasonable to conclude from this that this stereotype of eunuchs, though differing somewhat from those depicted in the poetry of Juvenal and Martial, also existed outside of the city of Rome.

Another non-Roman voice contemporary with Apuleius discusses eunuchs: Lucian, the Greek humorist who left us a comic dialogue called the Eunuch. This short piece will require a full summary due to its inherent importance for our discussion. One of the characters in the dialogue tells of a courtroom battle between two philosophers, Diocles and a eunuch Bagoas (both names are deliberately fictitious) as to who will take over the leadership of the Peripatetic school in Athens (as well as the 10,000 drachma salary dedicated by the emperor Marcus Aurelius). Diocles charges that Bagoas “is neither a woman nor a man, being a eunuch, rather synthesized, mixed, monstrous, outside of human nature” (47.6). After this standard attack on eunuchs, we are told by our narrator: “At first he [Bagoas] blushed and was quiet and stared stupidly because of shame and cowardice—which are common traits in eunuchs, but at last he piped up in a slight, effeminate voice and said that Diocles wasn’t being fair excluding eunuchs from philosophy in which study even women took part. There was Aspasia and Diotima and Thargelia, and in addition that Academic eunuch from Gaul, who recently had been so highly considered by the Greeks.” At this point a member of the jury joins in and counters that a philosopher needs his whole body and especially a beard, which presumably a eunuch would lack. A second juror defends Bagoas, who then defends himself by claiming that eunuchs are good teachers since they cannot corrupt the students. A third (probably our narrator) is said to bring an ironic conclusion to the debate. This juror has heard that Bagoas was caught in the act of adultery, and defended himself in court by protesting that he was a eunuch. The result was that it was suggested to fetch a prostitute and see if Bagoas could “consummate his marriage.” The dialogue ends on the point that the one thing clearly necessary for philosophy is the ability to perform sexual intercourse.

This dialogue shows that Lucian and his society were confused about or hostile toward eunuchs. Lucian could be satirizing eunuchs, or satirizing the stupidity of the masses, or satirizing the institution of philosophy in his period (most likely), or some combination of these, and yet all targets satirized would still represent a view held by these groups, albeit exaggerated or at least exaggeratedly outspoken. Nevertheless, all of the previous confused and conflicting views of eunuchs are summarized in Lucian’s dialogue: that they are lecherous and adulterous (the two were often considered synonymous by the ancients); that they were lacking in desire and incapable of erection (the second juror thought eunuchs could not have sex with their students); that they were effeminate (note how Bagoas defended himself by pointing out that women had been philosophers and then toses in a eunuch at the end of the list); and that they were unnatural. We can tentatively conclude that this array of opinions represented the Greco-Roman view in the late first and second centuries C.E.

It is interesting that the eunuch referred to in Bagoas’s speech (the one from Gaul) was probably Favorinus of Arles, a court favorite of Hadrian. This popular eunuch of the second century was also attacked for adultery by a high-ranking Roman official. What makes his case different from the stereotyped discourse of the satirical tradition is that Favorinus was a eunuch by birth. Philostratus, the great chronicler of second-century cultural life, states the following: “He came from Western Gaul. . . . He was born two-natured, a hermaphrodite, which was shown in his appearance; for even when he grew old he had no beard; it was evident too from his voice which sounded thin, shrill, and high-pitched, with the modulations that nature bestows on eunuchs.

23 Bagoas seems to have been a conventional name for Eunuchs in ancient literature (Ovid Amores 2.2.1, Pliny Naturalis historia 3.41), probably based on a bold and notorious Persian eunuch of that name (Diodorus Siculus 16.47.4).
24 Lucian Eunuch 47.7. I have used the translation of A. M. Harmon, Lucian (Cambridge, MA, 1936), 5:331–45, though I have freely adapted it.
25 See Philostratus Vitea sophistarum 8.489: “He was so ardent in love that he was actually charged with adultery by a man of consular rank.”
also.”

Since no other source contests Favorinus’s adultery, we can at least assume that ancient society accepted it as normal that a born eunuch was capable of committing adultery. On the other hand Philostratus quotes Favorinus as saying the following: “There are three paradoxes in his life: though he was a Gaul he led the life of a Hellenic; an eunuch, he had been tried for adultery; he had quarrelled with an Emperor and was still alive.”

As was the case with the satirical testimony quoted above, we are left in a quandary when reading this passage. Philostratus in one line can assume that we, his audience, will have no difficulty believing that a eunuch could be ardent in love, and at the same time quote the eunuch as saying that it is a paradox that a eunuch could be tried for adultery. That is, a eunuch was an ardent lover and yet physically incapable of adultery. We must conclude that in these first discussions of eunuchs there was still a good deal of confusion about their sexual capacity as well as a broad spectrum of opinion toward them ranging from acceptance to hostility. Nevertheless, the only consistent pattern is that eunuchs threatened Greco-Roman values.

The most interesting aspect of this Favorinus of Arles involves his third paradox, his relationship with the emperor Hadrian. It appears that Favorinus was the first eunuch intimate with the highest circles of power in the Mediterranean, the first publicly visible eunuch, and through his immense popularity a watershed figure in the history of eunuchs in Rome. The conflict of Favorinus with Hadrian is one that the eunuch himself is joking about.

We are told that the emperor appointed Favorinus to a high-ranking priesthood and that Favorinus attempted to refuse the honor on the grounds that a philosopher was exempt from such public duties. Hadrian is said to have been prepared to call the eunuch a sophist, but before he could do so, Favorinus accepted the office rather than suffering the perceived insult at the hands of the emperor. Philostratus goes on to say: “The emperor had acted thus merely for his own diversion, for by turning his mind to philosophers and sophists he used to lighten the responsibilities of Empire.”

A further sense of this diverting relationship between the two can be found in another ancient anecdote: “Once a word used by Favorinus was criticized by Hadrian. Favorinus yielded, which provoked some very agreeable amusement. He was wrong to concede to Hadrian, his friends charged him, over a word which reputable authors had used. ‘You don’t give me good advice, my friends,’ said Favorinus, ‘when you don’t allow me to believe the man who possesses thirty legions to be more learned than anyone else.’”

This jocular familiarity with the emperor won the talented eunuch unusual notoriety.

But Favorinus’s chief claim to fame was his speaking, which was considered unique, and which we can assume is related to his unusual sexuality. Philostratus tells us: “When he delivered discourses in Rome, the interest in them was universal, so much so that even those in his audience who did not understand the Greek language shared in the pleasure that he gave; for he fascinated even them by the tones of his voice, by his expressive glance and the rhythm of his speech. They were also enchanted by the epilogue of his orations, which they called ‘The Ode,’ though I call it mere affectation, since it is arbitrarily added at the close of an argument that has been logically proved.”

Here we see a man whom the Romans could clearly perceive as a eunuch, and yet whom they embraced as a great entertainer. Perhaps as a Gaul, he was seen as an acceptable practitioner of the “Asiaic” style of speaking he clearly exploited. Perhaps his sexual differences played only a small role in his success as a professional sophist. Whatever the reason, he seems to have conquered the distaste that Roman men felt for eunuchs, even if he did so only as a curiosity. Furthermore, by maintaining a close friendship with the emperor he may well have paved the way to power for eunuchs after him.

Ref: Philostratus Vita sophistorum 8.489. I have used Wilmer Cave Wright, Philostratus and Eunapius (London, 1992), for the translations of Philostratus, though I have freely altered these to make my points.

Ref: Historia Augusta, Hadrian 15. I have used the translation of Anthony Birley, The Lives of the Later Caesars (London, 1976), although I have made various alterations.

Ref: All of Favorinus’s extant work has been collected by Barigazzi, but two of his speeches have been translated into English in H. Lamar Crosby, Dio Chrysostom (London, 1946), 4:1–47 (no. 37) and 5:89–115 (no. 66).

Ref: Philostratus Vita sophistorum 8:491–92.
The first politically powerful eunuch in the empire, a precursor to the court eunuchs of the fourth-century emperors, was a high-ranking official under Caracalla named Sempronius Rufus. In the year 214 C.E., Dio Cassius, who was a Roman senator at the time, tells us: "That which was the most disgraceful to and unworthy of both the Senate and the Roman people happened, when we had a eunuch to domineer over us. He was a native of Spain, Sempronius Rufus by name, and his occupation was that of sorcerer and juggler, for which he had been confined on an island by Severus [the previous emperor Septimius Severus]."

If we sift out Dio’s strong opinions here, we see for the first time an emperor openly conferring official power, in this case power over the whole city of Rome while he was on campaign, to a eunuch. But Dio’s reaction to this new power structure is not unique—it is the expected Roman reaction: How could someone without procreative capability rule over the senate? In spite of Dio’s protests, the precedent set and would be picked up later by Diocletian and his followers far more consistently than Caracalla could have known.

It is necessary to point out here that the increasing influence of mystery religions played a role in the acceptance of eunuchs into Greco-Roman culture. We have already seen examples of Cybele and her castrated priests, and this cult apparently continued to grow, especially in Rome and the west. But at the same time Christianity was effectively divorcing itself from Judaism and creating its own novel sexual ethic. Probably the most celebrated eunuch of antiquity was the ante-Nicene Father Origen whose most famous (infamous) action was his youthful self-castration. There are those who would deny that Origen ever did such a thing, and yet the evidence of the period overwhelmingly confirms that self-castration was not uncommon for Christians in this period. Christianity was spreading the ancient ascetic principles of the east to Rome and probably played no smaller role in establishing the eunuch throughout the region than did the cult of Cybele.

By the fourth century the eunuch was well established as a powerful figure close to the emperor. So powerful were they that Ammianus Marcellinus, the great chronicler of pagan Rome’s twilight, felt compelled to state: “It is disgust with these creatures [eunuchs] and their like that leads me to praise the early emperor Domitian, who, though he was unlike his father and brother and disgraced his memory by acts which merit undying detestation, nevertheless distinguished himself by one most welcome measure. He forbade under threat of severe penalties the castration of any boy within the bounds of the Roman jurisdiction. If he had not done so who could have endured the swelling swarms of eunuchs, since we can barely tolerate them in small numbers.” Ammianus is upset here with the machinations of Eusebius, the chamberlain of the emperor Constantius II. Though his rhetoric forces him into fantasy—How could Domitian ever have enforced a law against castration?—the historian documents for us both the enduring Greco-Roman distaste for eunuchs and the surprising rise to power this class achieved.

Ammianus’s coeval Mamertinus rises to an even more ardent tone in his panegyric for the emperor Julian (361–63), blasting the flagrant immorality of Constantius’s court: “There were those who made themselves acceptable to the emperor through the most base means, enlisting him with continuous flattery, and winning him with bribes. They not only tried to solicit men, but even mere women; and not just women but even eunuchs whom either their birth or physical mutilation have cast out from citizenship in either sex as though they were banished from human society. Thus the most illustrious and ancient personages of the empire were forced to flatter the most infamous and degraded members of the imperial court.” This last statement clarifies the Greco-Roman view of eunuchs. In the ancient hierarchical perspective, we see that men of old family are on top, with low born men below, women below them, and eunuchs are stuck at the bottom as not even sharing in humanity. A patriarchy would demand maternity as a criterion for power and, thus, cast off women and children as unsuitable to positions of leadership. We see here that more is at work in Greco-Roman society than patriarchy. Our ancient witnesses have not only banished eunuchs from power but have also seemingly demoted them to the lowest rank of society where their “unnatural” bodies could dwell below the dangerous sexuality of women and the immaturity of children. Nevertheless, in spite of the sentiments of our witnesses, eunuchs did gain power, and this will present us with several interesting problems.

It will be helpful to summarize the historical outline here before...

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39 Brown, *The Body and Society* (n. 2 above), pp. 161–77, has a fascinating discussion of this important church father. Origen was inspired by a literal reading of Matt. 19.
launching off into the problems the evidence presents. The Romans from time immemorial were hostile to eunuchs, apparently because they worshipped and had high esteem for male fertility. For hundreds of years they legislated against castration; during this time authors such as Catullus, Juvenal, and Martial criticized various aspects of eunuchs. Those from outside Rome, such as Apuleius and Lucian, also joined the Romans in criticizing eunuchs, even though these sexually altered men were gaining broad popularity, especially the watershed figure of Favorinus. By the early third century a eunuch, Sempronius Rufus, had held high political power. And by the middle of the fourth century (under Constantius II) eunuchs had seized such positions of power that writers who served under Julian (emperor 361–63), especially Ammianus and Martianus, felt the need to excoriate their corruption. As most of the witnesses cited were hostile to eunuchs, I would conclude that asexual men were perceived as threatening or repulsive to the existing values. In spite of this hostility several eunuchs took power.

It will be a more difficult venture to interpret this surprising phenomenon from a modern theoretical stance. I will point out what I perceive to be three important problems of interpretation. The first problem is implicit in my presentation of this brief history. If the foundation of Roman patriarchy rested on the father’s procreative power, and if we concede that the Greco-Roman Mediterranean was patriarchal (as almost all do), then how are we to account for men who have no procreative power, men whom Mamertinus characteristically defines as less human even than women, rising to the highest circles of power and fame? If women were understood to be inferior to men, how could humans who were both considered effeminate and unnatural outstrip both women and other fully functional men in the society? To add to this problem we have seen that most of our literary discussion of eunuchs disparages them, thus indicating that there was no obvious shift in patriarchal attitudes during the period under consideration. How could the Greco-Roman patriarchy make such an unexpected innovation?

To this first problem I would like to respond with a brief discussion of another strange, and potentially related, phenomenon in the early empire, the almost flaunted effeminacy of several emperors. Caesar's passive sexual relations with the Bithynian king Nicomedes, whether historical or not, were at the center of many of the contemporary discussions of Caesar's ability to lead Rome. We would expect that such a "disgrace" would disqualify him from the highest power, and yet it did not. Caesar's careful propaganda of sexual dominance may have outweighed his youthful affair with Nicomedes, but nevertheless the originator of one-man rule in Rome was also the first famous Roman who was openly decried as a "faggot" (cinaedus). Tiberius's well-known escapades with little boys would fit into the accepted model of Roman dominance, but Nero, perhaps the most popular of the Julio-Claudians among the masses, is said to have "worn the bridal veil" (nubere) and consummated his single-sex marriage in the feminine role in front of witnesses. The popularity of such androgyny can be easily understood by students of modern popular culture. Perhaps the perceived androgyny of eunuchs appealed to the same crowds who so dearly loved Nero's antics that they continued to spot him throughout the empire for the next century.

Second we need to look at the relationship between biology and anthropology. Though it is helpful to separate discussion of sexuality from evocations of "nature" and to use the more versatile concept of "construction of sexuality," in the case of eunuchs we are forced to face the

40 See Eva Cantarella, *Gender in the Ancient World* (New Haven, CT, 1992), pp. 156–64, for a full list of ancient citations on Caesar's sexuality.
41 See A. E. Housman, *Classical Papers* (Cambridge, 1972), 3:1180, n. 2 (quoted in Wiseman [n. 13 above], p. 11, n. 34), who seems to have been the first (1931) to call attention to the sexual ethics of ancient Rome: "Sic iunct ac claude, et adulterium erat uti a pueris disueverunt opinionem, mentem comprehendunt quae, ut Catullus et Martialis, illa maturum subplebem, Neapolitanus petuit a natura insita est, obscuram reliquas et cinedam, sedicemtrum non obscenam esse." (Surely those who from childhood have been accustomed to the ethics of Paul of Tarsus and the Jews cannot easily grasp the opinion that, as it was in Catullus and Martial, even now is deeply ingrained in nature in any Sicilian or Neapolitan: men who allow themselves to be penetrated are obscene, while those who penetrate are not obscene.) I must note that my English is not capable of the wit and subtlety of Housman's Latin, which is carefully sprinkled with dazzling puns and untranslatable vocabulary.
42 See Tacitus *Annals* 15.57. See also Cantarella who argues: "What appears to emerge from the popular reaction to the 'deviancy' of the powerful is a sort of claim for personal autonomy, a confused and possibly unconscious desire to gain recognition, even in the midst of derisive laughter, for a very important principle: even a passive homosexual—the crowd seems to say—can be a man. Even if he is not Caesar; even if he is not Augustus" (p. 164). She lists a good deal of interesting evidence. Ramsey Macmullen, "Roman Attitudes to Greek Love," *Historia* 31 (1982): 484–502, discusses the early emperors and their problematic sexuality.
43 The calculated androgyny of Michael Jackson comes to mind in this context.
44 I am extrapolating here from the testimony of Suetonius *Life of Nero* 57, and once again thinking of a modern example who has earned Neronian popularity, Elvis Presley.
45 See Halperin (n. 2 above): "The distinctive contribution which the English publication in 1978 of the first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* made to subsequent work can be simply, if boldly, put: Foucault did for 'sexuality' what feminist critics had done for 'gender.' That is, Foucault detached 'sexuality' from the physical and biological sciences (just as feminists had detached 'gender' from the facts of anatomical sex, of somatic dimorphism) and treated it, instead, as 'the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations by a certain deployment' of 'a complex political technology.' He divorced 'sexuality' from 'nature' and interpreted it, instead, as a cultural production" (p. 8). Hal-
interaction of these two forces: most often the eunuch's sexuality is first created by a surgical procedure, then, once biology has altered the individual's sexuality, the society creates roles and a "construction" for him. We cannot neatly detach the two as we have so successfully done since the pioneering ideas of Foucault appeared. How do nature and culture collide and interact in the life of eunuchs? How does a society like that of the Roman Empire go about constructing a new (neuter) gender and sexuality for itself? Will it simply combine the ideas it already applies to feminine and masculine? Will it create whole new categories? Will it rethink its traditional constructions of gender and sexuality?

A third problem has to do with historical interpretation. How can eunuchs be fitted into the existing formulations of the late empire and Middle Ages? For instance, both Michel Foucault and Peter Brown, probably the two most important historians of sexuality writing on the Greco-Roman period, argue that sexual renunciation was increasing in the Roman Empire. And yet we have seen that the satirical tradition of this period not only did not see eunuchs as ascetic but, rather, saw them as the most "lecherous" and sexually active of human beings as well. How can those who are perceived as libertines gain prestige in a world in which strict control over bodily functions is becoming a central value? How could eunuchs who were already despised by traditional society gain power when the new austere values also rejected them?

It might be countered that the mystery religions and especially Christianity fostered castration as part of sexual renunciation. But in fact the Christians forbade self-mutilation and resisted its practice (no matter how much they admired it).48 We are left with several groups sharing possible influence on the sexuality of the period: the educated pagan members of society trying to cut back on casual sex for health reasons (Foucault) and censuring eunuchs for their lasciviousness; the Christians renouncing sex and reproduction (Brown) but also renouncing eunuchs; the cult of Cybele promoting a small class of eunuchs as priests; and the general population indulging as usual in both pleasure and procreation as well as finding eunuchs novel and entertaining (the case of Favorinus). How can these disparate forces of historical influence be synthesized into a clear picture of sexuality in the Greco-Roman world, a picture that includes the anomalous image of the eunuch?49 These seem to me to be the salient problems posed by this research.

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47 See Brown, The Body and Society, pp. 428–32, who reminds us how radical the stance of practicing sexual renunciation was in the empire. Most Christians apparently were not practicing it with the enthusiasm that their spokesmen would indicate.

48 See the church historian Eusebius’s comments on Origen’s self-mutilation in the Historia ecclesiastica 6.8. Hostile Christians apparently criticized Origen’s castration throughout his life. See also Chadwick (n. 57 above), p. 112, who mentions the Nicene Council’s restrictions on eunuchs for ordination to the priesthood.

49 Peter Brown, “Bodies and Minds: Sexuality and Renunciation in Early Christianity,” in Halperin, Winkler, and Zeitlin, eds. (n. 27 above), p. 480, borrows a useful image from geology. He describes the complexity of historical influence in the cosmopolitan and splintered high empire as similar to plate tectonics. Several floating masses may shift into each other and form a continent, but this happens slowly and gradually. Meanwhile this new continent itself may be shifting elsewhere.