

Public Abstract

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This dissertation explores Roman perceptions of eunuchs, particularly their perceived sex and gender. It covers both slave eunuchs castrated as infants or young children and the religious eunuchs of the cult of Cybele who are self-castrated after puberty. In observing the categories and interpretations given to eunuch bodies, I demonstrate the social and cultural elements that factor into determining what is generally considered to be biological sex. By examining ancient Greek and Roman medical texts, I show that sex in the ancient world was considered more fluid than it is today. One was not born with a fixed sex but rather the male sex was created by transformation through the process of puberty. This process could fail naturally, resulting in the sex category of "female," or be interrupted artificially through castration. While eunuchs in general were not typically considered fully male, the categories to which they were assigned varied and often depended on the age or social position of the eunuch. Although eunuchs were ambiguous in their sex, they were not perceived as asexual. Indeed, the conceptual association of slave eunuchs with either women or attractive youths made them potential objects of erotic desire for men. And the conceptual association of religious eunuchs with effeminate (and sexually promiscuous) intact men led to them being perceived as highly sexual with both men and women.