

# TOWARDS A REINTERPRETATION OF EUNUCHS AS A “THIRD GENDER” IN ANCIENT EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

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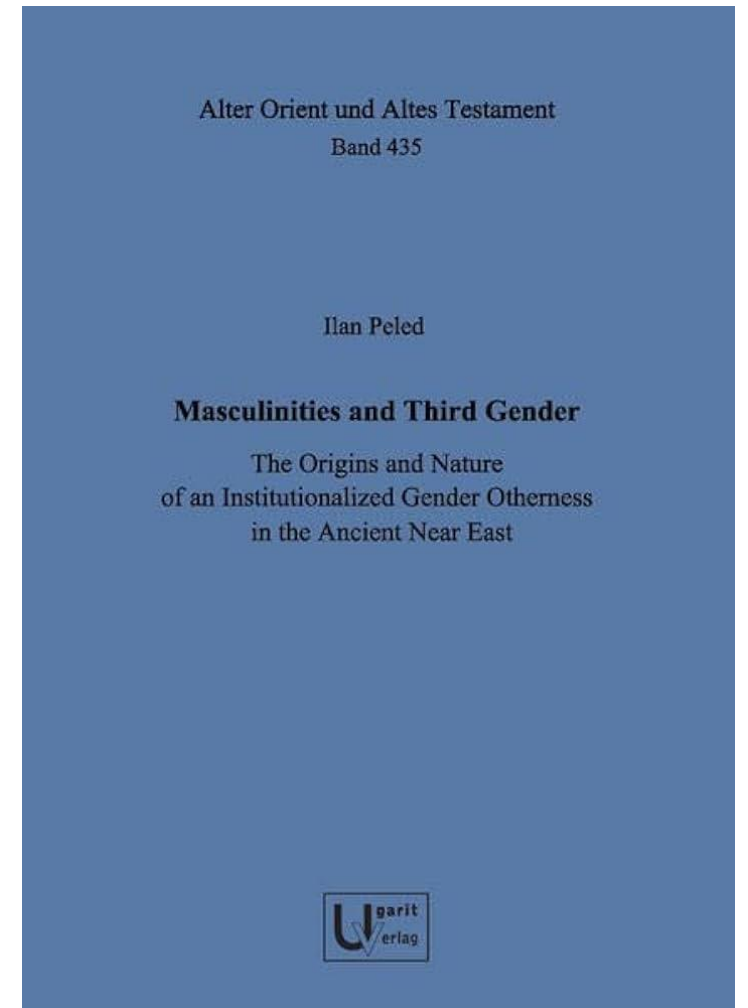
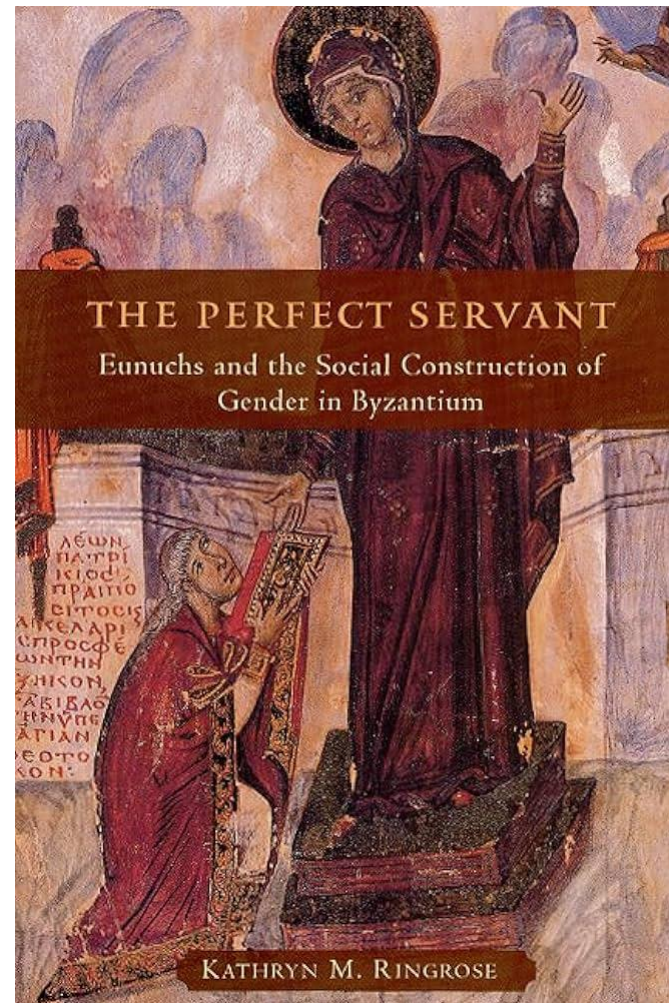
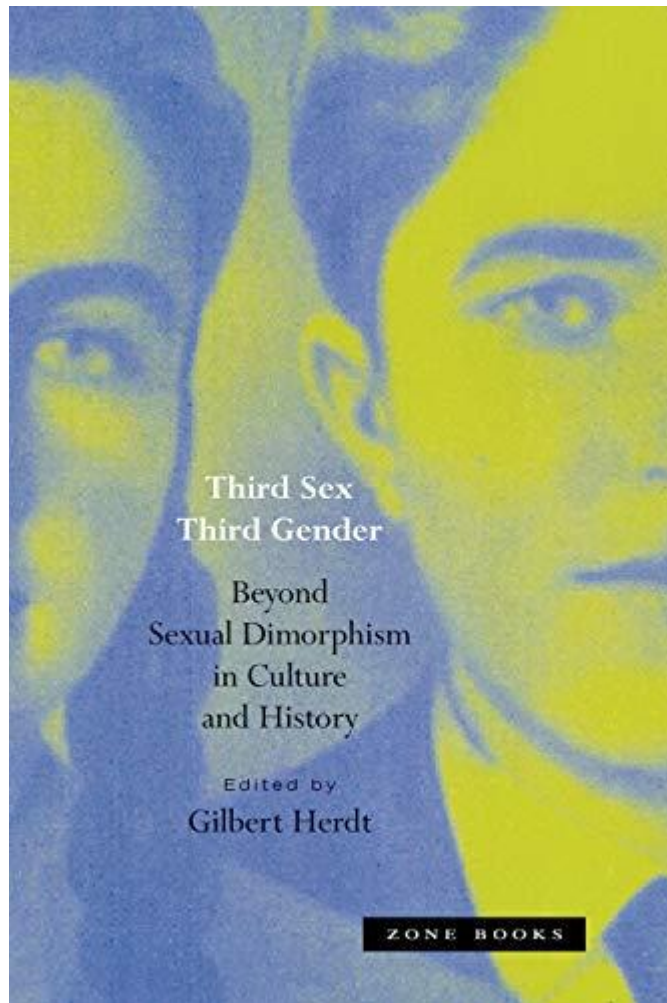


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**anhima**  
Anthropologie et histoire  
des mondes antiques



# I. THE CONTEXT OF SOURCES

LUCIAN OF SAMOSATA (c. 125- after 180 CE)

ἐπεὶ δὲ ἄλλισ μὲν εἶχον βλασφημιῶν, ἄλλισ δὲ ἐλέγχων, τὸ τελευταῖον ἤδη ὁ Διοκλῆς ἔφη μηδὲ τὴν ἀρχὴν θεμιτὸν εἶναι τῷ Βαγῶα μεταποιεῖσθαι φιλοσοφίας καὶ τῶν ἐπ' αὐτῇ ἀριστείων εὐνούχῳ γε ὄντι, ἀλλὰ τοὺς τοιούτους οὐχ ὅπως τούτων ἀποκεκλειῖσθαι ἠξίου, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἱερῶν αὐτῶν καὶ περιρραντηρίων καὶ τῶν κοινῶν ἀπάντων συλλόγων, δυσσιώνιστόν τι ἀποφαίνων καὶ δυσάντητον θέαμα, εἴ τις ἔωθεν ἐξιῶν ἐκ τῆς οἰκίας ἴδοι τοιοῦτόν τινα. καὶ πολὺς ἦν ὁ περὶ τούτου λόγος, οὔτε ἄνδρα οὔτε γυναῖκα εἶναι τὸν εὐνούχον λέγοντος, ἀλλὰ τι σύνθετον καὶ μικτὸν καὶ τερατῶδες, ἔξω τῆς ἀνθρωπείας φύσεως.

But when they had insulted each other enough and had filled each other with incriminations, at last Diocles denied in conclusion that Bagoas could be allowed at all to engage in Philosophy or to profit by its rewards by being a eunuch, but that such individuals deserved to be excluded not only from these pursuits but even from the temples themselves, from sacred ablutions and from all public gatherings, stating that it was an ill omen and an execrable spectacle if one met such an individual on leaving his house in the morning. And he delivered a long discourse on this subject, making it clear that the eunuch was neither male nor female, but a compound, hybrid and monstrous, foreign to human nature.

*The Eunuch*, 6. Ed. Harmon, 1936; trans. mod. Zaragoza Botella, 1990

# I. THE CONTEXT OF SOURCES

CLAUDIAN (c. 370- c. 404 CE)

quo struis hos auri cumulos? quae pignora tantis succedent opibus? nugas ducasue licebit: numquam mater eris, numquam pater; hoc tibi ferrum, hoc natura negat.

For what do you accumulate these heaps of gold? What children will inherit such great riches? You may marry (as a woman) or take a wife (as a man): you will never be a mother, never a father; one thing is forbidden to you by mutilation, the other by nature.

*Against Eutropius*, 222-225. Ed. Hall, 1985; trans. Bejarano, 1993 (modified).

linquite femineas, infelix turba, latebras, alter quos pepulit sexus nec suscipit alter, execti Veneris stimulos et uulnere casti, mixta duplex aetas inter puerumque senemque nil medium; falsi, complete sedilia, patres, ite, noui proceres, infecundoque senatu Eutropium stipate duces; celebrate tribunal pro thalamis, uerso iam discite more curules, non matrum pilenta sequi.

Wretched mob, abandon the refuges of women you, whom one sex has rejected and the other does not assume you, with the stimuli of Venus cut off and chaste by this wound; two ages have mingled in you, and between the child and the old man there is nothing in between. Ye false fathers, fill the senators' seats; advance, new proceres, and accompany your chief Eutropius as a barren senate. Frequent the courts instead of the bedchambers, learn now, reversed customs, to follow the curule chairs, not the matrons' bunks.

*Against Eutropius*, 466-474. Ed. Hall, 1985; trans. Bejarano, 1993 (modified).

# I. THE CONTEXT OF SOURCES

BASIL OF CAESAREA (330-378 CE)

Εἰ δὲ καὶ μαρτύρων χρεία, οὐ δοῦλοι στήσονται, οὐδὲ εὐνούχων γένος ἄτιμον καὶ πανώλεθρον· τοῦτο δὴ τοῦτο, ἄθηλον, ἄνανδρον, γυναικομανὲς, ἐπίζηλον, κακόμισθον, ὀξύθυμον, θηλυδριῶδες, γαστρίδουλον, χρυσομανὲς, ἀπηνὲς, κλαυσίδειπνον, εὐμετάβλητον, ἀμετάδοτον, πάνδοχον, ἀπροσκορὲς, μανικὸν καὶ ζηλότυπον· καὶ τί γάρ ἔτι εἰπεῖν, σὺν αὐτῇ τῇ γενέσει σιδηροκατάδικον. Πῶς οὖν τούτων γνώμη ὀρθή, ὧν καὶ οἱ πόδες στρεβλοί; Οὗτοι σωφρονοῦσι μὲν ἄμισθα διὰ σιδήρου· μαίνονται δὲ ἄκαρπα δι' οἰκείαν αἰσχρότητα. Οὐχ, οὗτοι στήσονται τῆς κρίσεως μάρτυρες, ἀλλ' ὀφθαλμοὶ δικαίων, καὶ ὄψεις ἀνδρῶν τελείων· ὅσοι τότε ὀρῶσι, πρὸς ἃ βλέποντες νῦν εἰσὶ συνέσει.

And if there be need also of witnesses, slaves will not stand forth, nor any disreputable and utterly accused race of eunuchs, —yes, I mean just that—a race, neither feminine nor masculine, woman-mad, envious, of evil wage, quick to anger, effeminate, slaves to the belly, money-mad, coarse, grumbling about their dinner, fickle, stingy, ready to accept anything, disgusting, crazed, jealous —and yet why say more ?—at their very birth doomed to the knife ! How then can these possess true judgment, whose very feet are twisted ? They are chaste without reward—thanks to the knife ; and they rave with passion without fruition—thanks to their own lewdness. These will not stand as witnesses at the judgment, but the eyes of just men and the countenances of whole men—all who then see with their eyes that which they now gaze upon with their understanding.

*Ep. I 15. Ed. PG 32, 529-532; trans. Deferrari, 1928*

# I. THE CONTEXT OF SOURCES

GREGORIUS OF NAZIANZUS (c. 329-390 CE)

Ἐξωνεῖται δὲ τῶν ἐν τέλει τοὺς φιλοχρύσους μᾶλλον ἢ φιλοχρίστους (εὐπορία γὰρ ἦν αὐτῷ τὰ τῶν πενήτων, κακῶς δαπανώμενα), καὶ τούτων μάλιστα τοὺς γυναικῶδεις τε καὶ ἐν ἀνδράσιν ἀνάδρους, καὶ ἀμφιβόλους μὲν τὸ γένος, προδήλους δὲ τὴν ἀσέβειαν· οἷς οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπως καὶ ὅθεν οἱ Ῥωμαίων βασιλεῖς, τὰ τῶν γυναικῶν πιστευομένοις, τὰ τῶν ἀνδρῶν ἐγχειρίζουσι.

He [George of Cappadocia] purchased those in authority who were lovers of money rather than lovers of Christ—for he was well supplied with the funds for the poor, which he embezzled—especially the effeminate and unmanly men, of doubtful sex, but of manifest impiety; to whom, I know not how or why, Emperors of the Romans entrusted authority over men, though their proper function was the charge of women.

*In laudem Athanasii. 21. Ed. PG 35, ; trans. Schaff*

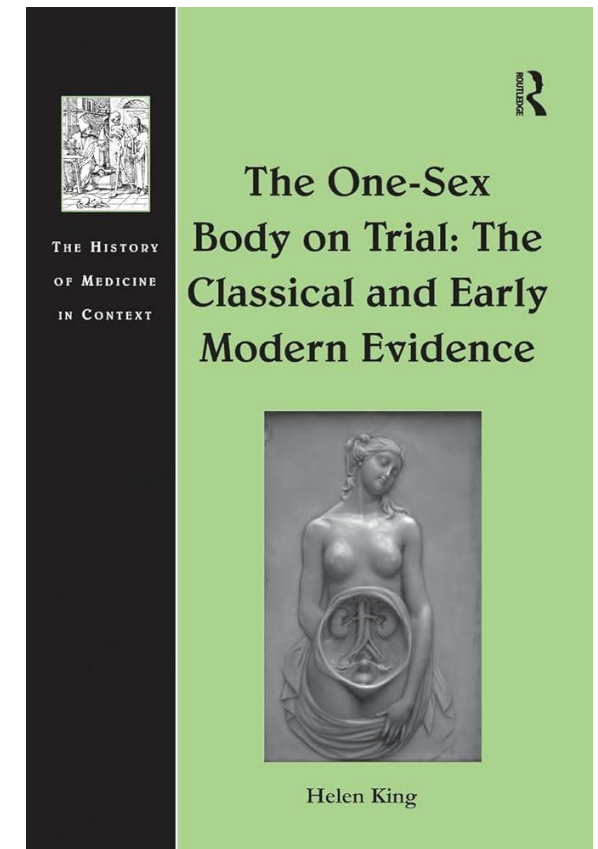
# I. THE CONTEXT OF SOURCES

## ARISTOTLE

Καὶ εὐνοῦχοι οὐ γίνεται φαλακρὸς διὰ το εἰς τὸ θῆλυ μεταβάλλειν. Καὶ τὰς ὑστερογενεῖς τρίχας ἢ οὐ φύουσιν ἢ ἀποβάλλουσιν, ἂν τύχωσιν ἔχοντες οἱ εὐνοῦχοι, πλὴν τῆς ἥβης· καὶ γὰρ αἱ γυναῖκες τὰς μὲν οὐκ ἔχουσι, τὰς δ' ἐπὶ τῇ ἥβῃ φύουσιν. ἢ δὲ πῆρωσις αὕτη ἐκ τοῦ ἄρρενος εἰς τὸ θῆλυ μεταβολὴ ἐστίν (Arist. *Gen an.* 784a7-12).

"Nor does the eunuch become bald because he is transformed into the feminine. And the hairs that come out after birth, the eunuchs do not grow or they lose them if they have them, except those of the pubis, because women also do not have the hairs that come out later, but those of the pubis. This mutilation is a change from the masculine to the feminine".

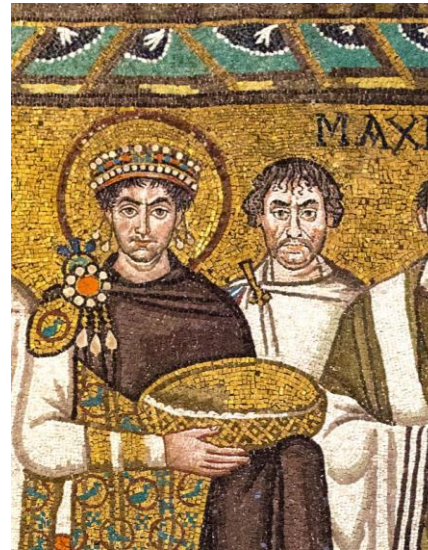
*Gen an.* 784a7-12.



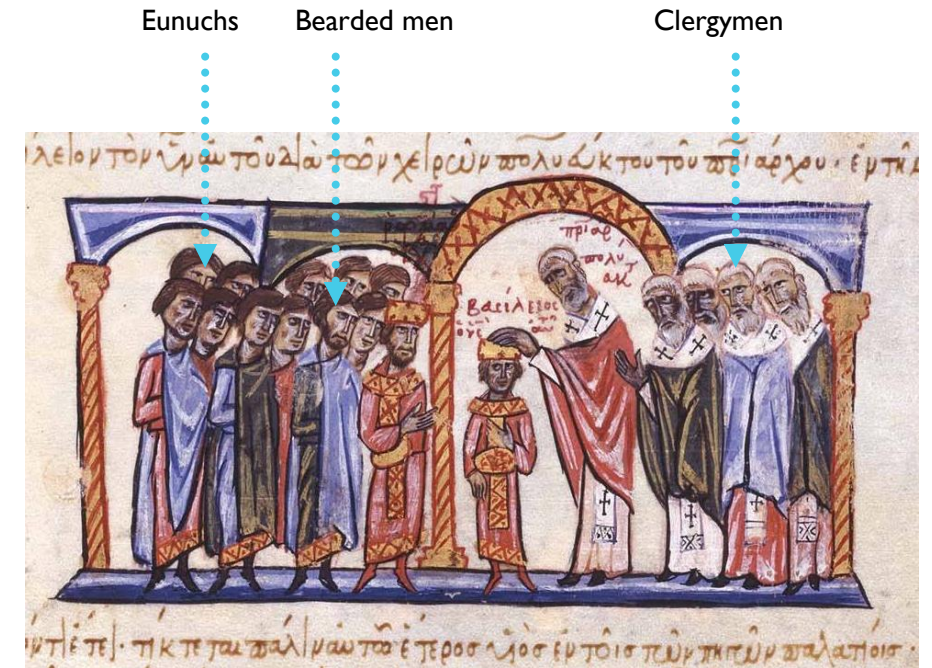
## II. THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT



St. Protus and St. Hyacinth, eunuchs. South wall, Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna (6th c.). Source: Wikimedia Commons



Narses, next to Justinian I. San Vitale, Ravenna (6th c.) Source: Wikimedia Commons



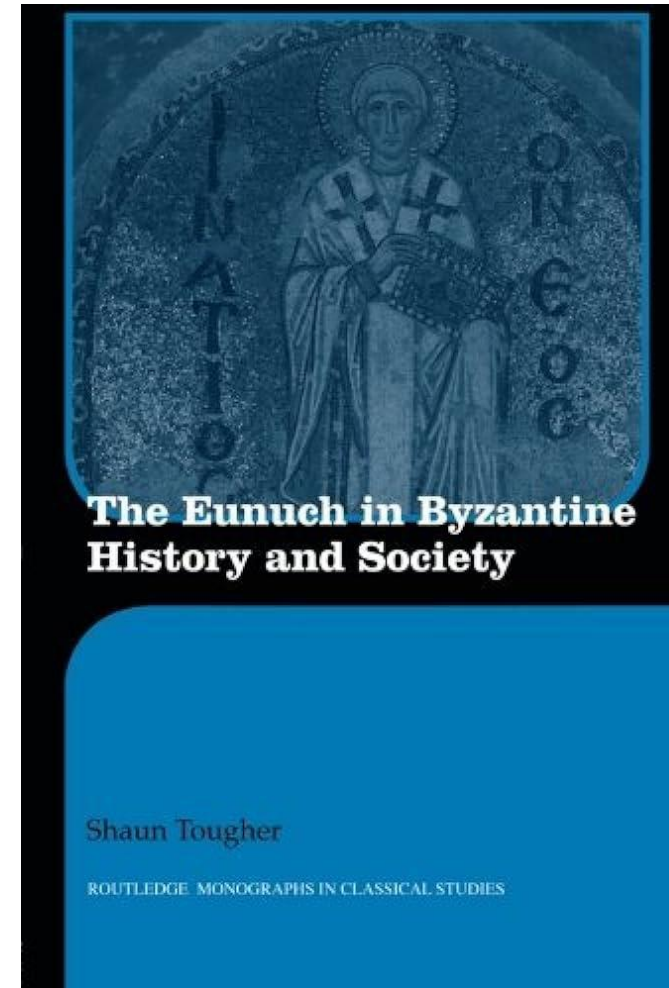
Coronation of Basil II. *Sylitzes Matritensis* (12th c.), BNE. Source: Wikimedia Commons

### III. WHICH EUNUCHS?

Εἴτις ἐν νόσῳ ὑπὸ ἰατρῶν ἐχειρουργήθη, ἢ ὑπὸ βαρβάρων ἐξετμήθη, οὗτος μενέτω ἐν τῷ κλήρῳ· εἰ δέ τις ὑγιαίνων ἑαυτὸν ἐξέτεμε, τοῦτον καὶ ἐν τῷ κλήρῳ ἐξεταζόμενον πεπαῦσθαι προσήκει· καὶ ἐκ τοῦ δεῦρο μηδένα τῶν τοιούτων χρῆναι προάγεσθαι. Ὡσπερ δὲ τοῦτο πρόδηλον, ὅτι περὶ τῶν ἐπιτηδευόντων τὸ πρᾶγμα καὶ τολμώντων ἑαυτοὺς ἐκτέμνειν, εἴρηται, οὕτως εἴτινες ὑπὸ βαρβάρων ἢ δεσποτῶν εὐνουχίσθησαν, εὐρίσκοιντο ἄλλως ἄξιοι, τοὺς τοιούτους εἰς κλῆρον προσίεται ὁ κανὼν.

If any one in sickness has been subjected by physicians to a surgical operation, or if he has been castrated by barbarians, let him remain among the clergy; but, if any one in sound health has castrated himself, it behooves that such an one, if [already] enrolled among the clergy, should cease [from his ministry], and that from henceforth no such person should be promoted. But, as it is evident that this is said of those who willfully do the thing and presume to castrate themselves, so if any have been made eunuchs by barbarians, or by their masters, and should otherwise be found worthy, such men the Canon admits to the clergy.

*Council of Nicaea, I. Trans.: Labbe.*



# THE PROBLEM WITH THE “THIRD GENDER” CONCEPT

- Ahistorical and essentialist taxonomy (“etic” concept).
- Contemporary West as the measure of everything (Towle & Morgan, 2022). Discourages reflection on the use and application to the past of the modern categories of “man”/”woman”.
- Unconscious reliance on genitalia as gender marker. Other gender markers in pre-industrial societies, like clothing (vid. King, 2013; Barthes, 1967).
- Artificial homogeneity.



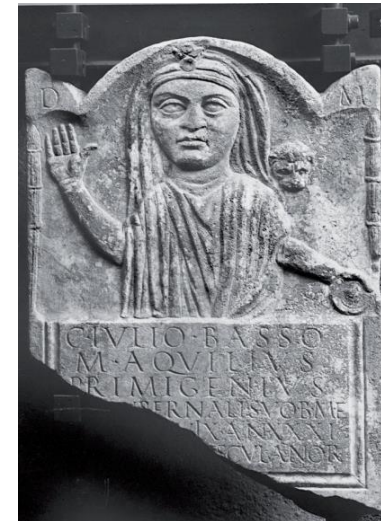
*Burrnesha*. Source: Jill Peters

## SOME PROPOSALS

- Towards an “emic” approach.
- Understand categorizations and definitions as non-absolute.
- Return to the idea of gender performativity (Butler, 1990).
- Acknowledge and accept contradictions: *l'homme pluriel* (Lahire, 1998)



Hijra. Source: Wikimedia Commons



Gallus. Source: Köckner, 2017: 383-384.



THANK YOU!

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ἡ δόχνη γενομένη σῶσέ τοι ἐν τῆ μαγνῶρα· εἰσὶ χθιπρῶσ

