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Towards a reinterpretation of eunuchs as a “third gender” in ancient Eastern Mediterranean

During the 1990s and early 2000s, the concept of the third gender became popular in Anthropology as a reaction to the binary approach of Western Ethnography in the study of other societies. The idea of "third genders" spread not only in the study of contemporary societies, but also in the study of past societies, from Byzantium (e.g., in the work of Katherine Ringrose), to the ancient Near East (e.g., in Ilan Peled's book on eunuchs, among others), to Rome, with special attention to the case of the *galli* of Attis-Cibeles. It has almost always been a question of eunuchs of various kinds.

In this paper we propose the need to move forward and leave behind the concept of "third gender". In our opinion, this term, which arose in an embryonic moment of Queer Studies, had its logic as a reaction to the limiting binarism that had been preeminent up to that time, but today it constitutes a constrain. This is because the category of "third gender," like binarism, is a contemporary metahistorical construct, which, at an effective level, discourages knowledge of local ways of understanding and classifying gender. For our part, we propose three key factors when studying gender in eunuchs and, in general, in ancient societies:

- To question the given Western categories, including also terms such as "man" and "woman", in favor of local terms.
- To understand gender as a set of performative actions, so that it only exists as a constant performance between individuals.
- To replace absolute and permanent categories ("genders") with a plastic and contextual understanding of gender.

In our case, we will focus mainly on the eunuchs of the Proto-Byzantine period (3rd-7th centuries), which constitute our area of expertise and are to a large extent the beginning of a tendency in recent historiographical research to classify eunuchs as a third gender, due to the work of K. Ringrose. Throughout this paper we will observe how, thanks to a comparative reading with other contemporary societies such as the *hijras* of India or the *burrneshat* of Albania, the sources can be reinterpreted in new ways. Our intention is not to deny absolutely the possibility of intermediate categorizations in gender, but to put in the center the importance of understanding gender in a more complex way.

Short CV

Héctor González Palacios has a degree in History (2014-2018) and a master's degree in Secondary Education Teacher Training from the University of Granada (2018-2019). He is a PhD student since 2019 at the University of Málaga and since 2020 also at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, under the joint direction of Clelia Martínez Maza, Cléo Carastro and Cecilia D'Ercole. His PhD thesis studies the phenomena of Christian transgender cases in the Eastern Mediterranean during Late Antiquity, where he combines history of religions, gender studies and social anthropology. His research activity is focused on the social and cultural history of Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean, in particular on gender and kinship, from Antiquity to Byzantine times, applying a cross-sectional and comparative

methodology. During his doctoral and pre-doctoral training, he has undertaken stays in Paris (2021 and 2022), Rome (Erasmus+ 2016/2017), Greece (2017), Seoul (2018) and UK (2019). She has written several articles and book chapters in Spanish, English and French, some in indexed journals such as *Experimental Anthropology* and publishers such as Routledge or Peter Lang, and is fluent in English, French and Italian and has knowledge of Modern Greek and German.