



The Gender of Authority

Celibate and Childless Men in Power:
Ruling Bishops and Ruling Eunuchs, 400–1800

Conference
Zurich, August 28th–30th, 2013

organised by Almut Höfert, Matthew Mesley,
and Serena Tolino

Karl-Schmid-Strasse 4, 8006 Zürich
KO2-F-152 (same entrance as “Zoologisches/Paläontologisches Museum”)

Conference Outline

From antiquity to modernity, pre-modern ruling systems in different parts of the world often shared a common feature: the participation of men who were either physically unable or normatively forbidden to father children. On the one hand, there were the childless eunuchs who fulfilled a variety of functions at courts in the Middle East, Byzantium and China; they were much more than simply guardians of the harem. Due to their specific “gender”, the eunuchs

formed an integral part of the different ruling systems; indeed, they held a central position in court politics, and their loyalty towards the reigning dynasty was not conditional on nepotism or favouritism towards their family, since they were childless. On the other hand, we have the ruling priests: the celibate bishops both in the Byzantine Empire and Latin Europe. Whereas the Eastern Church tolerated eunuchs as priests, the Western Church demanded that a priest was not castrated, and that instead he needed to have the willpower and resolve to remain celibate. Although this rule of celibacy was far from being followed thoroughly by men of the cloth, celibacy was a central feature of the ideal priest long before the reform movements of the eleventh and twelfth century. Bishops, who formed an integral part of the ruling elites in both the Western and Eastern were subject to the same rules surrounding celibacy, and were prevented from fathering legitimate children. It is also interesting that not only the bishops but also the eunuchs – at least in some cases as for example the eunuchs guarding the prophet's grave in Medina from the 12th century onwards or the involvement of eunuchs into the sacred imamate in Fatimid history – were linked to specific forms of sacredness.

Despite some fundamental differences between ruling bishops and eunuchs (nobility versus slavery, church versus military, non-castration versus castration etc.) it is a striking feature of pre-modern ruling systems that such men, including those who were childless or fathered illegitimate offspring, were often integrated into the elite. Without aiming at a strict comparison between the two, this conference wants to take this phenomenon as a starting point in order to address the following questions:

- (1) What were the political and economical consequences of integrating men who were childless or without any legitimate children into the ruling elites and the respective networks of family and kinship?
- (2) If we take the definition of gender by R. Connell in her classic study on *Masculinities* (Gender as a social practice in relation to the “reproductive arena”), we can expect specific gender conceptions for both priests and eunuchs. How should we view these men: as a third gender; a hybrid gender; or as an asexual gender? Were they always gendered in a specific way or only in certain contexts or environments? And how did the actors perceive their own role in this respect? Is gender still “a useful tool of historical analysis” (Joan Scott) even, or should we adopt different approaches?
- (3) What was the relationship between these men and a divinely legitimized rule in respect to sacredness?

In discussing these questions, this conference aims to shed some light on the culture of politics in a time before a strict biological dichotomy of the sexes existed. Hopefully it will also open up new perspectives on the connections between rule and gender on a global level. The papers will deal with the Middle East, the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity and Byzantium, Latin Europe, China and South Asia.

Final Version of the Program (26th August 2013)

Wednesday, 28th August 2013

14.00-14.30 Coffee/Registration

14.30-14.40 Welcome

14.40-16.10 **Eunuchs in Late Antiquity and Byzantium**

Chair: Almut Höfert

Mathew Kuefler (*San Diego State University*): Eunuchs by Will, not Necessity: Symbolic Castration in Late Antiquity

Shaun Tougher (*University of Cardiff*): Eunuchs of the Byzantine Court: Family, Gender and Power

16.10-16.40 Coffee

16.40-18.10 **Eunuchs in the Middle East (1)**

Chair: Almut Höfert

Nadia el-Cheikh (*American University in Beirut*): Guarding the Harem, Protecting the State: The Roles of Eunuchs in a Fourth/Tenth Century Abbasid Court

Serena Tolino (*University of Zürich*): Eunuchs in the Fatimid Empire: an Account of their Role and the Construction of their Masculinities

19.30 Dinner at Palmenhof (on invitation)

Thursday, 29th August 2013

09.30-10.30 **Eunuchs in the Middle East (2)**

Chair: Bettina Dennerlein (*University of Zürich*)

Hugh Kennedy (*SOAS London*): Eunuchs as Military and Political Actors in the Islamic Middle East c. 800-1000 CE: “the case of Mu’nis al-Muzaffar”

10.30-11.00 Coffee

11.00-12.30 **Ottoman Eunuchs**

Chair: Bettina Dennerlein

Metin Kunt (*Sabancı University*): Households of Ottoman Palace Eunuchs

Ezgi Dikici (*Independent Scholar*): Shades of Gender: The Construction of White Eunuch and Black Eunuch Identities at the Ottoman Court

12.30-14.00 Lunch

14.00-15.30 **Bishops in Medieval Europe: Family and Networks**

Chair: Simon Teuscher (*University of Zürich*)

Matthew Mesley (*University of Zürich*): Between Tradition and Novelty: Bishops, Celibacy and the Boundaries of Clerical Masculinity in Medieval Europe

Julia Barrow (*University of Leeds*): The Bishop as Uncle, 600-1100

15.30-16.00 Coffee

16.00-16.50 **Chair:** Simon Teuscher

Rachel Stone (*King's College, London*): Spiritual Heirs and Families: Episcopal Relatives in Early Medieval Francia

17.30 Transfer to Lake Zürich

18.00-18.14 Trip on Boat from Zürich Bürkliplatz to Wollishofen
Swimming in the Lake at Wollishofen (weather permitting)

19.15 Dinner at the Rote Fabrik (on invitation)

Friday, 30th August 2013

9.30-10.30 **Bishops in Medieval Europe: The Practice of Celibacy**

Chair: Matthew Mesley

Christof Rolker (*University of Konstanz*): Most Manly Men: Clerical Masculinities in Medieval Law and Medicine (12th to 15th Centuries)

10.30-11.00 Coffee

11.00-12.30 **Eunuchs in Premodern China**

Chair: Serena Tolino

Jennifer Jay (*University of Alberta*): Competing Masculinities and Gender Shift: Eunuchs Against Officials in Confucian China

Michael Höckelmann (*University of Münster*): Celibate, but not Childless - Eunuch *Dynasticism* in Medieval China

12.30-14.00 Lunch

14.00-15.30 **Gender and Authority in Early Modern and Modern South Asia**

Chair: Angelika Malinar (*University of Zurich*)

Ruby Lal (*Emory University, Atlanta*): Eunuchs and an Empress in Mughal India: Liminality and Networks of Authority

Jessica Hinchy (*Australian National University*): Masculinity, Kinship-Making and Slavery: Explaining the Political Power of the *Khwajasarai* of North India

15.30-16.00 Coffee

16.00-16.50 Shane Gannon (*Mont Royal University, Calgary*): Sliding from Authority to Marginality: Tracking the Transition from Pre-Modern 'Eunuchs' to Modern Hijras in South Asia

16.50-17.00 Short Break

17.00-18.00 **Conclusion**

Concluding Remarks: Antje Flüchter (*University of Heidelberg/Oslo*)
Final Discussion

19.30 Dinner at Zum Alten Löwen (on invitation)