

GENDER IN THE EARLY
MEDIEVAL WORLD

East and west, 300–900

EDITED BY

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*Introduction: gendering the early medieval world**Julia M. H. Smith*

In recent years few subjects have attracted as much attention – or as much hostility – as ‘gender’. Fewer still are the concepts whose meaning and significance are more hotly debated. Uncomfortable, subversive, threatening, contentious, it is also provocative, creative, multivalent and of immense analytic vigour. How can it help students of past societies achieve a fuller grasp of their subject? This volume of essays by leading specialists in a range of complementary disciplines answers this question with respect to the society of the late Roman empire and its successor civilisations, Byzantine, Islamic and western European. Through the prism of gender, these papers offer new perspectives on the institutions and ideologies of government, the allocation of economic resources, individual and collective identities, religious beliefs and practices, family life, death and burial, and the writing of history during the centuries from AD 300 to 900. Together, they argue for the ubiquity of gender in the ordering of social existence throughout this period.

The essays which follow are diverse in subject and pluralist in approach. It is fitting that they should be so, for they are located at the intersection of two fields of research which are different in focus but alike in liveliness and diversity. Simultaneously but separately, both fields took centre stage in academic debates from the early 1970s onwards. In 1971, Peter Brown’s *The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad* not only gave common currency to the expression ‘late antiquity’ for the centuries from c. AD 250 to 800, but inaugurated a thorough re-evaluation of this period and set the research agenda for a whole generation of scholars.¹ The following year, Ann Oakley’s *Sex, Gender and Society* launched a different

¹ For assessments of its impact, see Peter Brown, G. W. Bowersock, Averil Cameron, Elizabeth A. Clark, Albrecht Dihle, Garth Fowden, Peter Heather, Philip Rousseau, Aline Rouselle, Hjalmar Torp and Ian Wood, ‘SO Debate: the world of late antiquity revisited’, *Symbolae Osloenses* 72 (1997), pp. 5–90; Richard Lim and Carole Straw (eds.), *The Past Before Us: The Challenge of New Historiographies of Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, forthcoming).

intellectual revolution by turning the attention of political activists and scholars alike to the implications of the socially constructed asymmetries and differences between men and women. *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300–900* brings the two together by addressing the period of late antiquity with the methodology of gender studies.

For this double hinterland let us first turn our attention to the period in question. *The World of Late Antiquity* deliberately subverted conventional disciplinary boundaries between classical studies and Islamic studies and between ancient and medieval history. It marked out the Roman empire which emerged from the mid-third-century crisis as an empire with a political and cultural order fundamentally revised since the Principate (the first two centuries of the common era). It made religion – paganism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam – the province as much of the social historian as of the theologian. And it ended forever the negative evaluation of the later imperial centuries which Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* had made central to the grand narratives of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment historiography. 'Late antiquity' thus signifies a world substantively different from prior times but not thereby in decline or decadence, as traditional paradigms of Roman history had mandated. It indicates too a cultural tradition and heritage which continued in many guises long after all the Roman empire except its north-eastern quadrant (the Byzantine empire) had ceased to be under Roman rule, a heritage as central to early Islamic society as to the emerging 'barbarian' successor kingdoms in the former western provinces of the Roman empire. In altering historical periodisation, *The World of Late Antiquity* revealed a coherence in the post-Roman early Middle Ages which had hitherto been lacking. That coherence renders it otiose to try to delimit the 'late antique' from the 'early medieval': for most of the period covered by our essays, these terms are effectively interchangeable.

Scholars of the late and post-Roman worlds benefit greatly from the exceptionally rich and varied corpus of texts and material culture surviving from these centuries. Admittedly, distribution across place and time is uneven, but, in western Europe at least, any graph of surviving words per century would certainly show sharp peaks for the periods c. 350–450 and again c. 750–850. In Byzantium, the peaks are somewhat differently constituted – c. 350–550 and c. 800 on – while the Islamic world begins to generate massive textual evidence from the end of the eighth century. In part, these inconsistencies even out when we turn to material remains. The revisionist perspectives ushered in by *The World of Late Antiquity* coincided with new methodological approaches to visual communication, and

a huge upsurge in the quantity and quality of material evidence available as archaeologists began to pay serious attention to periods and cultures other than the prehistoric or the classical. Increasing interest in urbanism and settlement patterns coincided with archaeological opportunities presented by the 1960s post-war reconstruction of European cities, the rapid modernisation of Middle Eastern cities and the growth of historical preservation and heritage movements. Together with rapidly developing scientific techniques of field research and laboratory analysis, these have effected multiple, overlapping transformations in late antique studies during four decades. As a result, the natural and built environments within which the women and men of the early medieval centuries lived, their technologies and trade routes, diseases and life expectancies, funerary practices and religious places are known to us as never before.

The textual and material evidence from the late and post-Roman worlds informs diverse and wide-ranging debates. Some of these concern the impact of first Christianity then Islam on the ancient societies of the Mediterranean. Others address the causes and consequences of political change, whether the crumbling of imperial rule in the western provinces which were subjected to Germanic migration and settlement, its transformation into the caliphate around the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean by Muslim conquerors, or its reshaping in Byzantine regions where Roman rule persisted for many centuries to come. Differently put, the formation of new identities, whether social, religious or ethnic, stands close to the heart of much recent work in this field. So too does the expression of those shifting identities in such institutions as family, city, kingdom or caliphate. The reception and renegotiation of Rome's legacy in the Islamic, Byzantine and western culture provinces is another long-standing subject of enquiry, as much concerned with the textual as with the material inheritance. Attention to the knowledge these texts transmit is now supplemented by exposing the discourses they sustain, just as artisanal, archaeological and architectural remains are interrogated for the identities and ideologies they betray as much as for their styles, motifs and technologies. All approaches stress that the late Roman and early medieval world was characterised by societies, cultures and politics in flux, however disputed the causes and consequences of those changes remain. Common to all debates, however, is an emphasis on symbiosis not caesura in both present-day scholarly circles and the political and cultural life of the period from 300 to 900.

'At the crossroads of many histories': thus the *Guide to the Post-classical World* characterised these centuries in 1999, a generation after the

publication of *The World of Late Antiquity*.² This *Guide* stands as a survey of a subject which hardly existed prior to 1971. Prefacing its alphabetically arranged entries, eleven introductory essays offer an overview of several key directions in late antique studies. Worth attention – as much for what is omitted as included – they are: ‘Remaking the past’; ‘Sacred landscapes’; ‘Philosophical tradition and the self’; ‘Religious communities’; ‘Barbarians and ethnicity’; ‘War and violence’; ‘Empire building’; ‘Christian triumph and controversy’; ‘Islam’; ‘The good life’; ‘Habitar’.³ Each reader can draw up an alternative contents list; for our purposes there are two significant silences. The first concerns markers of individual or group identity other than those of religion or ethnicity, such as status, class or sexual identity. The second is the human body in both its lifecycle from reproduction to death and its public presentation through moulding, dress, deportment and language. The central lacuna of this compendium is, in effect, the social and discursive construction of sexual difference.

That is the subject of this book of essays. We approach it by means of ‘gender’. This is not a thing or object waiting to be discovered, whether in the ground or a dusty archive. Rather, like ‘class’ or ‘race’, it is a concept capable of being put to various uses. As such it is inevitably shorthand, a single word that hints at possibilities and complications. And, like many other concepts used by historians, it has its own history – of shifting meanings and contested significances.⁴ At its simplest it refers to the disparities in all societies between the social roles permitted to men and women together with the wider cultural meanings associated with masculinity and femininity.

This has not always been its meaning, however. The English word ‘gender’ is from the common Latin word *genus* (Greek: *genos*). Meaning a

‘category, class or kind’, *genus* is etymologically closely related to *gens*, ‘a biological descent group, a race or people’, and *gignere*, ‘to beget’, and thus has connotations of procreation as much as of categorisation. Amongst its many uses in antiquity, *genus* was the grammarian’s term for the classification of all nouns and adjectives into groups including ‘male’, ‘female’, ‘neuter’ and ‘common’. The grammarian Servius (c. 370–c. 430) explained it thus:

Genders are so called from that which they generate, and thus there are only two principal genders, masculine and feminine, for biological reproduction generates these two alone. Genders [of words], however, are either natural or assigned by authoritative social usage. Natural genders are words such as ‘man’ or ‘woman’; those assigned by authoritative social usage are words such as ‘wall’ [*hic paries*: masculine] or ‘window’ [*haec fenestra*: feminine]. We recognise that these things do not have any natural sex, but we follow the sex which authority has established. The remaining genders, however, derive from the aforementioned, namely neuter, which is neither masculine nor feminine; common, which is both masculine and feminine; inclusive, which includes all the aforementioned genders, and finally epicene, which refers to creatures of either sex.⁵

With this complex semantic field referring to modes of categorising, both arbitrary (grammatical) and natural (biological), *genus* had passed into Middle English as ‘gender’ by the fourteenth century.⁶ Primarily (although not exclusively) a grammarian’s term, ‘gender’ must have puzzled generations of grammar school children curious as to why a window should be feminine but a wall masculine. Thus the term remained until the mid-twentieth century, when anglophone psychoanalysts turned their attention towards individuals whose social personality and sense of individual identity were discordant with their physiological sex. Disregarding the word’s etymological roots, they found ‘gender’ a convenient word for categorising these individuals’ social role, as distinct from their genital anatomy.⁷

² Introduction, in G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown and Oleg Grabar (eds.), *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. xviii.

³ In addition to the extensive bibliographical guidance supplied in the *Guide to the Postclassical World*, consult the following for up-to-date interpretations: *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. xiii: *The Late Empire, AD 337–429*, ed. Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey, and vol. xv: *Late Antiquity, Empire and Succession, 429–600*, ed. Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward-Perkins and Michael Whitby (Cambridge, 1998–2000); *New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. ii: *c.700–900*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge, 1993); *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, vol. i: *Problems in the Literary Source Material*, ed. Averil Cameron and Lawrence Conrad, vol. ii: *Land Use and Settlement Patterns*, ed. G. R. D. King and Averil Cameron, and vol. iii: *States, Resources and Armies*, ed. Lawrence Conrad and Averil Cameron (Princeton, 1992–93). The numerous volumes of essays under the general editorship of Ian Wood in the ongoing series *Transformation of the Roman World* (Leiden, 1997–) are also relevant.

⁴ The full history of the concept remains to be written; for a clear outline of its development within the historical profession see K. Canning, ‘Gender history’, in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. ix (Amsterdam, 2001), pp. 6006–11. ‘Gender history: the evolution of a concept’, in Robert Shoemaker and Mary Vincent (eds.), *Gender and History in Western Europe* (London, 1998), pp. 1–20. On its contested significance, see the preface to Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, revised edn (New York, 1999), and Penelope Corfield, ‘History and the challenge of gender history’, *Rethinking History* 1 (1997), pp. 241–58.

⁵ *Commentarius in artem Donati*, ed. H. Kell, *Grammatici Latini*, vol. iv (Leipzig, 1866), pp. 407–8: ‘Genera dicta sunt ab eo, quod generant, atque ideo duo sunt tantum genera principalia, masculinum et feminum. Haec enim sexus tantum generat. Genera autem aut naturalia sunt, aut ex auctoritate descendunt: naturalia sunt, ut vir, mulier; auctoritate descendunt, ut hic paries, haec fenestra. In his enim naturalium nullum intellegimus sexum, sed eum sequimur, quem firmavit auctoritas. Cetera vero genera a superioribus veniunt, ut est neutrum, quod nec masculinum est nec feminum, commune, quod et masculinum et feminum, omne, quod omnia supra dicta continet genera, epiconenon vero, quod confusum continet sexum. I am grateful to Karla Pollmann for discussion of this passage.

⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition, sv ‘gender’.

⁷ The Englishness of this word is important: no other language is capable of a similar sharp semantic distinction between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’. Cf. Gisela Bock, ‘Challenging dichotomies: perspectives on women’s history’, in Karen Offen, Ruth Koach Pierson and Jane Rendall (eds.), *Writing Women’s*

Thanks to Ann Oakley's *Sex, Gender and Society*, this meaning was taken up in the early phases of the 'second-wave' feminist movement, and from there spread rapidly throughout the social sciences, always referring to the socially organised relationship of women to men.⁸

Its adoption by historians owes much to Joan Scott's immensely influential paper of 1986, 'Gender: a useful category of historical analysis'.⁹ Since then, its conceptual and historical elaboration has been rapid, notably so in the USA. On the one hand, a renewed emphasis on the use of language to organise knowledge about sexual difference has entered historical scholarship under the influence of post-modern literary theories.¹⁰ On the other hand, historians have followed sociologists in exploring the relational aspects of gender from men's perspectives, thus opening up to analysis the cultural production of masculinities and the organisation of power hierarchies between different groups of men.¹¹ Notable here has been R. W. Connell's elaboration of the notion of 'hegemonic masculinity'. This refers to a dynamic masculinity which lacks fixed content but is rather the culturally specific legitimisation of the dominant form of masculinity within any particular gender order, by which femininities and other masculinities are marginalised or subordinated.¹²

Loosed from its earlier grammatical moorings, the word 'gender' has developed additional related but variant meanings. Sometimes regarded as synonymous with 'sex', it is more widely used to designate humans as

History: International Perspectives (Basingstoke, 1991), pp. 1–23 esp. p. 9, and Ruth Rodde, *Women in Islam and the Middle East* (London, 1999), p. 14.

⁸ Ann Oakley has commented on the context in which she developed this usage in 'A brief history of gender', in Ann Oakley and Juliet Mitchell (eds.), *Who's Afraid of Feminism? Seeing through the Backlash* (New York, 1997), pp. 29–55 esp. pp. 31–3.

⁹ First published in *American Historical Review* 91 (1986), pp. 1053–75; reprinted in Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, pp. 28–50 and Joan Scott (ed.), *Feminism and History* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 152–80.

¹⁰ Pertinent to the period covered in these essays are Kate Cooper, 'Insinuations of womanly influence: an aspect of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy', *JRS* 82 (1992), pp. 113–27; Elizabeth Clark, 'The lady vanishes: dilemmas of a feminist historian after the "linguistic turn"', *Church History* 67 (1998), pp. 1–31; Gabriele Spiegel, 'History, historicism and the social logic of the text in the Middle Ages', *Speculum* 65 (1990), pp. 59–86.

¹¹ The article which opened up this subject was T. Carrigan, R. W. Connell and J. Lee, 'Toward a new sociology of masculinity', *Theory and Society* 14 (1985), pp. 551–604 (reprinted in H. Brod (ed.), *The Making of Masculinities* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), pp. 63–100 and, abbreviated, in Rachel Adams and David Savran (eds.), *The Masculinity Studies Reader* (Malden, MA, 2002), pp. 99–118). For an up-to-date overview of recent work on masculinity within a contemporary British perspective, see Stephen M. Whitehead, *Men and Masculinities: Key Themes and New Directions* (Cambridge, 2002). Its emergence as a subject of historical enquiry was prompted by Michael Roper and John Tosh (eds.), *Manly Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800* (London, 1991). See also John Tosh, 'What should historians do with masculinity?', *History Workshop Journal* 38 (1994), pp. 179–202; reprinted in Shoemaker and Vincent (eds.), *Gender and History*, pp. 64–85. For further bibliography, see note 26 below.

¹² See further R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 76–81.

belonging to one of two groups, either male or female. Common usage thus often blurs the distinction between biological and cultural categories, and is at variance with the meaning of the term established as normative in the social sciences from the 1970s onwards but unwittingly analogous to the word's etymological root.¹³ In this context, 'gender history' has often been women's history passing under a new name. 'Today', Ann Oakley comments, looking back on the political career of the word she had launched a generation previously, 'gender slips uneasily between being merely another word for sex and a contested political term'.¹⁴

Its contested nature stems directly from the fact that it is inherently political. Many of the conceptual advances stemmed explicitly from the political engagement of their originators, whether within the women's movement of the 1960s–80s or within more recent gay rights movements, pro-feminist men's groups and a wide range of minority rights political interest groups. Even more importantly, gender is in essence about power relationships and the language which legitimates or denies their existence. A gendered approach insists upon attention to hierarchies of power, and in so doing takes equal notice of institutional, cultural and discursive mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion. Additionally, it exposes understandings of the sexed human body as culturally conditioned. In dismantling any lingering idea of the 'naturalness' of gender, it contributes a sharpened sense of the ways in which even at a physiological level the sexed body is a malleable object of a politics of power and interpretation.¹⁵ In sum, whether we focus on socio-political modalities or on language as the medium which represents and interprets the world, the self and the human body, the concept of 'gender' indicates the rejection of any notion that 'male' and 'female' are essential, natural and objective distinctions. It divorces the gendered individual from genital anatomy, and in place of biological determinism it substitutes language, social situation and power.

Gender politics and gender studies originated in a specific political context – the final three decades of the twentieth century in the secularised western world. In that environment, they have become intimately associated with some of the fundamental issues of modern and post-modern philosophy: the nature and production of language, knowledge, power and selfhood. But because of that very context, 'gender' has also encountered

¹³ For a discussion of this slippage and its methodological implications, see Joan Scott, 'Some more reflections on gender and politics', in the revised edition of her *Gender and the Politics of History*, pp. 199–222.

¹⁴ Oakley, 'Brief history', p. 30.

¹⁵ Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories about Men and Women* (New York, 1985); Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York, 2000).

powerful challenges which have delayed its impact, renegotiated its terms or even denied it any validity at all.¹⁶ Whether propounded by opponents of secularisation or of westernising paradigms of political and social development, these refutations have constrained the development of concepts of gender, rendering their acceptance patchy. Even within the western world, gender studies are construed as far more radical in some countries and institutions than in others. The essays in this volume indirectly reflect this: our authors write in a wide range of specific political situations ranging from the American to the Middle Eastern, and in various religious milieux as well as self-consciously secular contexts. Although some write from a position of greater personal involvement in the politics of social equality than others, all of us know that the scholar as much as the object of study is gendered, and that none of us can deny our own bodily subjectivity or personal experience of gender.

Nevertheless, we all engage with a common understanding of 'gender', agreeing that it is both a method of analysing past societies and also a subject of study within them. Although some of the chapters which follow incline to one rather than the other, most deploy both together. As a group of essays, they take as their domain the human body, social institutions (family, marriage, church, state) and the rhetorics of sexuality; as their method, they search out both implicit and explicit ways in which sexual differences informed politics, culture, society and religion in the late Roman empire and its successor civilisations.

The driving impulse behind the spread of the concept of gender has been contemporary political action, and historians' efforts to explain the formation of modern, western gender systems have tended to concentrate their energies in the period from the French Revolution onwards.¹⁷ Nevertheless, historians, political theorists and sociologists alike are now far more sensitive than they were in the 1970s and early 1980s to the absence of any universals underlying the modern, western gender order. Indeed, anthropologists have made it abundantly clear how very different gendered roles, discursive practices and understandings of the sexed human body are in other cultures.¹⁸ There is now a general recognition that gender is historically contingent, expressed through and interacting with the cultural

¹⁶ Cf. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (revised edn), pp. ix–xiii, 211–28; Roded, *Women in Islam*, pp. 9–18; Barbara L. Marshall, *Configuring Gender: Explorations in Theory and Politics* (Peterborough, Ont., 2000), pp. 144–9.

¹⁷ See, for example, the essays collected together by Shoemaker and Vincent (eds.), *Gender and History*.

¹⁸ Of the vast literature, key works include Michele Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (eds.), *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford, 1974); Kayra Retter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (Stanford, 1975); Carol MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern (eds.), *Nature, Culture and Gender* (Cambridge,

resources and social matrix particular to any given time and place. All that is remarkably constant is the presence of gender differences in all known human societies. Beyond that, gender is fluid, subject to constant challenge and reformulation, multivalent not monolithic and not easily susceptible to generalisation.

Approaching the centuries between AD 300 and 900 with this in mind, we also build on recent scholarship on women, men and sexuality in classical, western medieval, early Islamic and Byzantine societies. Over the past generation, this has followed a trajectory similar to that of women's and gender history in general, although with some notable modulations. Broadly speaking, there have been three historiographical phases since the 1970s. The initial one drew attention to women within existing modes of historical analysis and identified the realities of women's lives with their concomitant modes of subordination. The second phase was marked by conceptualisations of the distinctiveness of women's lives and cultural expressions which either established new interpretive agendas or claimed a different historical space for women. Most recently, attention to the social and cultural formations of gender relations has followed, somewhat belatedly, the agenda outlined above.¹⁹

In the early phase of women's history, in which the keynote was 'becoming visible', the women of some historical periods were nevertheless far more visible than of others. The comparative invisibility of women in traditional Eurasian societies contributed to retarding their emergence as historical subjects in their own right: the women of the centuries and cultures featured in this book were notably absent from the general histories of women composed in the 1970s–80s.²⁰ By the time the women of late antiquity, Byzantium and the early medieval west were gaining scholarly attention

1980); Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead (eds.), *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality* (Cambridge, 1981); M. Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift* (Berkeley, 1988); Andra Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne (eds.), *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies* (London, 1994); Sherry Ortner, *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (Boston, 1996).

¹⁹ For overviews see Olwen Hufton, 'Women, gender and the *fin de siècle*', in Michael Bentley (ed.), *Comparison to History* (London, 1997), pp. 929–49, and Johanna Alberti, *Gender and the Historian* (Harlow, 2002). Note Hufton's comments on the differing American and European trajectories of women's and gender studies. Historiographical trends in classical and medieval studies are sketched by Allen J. Franzen, 'When women aren't enough', in Nancy F. Partner (ed.), *Studying Medieval Women* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), pp. 143–69 esp. pp. 145–50; Liz James, 'Introduction: women's studies, gender studies, Byzantine studies', in L. James (ed.), *Women, Men and Eunuchs* (London, 1977), pp. xi–xxiv, and Maria Wyke, 'Introduction', in M. Wyke (ed.), *Gender and the Body in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 1–7. For a different framing of the literature, consult Janet L. Nelson, 'Family, gender and sexuality in the Middle Ages', in Bentley (ed.), *Comparison to History*, pp. 153–76.

²⁰ Neither Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Coon, *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, 1st edn (Boston, 1977), nor Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women*

in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it had become problematic to study the women of more recent historical periods as a single, relatively homogeneous group at all.²¹ Indeed, medieval Islamic women could be described as 'becoming visible' only as recently as 1999.²² For the period and cultures under discussion here it is possible to fracture the category of 'women' along lines of ethnicity, status and class, but the extreme scarcity of any direct evidence for women's activities and experiences makes attempts to dissolve it into multiple subjectivities exceptionally difficult.

Instead, scholarly impulse has come from rather different directions, on the one hand the institutional and theological history of Christianity and on the other the history of sexuality. From the 1960s onwards, attention to the role of women within contemporary churches, Catholic and Protestant alike, prompted both re-evaluation of the roles of women within the early Christian church and reappraisal – often searing – of the development of patristic teaching about women and gender order.²³ One consequence of this has been lay and academic fascination with the high-profile women saints of late antique and medieval Christianity; another, a sophisticated body of scholarship on the gendered aspects of Christian ethical and moral teachings.²⁴ To the extent that injunctions to sexual abstinence – and indeed

²¹ *in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, 2 vols. (New York, 1988), nor Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society*, 2nd edn (London, 1996) devotes more than a handful of pages to them.

²² Cf. Denise Riley, 'Am I that Name? Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History' (Basingstoke, 1988).

Groundbreaking titles on women c. 300 to 900 include Averil Cameron and Amelie Kuhrt (eds.), *Images of Women in Antiquity* (London, 1983); Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1983); Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1984); Suzanne F. Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister 500–900* (Philadelphia, 1985); *Storia delle donne in occidente*, vol. 1: *L'antichità*, ed. Pauline Schmitt Pantel (Rome, 1990) [English translation: *A History of Women in the West*, vol. 1: *From Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA, 1992)]; *Storia delle donne in occidente*, vol. 11: *Il Medioevo*, ed. Christiane Klmpsch-Zuber (Rome, 1990); [English translation: *A History of Women in the West*, vol. 11: *Silences of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA, 1992)]; Joselle Beaucamp, *Le Sancte de la femme à Byzance, IV^e–VII^e siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1990–2); Werner Affeldt (ed.), *Frauen in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter: Lebensbedingungen – Lebensformen – Lebensformen* (Sigmaringen, 1990); Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1993); Leonie Archer, Susan Fischler and Maria Wyke (eds.), *Women in Ancient Societies: An Illusion of the Night* (London, 1994). For an overall assessment, see Julia M. H. Smith, 'Did women have a transformation of the Roman world?', in P. Stafford and A. B. Mulder-Baker (eds.), *Gendering the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2001) [also published as a special issue of *Gender and History* 12, 3 (2000)], pp. 22–41.

²³ Cf. Gavin R. G. Hambly, 'Introduction. Becoming visible: medieval Islamic women in history and historiography', in Hambly (ed.), *Women in the Medieval Islamic World* (Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 3–27. See also Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (eds.), *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender* (New Haven, 1991).

²⁴ For example, Rosemary R. Ruether, *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York, 1974); Elisabeth Schlusser Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York, 1983).

²⁵ A short selection: Caroline Walker Bynum, 'Women's stories, women's symbols: a critique of Victor Turner's theory of liminality', in R. L. Moore and F. E. Reynolds (eds.), *Anthropology and the*

permanent chastity – are central to the latter, the stimulus of patristic studies intersected with the markedly different impulse offered by the work of Michel Foucault on the ethics of sexual self-fashioning in the ancient world. In 1984, the second volume of his *Histoire de la sexualité*, *L'Usage des plaisirs*, took fifth- and fourth-century BC Greece as the locus of an argument about the ideological nature of the apparent 'naturalness' of modern western heterosexuality; the third volume, *Le Souci de soi*, extended his interest in the contribution of sexuality to the shaping of male modes of being into the first and second centuries AD.²⁵ The second volume in particular administered an electric shock to classical studies, a jolt which rapidly affected late antiquity too.²⁶ If Foucault made the social construction of the male body central to understandings of citizenship and selfhood throughout the entire ancient world, the reaction provoked by his notorious gender-blindness has prompted the rapid development of fully gendered analyses of classical and patristic masculinities.²⁷

Hitherto, understanding of men, women and gender in the post-classical period has tended to focus on the textually rich decades of the fourth to fifth centuries, when Christian discourses of self, power and morality were debated with articulate passion and enduring norms were established. The essays in this book extend a gendered perspective far more widely, into periods and places which are not all as well documented. Notably, our geographical and religious contexts are not limited to the rapidly Christianising world of the late Roman empire. Effros takes as her subject the pre-literate peoples who found new homes for themselves within the boundaries of

Study of Religion (Chicago, 1984), pp. 105–25; James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago, 1987); Benedicita Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources* (London, 1987); Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1994); Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA, 1996); Lynda Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia, 1997); Elizabeth Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton, 1999); Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans and Sarah Salih (eds.), *Medieval Virginitas* (Cardiff, 2003).

²⁵ English translations by Robert Hurley, *The Use of Pleasure* (Harmondsworth, 1986) and *The Care of the Self* (Harmondsworth, 1986).

²⁶ For critiques by ancient and late antique historians, see Averil Cameron, 'Redrawing the map: early Christian territory after Foucault', *JRS* 76 (1986), pp. 266–75, and Lin Foxhall, 'Pandora unbound: a feminist critique of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*', in Cornwall and Lindstrane (eds.), *Disorienting Masculinity*, pp. 133–47.

²⁷ Clare Lees (ed.), *Medieval Masculinities* (Minneapolis, 1994); J. J. Cohen and B. Wheeler (eds.), *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1997); Lin Foxhall and John Salmon (eds.), *Thinking Men: Masculinity and Self-Representation in the Classical Tradition* (London, 1998); Foxhall and Salmon (eds.), *When Men Were Men: Masculinity, Power and Identity in Classical Antiquity* (London, 1998); D. M. Hadley (ed.), *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (London, 1999); Virginia Burrus, *Begotten Not Made: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, 2000); Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, 2001).

empire but persisted, for a while, with their traditional ways of disposing of the dead by burying them richly dressed and in furnished graves. Bray and El Cheikh both extend gendered methodology into early Islamic society, and Coon explores Jewish notions of priestly identity as the background to her work on ninth-century Christian images of the gender of the clergy.

Moreover, many of our contributors present source material previously excluded from discussions of gender history in these centuries. Three authors draw on material and art historical evidence: Harlow finds visual images an important source for understanding the dress codes associated with elite masculinity in the third to sixth centuries, whilst Effros and Hadley both work with funerary archaeology, the former in the context of 'migration age' settlements in western Europe, the latter in Anglo-Saxon England. Effros exposes the inappropriate gendered assumptions of much modern scholarship by doubting whether women's dress can provide a secure guide to ethnic identity and thereby challenging assumed links between material culture and ethnicity in fifth-century Gaul. Hadley argues that, notwithstanding the gradual impact of Christianity on burial rites, the expression of gender identity through Anglo-Saxon burial practices fluctuated between the fifth and tenth centuries, and that funerary expression of martial masculinity was a recurrent feature at times of great social stress and political crisis.

Others find richness in neglected written sources. Two authors turn a gendered gaze on Christian texts not generally interrogated from this perspective because of the highly technical and deeply conservative nature of their genres: Muschiol on liturgy and Coon on biblical exegesis. By contrast, Wood finds in bare genealogies a fertile source for the gendered manipulation of lineages of power and dynasty, whilst Tougher exploits administrative lists for their insights into a form of masculinity entirely absent from the history and sociology of masculinities in more recent times – the eunuch.

We balance contributions on new sources with ones which pose new questions to topics which have always been the object of historical enquiry – royal and imperial courts, the Christian church, family and marriage. Several chapters address courts from varying perspectives: power and rulership, cultural production, dynastic reproduction. As an ensemble, these chapters make clear that gender is the connective tissue between these seemingly different themes. Whilst Hen examines the evidence for women's modes of patronising cultural production and finds a considerable degree of gender complementarity in Merovingian courts, Pohl highlights the role

of Lombard queens in conferring dynastic legitimation, ordering social memory and commissioning historical commemoration of the Lombard people and their kings. Nelson extends this discussion by investigating royal women's agency in the reproduction of cultural value systems in the early medieval west and arguing that women as well as men were key agents in the 'civilising process'.

Marriage emerges as a crucial vector for cultural reproduction and political legitimation in many of our chapters. Nevertheless, it is equally evident from them that the ways in which early medieval authors deployed gendered stereotypes or wrote in ways which systematically occluded female subjectivity have to be unravelled before a full understanding of the gender differences and complementarities of dynastic marriages and court politics can be appreciated. Notably, Wood complements Pohl's analysis of Lombard queens by demonstrating how the female ancestors of the Carolingian kings not only conveyed dynastic legitimacy but also transmitted crucial claims to land and power to their male relatives, in ways which eighth-century writers and modern historians alike have consistently overlooked. In contrast, Brubaker dissects a literary account of the Byzantine empress Theodora, who was the contemporary of some of the civilising western queens discussed by Nelson, and demonstrates how a famous text whose denunciation of female conduct is conventionally read as essentially factual is in essence a rhetorically constructed fiction. By demonstrating the text's use of standard stereotyping of female sexual transgression to vilify the reigning emperor, Brubaker argues that the gendered stereotyping of the empress cannot be separated from that of the emperor, for the two are mutually reinforcing, to devastating political ends.

Brubaker's conclusions are complemented by El Cheikh's demonstration of the disjuncture between the textual representation and the political realities of a woman's influence in the court of an early tenth-century caliph of Baghdad. Not until the gendered rhetoric of both medieval and modern Arab historians has been picked apart can the career of an able woman, a slave in origin and mother of the reigning caliph, be understood and the scope of female agency assessed. Stripped of rhetorical denigration, the ability of Shaghab to govern effectively from the private, residential quarters of the palace (the harem) becomes evident. In this case, not husband and wife but mother and son form the gendered pair equally central to political action and gendered text. Coupled chapters by Vinson and de Jong about 'bride shows' – literary narratives of emperors selecting their bride from among the participants in a female beauty parade – extend the arguments about courts, gender and political influence still further. Together, they

demonstrate how textual discourses about gendered morality and the ideal wife simultaneously construct and reflect court life and dynastic legitimacy in the ninth century, both Byzantine (Vinson) and western (de Jong). As a group, these chapters all put a gendered understanding of dynastic politics at the centre of late antique, early medieval, western, Islamic and Byzantine court life by indicating the ways in which female agency and men's political imperatives are refracted in the same texts through complex literary strategies. Together, they warn us of the gender games which authors play. They alert us to the discursive power of gendered commonplaces. In so doing, they reinforce a notable theme of the volume, the complex relationships between textual representations and political 'realities'.

A secondary theme in Vinson's and de Jong's discussion of purported bride shows is the reformulation of early medieval gender roles under the impact of Christianity. This becomes the main focus of two chapters which each offer a distinctive approach to the history of the Christian church. Muschiol examines the extent to which the formal liturgical rituals of worship encoded changing understandings of gender relationships, and also points to the ways in which changing ritual contributed to reorganising gender roles. Coon, on the other hand, provides an exposition of the rhetorics of the fecundity of priestly chastity in a ninth-century monastery. She demonstrates the malleability of strongly gendered language by analysing how feminine imagery contributed to organising an understanding of masculine, priestly prowess. By contrast, images and realities of gender roles in early Islam are Bray's subject. Although the cultural specifics of the early Islamic Arab world were different from those of the early medieval Christian west, the reorganisation of gender roles is likewise an aspect of religious conversion and associated societal changes.

Bray's analysis is concerned as much with the imaginative reorderings of social and gender hierarchies in poetry as with the actual reorganisation of Arab society in the eighth and ninth centuries. She finds poetic images of socially marginal women – slaves – a particularly sensitive index of changing forms of Arab masculinity, thus further emphasising the integral, subtle links between constructions of masculinity and femininity and also between gender and other forms of social distinction, in this case legal status. Pohl, on the other hand, searches out the intersection of discourses of gender with those of ethnicity in late antiquity and the early medieval west. He brings to our attention images of Amazons and other women warriors. Through literary representations of these embodiments of otherness, Pohl argues, cultural boundaries could be affirmed and gender hierarchy maintained in situations where both were in flux. Like Bray, Pohl emphasises the deep

levels of meaning contained within literary texts' imaginative reorderings of gender hierarchies at times of major socio-political change.

Taken together, the chapters in this book require us to revise our understanding of the early medieval world in several ways. In the first place, they expose serious fallacies within the common knowledge frequently recycled in textbooks. Effros demonstrates that many of the maps of 'barbarian' migration routes and settlement patterns are without secure interpretive foundation. Similarly, Wood points out that the genealogical tables which accompany accounts of the Carolingian dynasty's rise to power are fundamentally misleading and must be reconceived. Rid of these unmodded props, the history of the early medieval west will have to be visualised and conceptualised very differently.²⁸ El Cheikh and Brubaker both make clear the way in which Islamicists and Byzantinists have continued to recycle as truthful narratives which are so tendentious as to be wrong or, at best, misconceived. They emphasise that it remains all too easy for modern scholars to reiterate the gender prejudices of their medieval sources. It takes their skilful approach to identify discursive practices, medieval and modern, which occlude or disempower women, and to make apparent the gendered nature of the narratives which they sustain.

Instead of master narratives, the embodied self is central to the arguments offered here. This emerges in two ways. First, understanding of sexual physiology in the ancient world was quite different from post-Enlightenment interpretations, for it rooted gendered morality directly in physiology.²⁹ The Christian Middle Ages reinforced this inheritance with an externalised ethical code projected straight on to the human body.³⁰ Hence, as Vinson and de Jong both show, the morally pure wife was also the most beautiful, for external appearance was the outer manifestation of inner moral character. Yet, as de Jong also stresses, bodily appearance required careful interpretation, for beauty might also betoken lack of modesty and a wanton disposition.

²⁸ Similar arguments concerning the high and late medieval west are offered in Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (eds.), *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY, 2003).

²⁹ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA, 1990); Mary Harlow, 'In the name of the father: procreation, parenthood and patriarchy', in Foxhall and Salmon (eds.), *Thinking Men*, pp. 15–69.

³⁰ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988); Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex: Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science and Culture* (Cambridge, 1993); Julia M. H. Smith, 'Gender and ideology in the early Middle Ages', in R. N. Swanson (ed.), *Gender and Christian Religion*, Studies in Church History 34 (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 51–73.

Nor was the distinction of 'male' and 'female' analogous to that of the modern world. Tougher's discussion of eunuchs reminds us that the male body of late antiquity, Byzantium and medieval Islam was adjustable, liable to surgical reshaping for political ends. The inherent social and moral implications of that medical intervention inform the ambivalence with which others wrote about eunuchs in the Byzantine world. These feminised men also remind us that instead of a gender polarity of male and female, Roman and post-Roman ideas of sexual distinction formed a broad spectrum of possibilities.³¹ As Tougher also indicates, the notion of a 'third gender' is no recent anthropological construct, but a late antique way of classifying eunuchs. That this spectrum also took discursive form is the conclusion to be drawn from the contributions of Pohl and Coon. These both focus on the early medieval west, where indigenous eunuchism was lacking, but where both virile woman warriors and fecund, virginal men able to generate sons existed in textual form. As Pohl and Coon show respectively, the language of masculinity applied to Amazons as convincingly as the language of birthing and pregnancy fitted chaste priests.

Not only surgery, but language and discourse inscribed gender on the early medieval body. Costume – dress, jewellery and portable objects betokening status – was equally potent, as Harlow, Effros and Hadley agree. Male costume, Harlow stresses, was a way of negotiating power and identity in late antiquity that had to cope not only with the gender ambiguity of brightly coloured silks but also with the cultural ambiguity of barbarian-inspired trousers. Choice of female costume in the post-Roman west, Effros argues, involved issues of ethnic identity, agency and cultural assimilation which the archaeological record and extant textual sources cannot fully reveal. For Hadley, committing a person to the grave in Anglo-Saxon England implied decisions about whether to mark status through gendered clothing and grave goods, during ceremonies in which the audience can be presumed to have been at least as important as the deceased. Inscribed on stone memorials, decisions about gendered displays of costume could endure for many centuries. The point that emerges is that costume could mark far more than merely the gender identity of the body which it clothed. The dress codes for court eunuchs (Tougher), Christian priests

(Coon) and Amazons (Pohl) variously signalled one or more of their wearers' occupation, status and ethnicity. Clothing could also be interpreted as marking depravity or virtue, the transgression or adherence to cultural and moral norms and expectations. We encounter here what Judith Butler has labelled the 'performative' nature of gender identity.³²

Social fashioning and discursive interpretation of the human body thus constitute one of the ways in which gender was produced and interpreted in the early medieval world. But human encounters are of course socially organised, and thus our contributors give equal attention to those institutions where gender informed social relationships. Particularly evident here is the gendered regulation of space, whether in the caliphal palace with its attached harem (El Cheikh), the imperial Byzantine palace with its *gynaikonitis* (women's quarters), the male monastery (Coon) or the chancel of a community church (Muschiol). These were the places of holiness or courtliness, where the efficacy of ritual purity on the one hand, or of the politics of power on the other, called for particular attention to the maintenance of gender boundaries. Those boundaries rested on the presumption that neither political nor sacred power was to be wielded by women or eunuchs but only by fertile men, whether as kings and emperors or as priests and caliphs.

However much gender difference blocked women and subordinate men from the exercise of power, these boundaries were nevertheless negotiable to a degree. A holy woman's convent could function as an outpost of a western court or as a centre of familial politics in its own right (Nelson, Wood), whilst Byzantine and Islamic eunuchs were regularly entrusted with high administrative office and might also have privileged access to *gynaikonitis* and harem (Tougher, El Cheikh). Indeed, at the elite level, we can detect a degree of gender complementarity, whether in lavishly furnished burials of the fifth and sixth centuries (Effros, Hadley), in participation in the liturgy and in the patronage of cultural production in Merovingian Gaul (Muschiol, Hen), in the generation and transmission of cultural values (Nelson) or even in subjection to vitriolic invective (Brubaker). Early medieval gender order was often as fluid in practice as it was rigid in theory. It was also as much discursive as performative or institutional, as many of our contributors rightly insist. As such, it infused explicit ideologies and organised perceptions of individuals' behaviour (Pohl, Brubaker, Vinson, Bray, El Cheikh, de Jong, Coon). With their firm physiological groundings, discourses of gender remained less liable to change than performative or

³¹ As argued with respect to early Icelandic society by Carol J. Clover, 'Regardless of their sex: men, women and power in early Northern Europe', in Parment (ed.), *Studying Medieval Women*, pp. 61–85, and with respect to early Islam by Everett K. Rowson, 'Gender irregularity as entertainment: institutionalised transvestism at the caliphal court in medieval Baghdad', in Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack (eds.), *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, 2003), pp. 45–72.

³² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd edition (London, 1999).

institutional manifestations of gender. But as we unravel them, we must always remember that mastery of literacy was one of the ways in which hegemonic masculinity reproduced itself in the ancient and medieval worlds, and that the texts in which gender ideology was embedded were, for the most part, generated by those centres which had most at stake in the maintenance of hierarchies of power, whether sacred or secular.

The political, religious and social transformations which characterised the centuries from c. 300 to c. 900 were accompanied by upheaval and renegotiation of gender systems. Not surprisingly, therefore, fluidities and pluralisms mark the ideas and expressions of gender which we meet in this book. It is nevertheless possible to point to continuities and uniformities in the organisation and expression of gender in the late Roman and early Byzantine, Islamic and medieval worlds.

One of those is the restricted range of social roles in which we can observe women. At elite level, they feature in this book only as wives and mothers or, in Christian times, as nuns. At a lower social level, we occasionally encounter them as courtesans, slaves and prostitutes. We may note too the intellectual efforts which several contributors have to make to uncover traces of female agency even at elite level (El Cheikh, Effros, Nelson, Muschiol, Hen). Alongside these women, however, we meet elite men as senators, warriors and bureaucrats as well as kings, emperors and caliphs. All were generally husbands and fathers, often highly visible within textual and/or material evidence. Chaste Christian priests and eunuchs, Byzantine and Islamic, both occupied distinctive roles within this elite, the former claiming a unique spiritual potency, the latter of essential utility but ambiguous social evaluation. The restricted range of women's social roles contrasts sharply, however, with the wide range of imaginative forms which women's lives could take in poetic, political, religious and historical texts. As for men, we encounter the inverse: a much narrower range of imaginative masculinities accompanied the varied constructions of masculinity actualised in social practice.

Simply to invoke the gender asymmetry typical of traditional societies would not be an adequate explanation of this. Though we may agree that male authors within the centuries from 300 to 900 often found women 'good to think with', this observation also lacks full explanatory utility.³³ We should turn instead to the fixed point in late antique and early medieval

gender systems: the hegemonic masculinity of the ruling elite of the day. This was the reference point for all other expressions of gender identity in both discourse and practice, whatever the particular cultural content and social form of that elite masculinity might be. In many of our chapters, elite masculinity emerges as the most unstable element in the post-classical gender order, the most in need of frequent reaffirmation. The particular mode of hegemonic masculinity of any given moment faced challenges from those it marginalised, whether barbarians, elite women, eunuchs, slaves or political opponents. Men responded to these challenges by investing in material and discursive reinforcements to their hegemony. Whether this investment was in personal adornment (Harlow), political invective against transgressing women (Brubaker, de Jong, El Cheikh) and effeminate eunuchs (Tougher), commemorative funerary stones (Hadley), narratives about terrifying women warriors (Pohl) or poetic romances about courtesans turned soul-mates (Bray), our contributors agree that it was greatest, and the results most historically conspicuous, at moments of greatest social stress or political dislocation. The gendered arguments which all these texts and monuments contain emphasise that even hegemonic masculinity was relative, performed in relation to those it marginalised as 'other', reduced to subordination or disparaged as weak.

To conclude that the manifold textual and material constructions of gender in the early medieval world were always context specific but nevertheless betray fundamental structural and discursive similarities is therefore not at all a contradiction in terms. Furthermore, despite the virtual invisibility of most women as historical subjects in their own right, they were nevertheless omnipresent in the gendered discourses which buttressed men's precarious assertions of power. Inasmuch as the study of gender has the capacity to 'revise our concepts of humanity and nature, and enlarge our sense of the human predicament',³⁴ we publish these essays as a contribution to that end.

Cabrit, 'Virginity and misogyny' in tenth- and eleventh-century England', *Gender and History* 12 (2000), pp. 1–32 at p. 15.

³⁴ Jill K. Conway, Susan C. Bourque and Joan W. Scott, 'Introduction: the concept of gender', *Dactylus* 116 pt 4 (1987), pp. xxi–xxix at p. xxix.

³³ Cf. Janet L. Nelson, 'Women and the Word in the earlier Middle Ages', in W. J. Shields and D. Wood (eds.), *Women in the Church: Studies in Church History* 27 (Oxford, 1990), pp. 53–78 at p. 58 (reprinted in Janet L. Nelson, *The Frankish World, 750–900* (London, 1996), pp. 199–221); Catherine