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# Angels, Snakes, and Everything In Between: The Fall of the Byzantine Eunuch

Tess E. Nye  
*Saint Mary's Academy*

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## **Angels, Snakes, and Everything In Between: The Fall of the Byzantine Eunuch**

Great figures of fascination, eunuchs have mystified ancients and contemporaries alike through their physical mutilation, sexual ambiguity, and distinct roles within civilizations and societies. Underpinning Byzantine imperial court life, eunuchs possessed great influence in domestic and political spheres for much of the empire's history. Following the Latin occupation of Constantinople in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and extending onwards, however, eunuchs and their influence became increasingly obsolete. This paper explores the broad scope of the Byzantine eunuch's social and political power and the causes for the eunuch's decline nearing the collapse of the Byzantine empire.

**Tess Nye, St. Mary's Academy**

**Angels, Snakes, and Everything in Between:**

**The Fall of the Byzantine Eunuch**

Tess Nye

PSU Challenge History of Modern Europe

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A smooth, bald head and round, pre-pubescent features; a girlish softness. Ambitious yet levelheaded, cowardly yet quick-witted, conniving, effeminate, unpredictable. Shrouded in mystery, silks, and the scent of lilac, Varys from George R. R. Martin's book and television series *Game of Thrones* embodies the ambiguous, dualistic, and undefinable characteristics commonly associated with eunuchs throughout history. Intriguing through their sexual obscurity and corporal mutilation, eunuchs and their unique roles within society have long been subjects of interest to both ancient and modern audiences. From their duties as harem-guards and bedroom-protectors to their high-rank in courts and proximity to the emperor, eunuchs often held positions of great social and political power. Focusing on the Byzantine empire, the eunuch's sexual ambiguity and distinct gender identity due to physical castration afforded them an unconventional yet distinguished power within the Byzantine imperial court system. However, after the Crusaders' Sack of Constantinople and occupation in the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the fall of the Byzantine empire in 1453, eunuchs wielded significantly less power, both as individuals and as a collective institution. The last dynasty to rule Byzantium, the Palaiologoi reclaimed Constantinople from the Latins in 1261, however, Latin customs, ideologies, and court hierarchies continued to influence Byzantine courts and politics until the empire's fall in 1453. Among those impacted, the eunuchs saw a loss in political and societal status as a result of changes to the imperial ruling system under the reign of the Palaiologoi, shifting Byzantine court dynamics, and increased Latin and Western European influence on Byzantine gender attitudes.

Dating back to the Assyrian empire, the tradition of eunuchism was deeply rooted throughout Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and Asian court life. Hellenistic and Roman rulers continued the practice, passing it onto the Byzantine, Muslim, and Ottoman empires. Spanning across centuries

in Europe and Asia, eunuchs generally fell into three categories: men who were castrated as adults as punishment crimes or as prisoners of war, willingly castrated adult men who served in religious cults, and men who were castrated as prepubescent boys and young slaves to prepare them for careers as servants, court functionaries, or prostitutes.<sup>1</sup> During the Byzantine era, approximately 330 CE – 1453 AD, eunuchs were viewed as recognizably separate—physiologically and socially—from both the male and female genders. The eunuch’s sexual ambiguity and characterization as non-threatening to dominant males allowed them to occupy and reject both spheres of gender, assuming distinct roles because of their nonbinary nature. Unbound by the male responsibilities of providing for and heading the household and free from female domestic roles of childbearing and keeping the home, eunuchs existed outside of gendered domestic, reproductive, and sexual realms of Byzantine society.<sup>2</sup> Originally from the ancient Greek language, the word eunuch derives from the word “bed,” more specifically, the “marriage bed.” Posing no sexual threat to male husbands, their lack of reproductive ability qualified eunuchs for the function of guarding the marriage bed, as they were unable to impregnate female wives.<sup>3</sup> Amongst the socially prominent and wealthy aristocratic households, eunuchs were employed to protect the female from insemination by other men, ensuring that the wife carry only her husband’s offspring. Extending to harems as well, eunuchs possessed the power to control access to the female body, both as a means of pleasure and as a tool for biological reproduction. Additionally, their closeness to wealthy, influential members of society granted them power through proximity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Gary Taylor, *Castration: An Abbreviated History of Western Manhood* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2000), 33.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 36.

Eunuchs gained much of their power from their closeness and association with the Byzantine emperor. The most important figure in Byzantine society, the emperor commanded armies, headed political institutions, appointed officials, controlled the empire's finances, interacted with foreign powers, and formed the foundation of the law, among other roles.<sup>5</sup> Though secondary to power, the eunuch's personal influence and access granted them a chiefly impactful role within the Byzantine imperial system.<sup>6</sup> As servants, guardians, and messengers, eunuchs surrounded the emperor's daily life and operations, serving as protective shields with constant visual and physical access to the pinnacle of society. Their constant proximity to the emperor heightened the ruler's divine mystique and perceived power. The emperor's interaction with society was mediated through an alternate source, a shield of loyal, sexually pure, and unnaturally-created eunuchs.<sup>7</sup> Surrounded by these artificial, asexual beings, the emperor's imperial entourage evoked associations to God's angelic escort.<sup>8</sup> Since the emperor's earthly court was believed to imitate the court of Heaven, eunuchs paralleled these angel attendants.<sup>9</sup> Eunuchs and their relationship to the emperor also served to paradoxically uplift the ruler's masculine power, presenting the emperor as dominant and hyper-masculine while surrounded by ambiguous, effeminate figures.<sup>10</sup>

Despite positive associations to angels in court settings, the eunuch's physical deformities and gender ambiguity had consistently caused tension between Christian beliefs and the institution of eunuchism. Early Christian and Judaic traditions stressed the integrity of the

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<sup>5</sup> Liz James, "Men, Women, Eunuchs: Gender, Sex, and Power," in *The Social History of Byzantium*, ed. John Haldon (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 40.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>7</sup> Maria Parani, "Look Like an Angel: The Attire of Eunuchs and Its Significance within the Context of Middle Byzantine Court Ceremonial," in *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power in Byzantium and the Medieval Mediterranean: Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 437.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Leonora Neville, *Byzantine Gender* (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 54.

<sup>10</sup> Parani, 435.

physical body as a representation of God's divine creation, and because castration permanently removed the male body from its natural state, the Roman Church disapproved of the bodily mutilation of eunuchs.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the Christian religion valued celibacy and rejected sexual activity. Without sexual and reproductive organs, eunuchs were viewed as asexual, abstinent beings, their holiness through celibacy a possible demonstration of God's favor. However, since castration was usually forced upon the male individual, the eunuch's celibacy was not their choice, and therefore had been achieved too easily. Basil of Caesarea, for example, believed that eunuchs were "chaste without reward, since they owed their condition to the knife."<sup>12</sup> Basil's view exemplifies the idea that eunuchs had cheated at achieving celibacy through the "knife," or castration. Furthermore, any sexual activity or sexual desires of eunuchs was inherently more sinful, as any deviant behaviors would be solely motivated by lust, not for a function of procreation. Ultimately, eunuchs who had faced accidental or involuntary castration by barbarians, physicians, or their masters maintained the ability to rise in rank within the Christian Church.<sup>13</sup> Eunuchs who had been intentionally castrated, however, were rejected by the Church for their intentional insult to their bodies, God's perfect creation.<sup>14</sup> Muddling this distinction, in the later Byzantine empire, many native parents began to castrate their children in order to possibly secure positions for their children within the imperial court.<sup>15</sup> This gray area of intentional versus unintentional likely contributed to increased suspicion and prejudice against eunuch clergy members.<sup>16</sup> Though Christian attitudes surrounding the morality, sexual purity, and faithfulness of eunuchs frequently shifted back and forth, the Church's conflicted

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<sup>11</sup> Ringrose, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Basil the Great, *Letters*, texts and trans. R.J. Defferrari, (London: 1926-1950), quoted in Shaun Tougher, "Eunuchs and Religion," in *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 79.

<sup>13</sup> Tougher, "Eunuchs and Religion," 69.

<sup>14</sup> Ringrose, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Tougher, "Eunuchs and Religion," 74.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 74.

relationship with eunuchism persisted through the centuries. One factor that remained consistent, however, was the secular eunuch's association to the imperial court.

In addition to power through proximity, court eunuchs also acted as confidants to the emperor and secondary sources of the court's power.<sup>17</sup> Essential to their imperial roles, their positions as advisors and messengers required a high level of literacy, and eunuchs as a collective were an extraordinarily educated class. In this manner, eunuchs also retained power through their education and knowledge which allowed them to navigate social and political courts.<sup>18</sup> Notable eunuchs like Basil of Lekapenos (925-985 AD) became extreme forces of power within the Byzantine empire for their intelligence, wit, and ability to "cleverly adjust to the situation of things."<sup>19</sup> Born the bastard son to emperor Romanos I Lekapenos (920-944), Basil was castrated as a child and served his father at court. Rising in the court's favor, Basil ascended to the rank of *protovestiarios* or "first dresser" under emperor Constantine VII (905-959). In addition to occasionally leading military expeditions, Basil successfully realigned his loyalty from one emperor's ascent to another's, consistently accumulating political and military power under emperors Constantine VII, Romanos II, Nikephoros Phokas (912-969), and John Tzimiskes (925-976).<sup>20</sup> Despite the rapid rate of change to the imperial throne, Basil maintained his position as *parakoimomenos*, or "first eunuch" under Constantine, Nikephoros, and John, even being appointed president of the senate by Nikephoros and leading John's military campaigns.<sup>21</sup> Though important individual eunuchs like Basil Lekapenos were exceptions, they

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<sup>17</sup> Ringrose, 40.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, 40.

<sup>19</sup> Leo the Deacon, *Leonis diaconi Caloensis Historiae libri decem*, ed. C. B. Hase (Bonn, 1828), quoted in Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 40.

<sup>20</sup> Ringrose, 130.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 130.



utilized their position to wield significant power, both as alternate sources of imperial power and as independent forces.<sup>22</sup>

Not limited to roles as courtiers, eunuchs assumed positions as commanders and military officials since early Byzantium. For example, eunuch Eutropios led an army against the Huns and rose to oversee the Roman forces in the east before his death in 399.<sup>23</sup> Starting in emperor Justinian I's (527-565) reign and extending onward, eunuchs as commanders and generals became more commonplace. One of the most distinguished examples of eunuch commanders, Narses (478-573) rose to power in the 6<sup>th</sup> century after Justinian I sent Narses to assist and advise general Flavius Belisarius (500-565), the military commander of the empire, on military strategy and command in his conquest of Italy.<sup>24</sup> After Justinian recalled Belisarius in 548, he made Narses the sole commander of the forces in Italy. In Greek historian Agathias' (536-582) evaluation of Narses, Agathias attributes Narses' military success to his cleverness, and that he was never impertinent or vulgar, always civil and unarrogant.<sup>25</sup> Many of Narses' opponents underestimated him, believing his loss of testicles and nature as a eunuch made him submissive, effeminate, and too accustomed to the pleasures of court life. The Goths, for example, assumed Narses to be weak due to his lack of sexual virility and masculinity. Unprepared for his strategical wit on the battlefield, however, the Goths were defeated under Narses' command. Narses' organization, intelligence, and ability to execute large-scale military operations, in addition to his opponents' underestimation of his military prowess, afforded him great success.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Narses was known for his attentiveness, clarity, and ambition, qualities that also

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<sup>22</sup> Ringrose, 129.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 131.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 131.

<sup>25</sup> Agathias, *Agathiae Myrinaei Historiarum libri quinque*, ed. R. Keydell (Berlin: 1967), cited in Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 132.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 132.

benefited him as a loyal, close-advising eunuch to the emperor.<sup>27</sup> Due to the eunuch's inability to procreate, and therefore inability to challenge and seize the imperial throne, Byzantine emperors consistently appointed military power to eunuchs because they posed no threat to the emperor's political authority.<sup>28</sup> Following Justinian's reign in the sixth century, eunuchs continued to occupy important court and military roles through the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Approaching the end of the Byzantine empire, the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204 marked a significant change to the social, political, and cultural institutions of Byzantium even after the recapture of the capital by Michael VIII Palaiologos (1223-1282) in 1261.<sup>29</sup> The tumultuous period of Latin occupation from 1204-1261 saw an unprecedented influx of western immigration to Byzantine territories, and Latin populations and cultural ideas became more reinforced throughout the empire.<sup>30</sup> Latin religious practices and their interpretation of Christian beliefs formed the foundation of social stratification and individual identity during this period, and conquering crusaders enforced rigid hierarchical views onto Byzantine society.<sup>31</sup> Following the restoration of the empire under the Palaiologan dynasty, Latin influences continued to impact the recovering state. Even after the recapture, Byzantine forces focused their concerns on monitoring Western Europe, despite the encroaching Turks and loss of Asia Minor.<sup>32</sup> In addition to the large-scale loss of imperial territories, internal political conflicts and civil wars, and pressure from foreign forces, both the emperor's power and the strength of the imperial system

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<sup>27</sup> Ringrose, 131.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 140.

<sup>29</sup> David Jacoby, "After the Fourth Crusade: The Latin Empire of Constantinople and the Frankish States," in *The Cambridge History of The Byzantine Empire c.500-1492*, ed. Jonathan Shepard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 763.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 769.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 772.

<sup>32</sup> Angeliki E Laiou, "The Palaiologoi and the World Around Them (1261-1400)," in *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire*, ed. Jonathan Shepard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 809.

became increasingly fragmented and decentralized in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>33</sup> All these transforming factors proved to have a significant impact on the power, social perception, and diminishing employment of the Byzantine eunuch until the collapse of the empire.

Under the Palaiologan dynasty, eunuchs held lesser gubernatorial, political, and leadership roles. After the ascension of emperor Alexios I Komnenos (1057-1118), systems of power and delegation began to more closely assemble aristocratic family rule, which differed from the previous nature of Byzantine imperial rule as a “meritocratic government headed by a sacred emperor.”<sup>34</sup> Unlike preceding emperors who feared giving family too much power and relied on a larger group of less-powerful courtiers, this shift set family at the core of political power. Inevitably impacting the standing of eunuchs in imperial settings, the ushering in of aristocratic family rule pushed eunuchs out of their close advising positions. For example, Alexios ended the tradition of the emperor’s *paradykast*, or closest advisor, being a eunuch, and he instead granted this role to his wife and mother.<sup>35</sup> These changing court power dynamics carried through to the Palaiologans after their recapture of Constantinople, who modeled a similar method of family rule. Consequently, from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onward, emperors began to rule increasingly through personal relationships with powerful individuals, which in turn diminished the court’s association to God’s court in Heaven.<sup>36</sup> The divinity and God-like characterization of the emperor became less commonplace, and instead of being imagined as the Ruler of All, “emperors imitated Jesus by suffering on behalf of the Empire because Jesus was now imagined as a savior who suffered for the sins of humanity.”<sup>37</sup> This shift away from more

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 812.

<sup>34</sup> Shaun Tougher, “The Twilight of the Byzantine Eunuch,” in *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 124.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>36</sup> Neville, 90.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 91.

God-like characterizations impacted court eunuchs, as their purpose as earthly reflections of God's angels was no longer as significant. In turn, eunuchs in court settings became more obsolete, as they no longer posed an ideological or religiously illustrative purpose in Byzantine political culture. Overall, the eunuch's position near the emperor in servitude, advisory, and intermediary roles progressively dwindled.

Evidence suggests that eunuchs became less active in roles adjacent to the emperor, and the minimal mentions of eunuchs in source material suggest closer proximity in role and social standing to empresses and noblewomen. For example, a Trapezuntine horoscope for the year 1336 by an anonymous author placed eunuchs in a middle rank near noblewomen, the order playing out as follows: emperors, grandees, grammarians and notaries, prelates and clerics, courtiers and army commanders, abbots and eunuchs, noblewomen, merchants, envoys, actors, simple folk, and people of the marketplace.<sup>38</sup> Because such horoscopes provided societal foundations for class rank, the eunuch's middle position and distance from the emperor reflects their wavering access to political influence. Additionally, the sole mention of eunuchs in the Pseudo-Kodinos, a comprehensive treatise on principal court ceremonies, hierarchies, and procedures, specifies that during coronation ceremonies, the empress leans on two of her closest relatives, but if she lacks relatives, then she leans on two eunuchs.<sup>39</sup> No mention of specific attire or offices for eunuchs in the Pseudo-Kodinos highlights their diminished roles in court, and significantly, the only comment on the eunuch's position references a custom that insinuates a closer relationship between the empress and her eunuchs.<sup>40</sup> Further, their occupation of roles

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<sup>38</sup> Shaun Tougher, "Eunuchs in the Late Byzantine Empire," in *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond*, (London: Classical Press of Wales and Duckworth, 2002), 201.

<sup>39</sup> Pseudo-Kodinos, *Treatise of Offices*, ed. and French trans. J. Verpeaux (Paris: 1976), cited in Shaun Tougher, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 122.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 201.

reserved for close relatives conveys that eunuchs were still considered trustworthy servants and sexually unthreatening to the empress. However, their servitude became increasingly focused not on the most powerful individual in the empire, but on his wife or daughters. The few written accounts of eunuchs in court positions during the Palaiologan period links them to imperial women, often as escorts. For example, nobleman, commander, and emperor from 1347-1354, John Kantakouzenos (1292-1383) affirms that Anne of Savoy (1306-1365) was escorted by eunuchs in her marriage to Andronikos III in 1326.<sup>41</sup> Theodora Kantakouzene (1332-1396), John's daughter, was also attended to by eunuchs during her marriage to Orhan, the emir of Bithynia in 1364. During the *prokypsis*<sup>42</sup> ceremony of Theodora's wedding, sources describe eunuchs kneeling on the bride's platform in her surroundings.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, notable eunuch John of Heraclea began as an attendant to the empress Theodora Palaiologina before his shift towards a religious career as bishop of Nicomedia under Andronikos II.<sup>44</sup> The heightened role of eunuchs as the empress's intermediaries indicates that they still retained their function as mediators between male and female spheres. While eunuchs had always been present as escorts and attendants, sources suggest a transition away from powerful individual eunuchs as commanders and close advisors to the emperor; instead, their nominal historical footprint ties them to the company of imperial women.

In fact, named records of politically important eunuchs after the recapture of Constantinople stop after the 13<sup>th</sup> century, with no mentioned eunuchs being appointed as military commanders, close advisors, or diplomats in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>45</sup> The last

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<sup>41</sup> Kantakouzenos' description of Anne of Savoy's relationship to her eunuch escorts at her wedding provided the foundation for the sole treatise in the Pseudo-Kodinos that mentions a role for eunuchs.

<sup>42</sup> Ceremony where the curtains around the bride's platform were pulled back to reveal her glory.

<sup>43</sup> Frouke Schrijver, "The Court of Women in Early Palaiologan Byzantium (ca. 1260-1350)," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 42, no. 2 (2018): 176.

<sup>44</sup> Tougher, "The Twilight of the Byzantine Eunuch," 123.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 124.

eunuch to command an army during the Palaiologan reign was Andronikos Eonopolites under emperor Michael VIII (1259-1282) in 1281.<sup>46</sup> Eonopolites co-commanded the Byzantine army in a battle against the forces of Charles Anjou in Belgrade; however, he held a very low rank in authority in comparison to the other co-commanders.<sup>47</sup> Later, emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (1282-1328) named Eonopolites as *megas droungarios*<sup>48</sup> and was the last known eunuch to hold this position.<sup>49</sup> Andronikos II also sent eunuch Michael Kallikrenites to mediate with Andronikos III, the emperor's grandson, during the civil wars of the 1320s.<sup>50</sup> However, after the mid 1300s, eunuchs are absent from source material as ambassadors, indicating with high probability that Andronikos II was the last emperor to appoint eunuchs to these diplomatic relations positions. Furthermore, the Pseudo-Kodinos' lack of specification with regards to positions, dignities, or dress for imperial eunuchs implies their insignificance in courts, as it suggests that eunuchs were not noteworthy enough to be distinguished from normal men, or that they were absent entirely.<sup>51</sup> Overall, the mention of named eunuchs and specifications with regards to their court roles became more uncommon in source material beginning in the 13<sup>th</sup> century with the Latin occupation.

While the Palaiologans successfully expelled the Latins from Constantinople in the mid 13<sup>th</sup> century, Latin and Western European political structures and religious ideologies remained entrenched in Byzantine society. During the fifty-seven years of Latin occupation of the capital, eunuchs went unmentioned in historical records, their absence indicating the eunuch's insignificance in Latin courts and political systems.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, Western European

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>47</sup> Frouke Schrijver, "The Early Palaiologan Court (1261-1354)," (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2012).

<sup>48</sup> High rank in Byzantine military command.

<sup>49</sup> Tougher, "The Twilight of the Byzantine Eunuch," 122.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>51</sup> Tougher, "Eunuchs in the Late Byzantine Empire," 201.

<sup>52</sup> Tougher, "The Twilight of the Byzantine Eunuch," 122.

perceptions of eunuchs in Eastern empires were usually negative, and it is probable that these attitudes had an impact on Byzantine outlooks towards the character and morality of eunuchs. Considered an ‘inferior being,’ from Latin perspectives, eunuchs were seen as decadent, corrupt, conniving, and emblematic of barbaric Oriental empires.<sup>53</sup> Earlier Latin sources from the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries express a hostile view of eunuchs, especially in the accounts of Liuprand of Cremona, who wrote about his visits to Constantinople as an envoy.<sup>54</sup> In criticizing emperor Nikephoros II for appointing the command of a fleet to a eunuch, Liuprand states:

How disgraceful, how insulting it is, that these soft, effeminate, long-sleeved, hooded, veiled, lying, neutral-gendered, idle creatures should go clad in purple, while you heroes, strong men, skilled in war, full of faith and love, submissive to God, full of virtues, may not!<sup>55</sup>

Expressing anger at their ambiguous gender characterization, Liuprand found the eunuch’s power insulting to “real,” traditionally masculine men. Though not all Western descriptions of eunuchs were entirely negative, eunuchs contributed to an image of an orientalist, exotic Byzantine empire. Their perceived effeminacy, however, was often used to discredit the power and masculinity of all Byzantine men.<sup>56</sup> With the rise of westerners in Byzantine territories following the Fourth Crusade, the possibility of Western prejudices against eunuchs seeping into Byzantine attitudes presumably contributed to a greater reluctance to employ them in positions of imperial power.

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<sup>53</sup> Neville, 93.

<sup>54</sup> Tougher, “Eunuchs and Religion,” 116.

<sup>55</sup> Liuprand of Cremona, *Relatione de Legatione Constantinopolitana*, ed. Paolo Chiesa (Turnhout, 1998), ed. and trans. Brian Scott (Bristol: 1993), quoted in Shaun Tougher, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 116.

<sup>56</sup> Tougher, “Eunuchs and Religion,” 116.

In a similar vein, Western views of the effeminate, deceitful, and corrupt eunuch likely influenced Byzantine depictions of eunuchs in source material following the Fourth Crusade. Most apparent in vernacular romances, eunuchs are depicted as conniving, overly ambitious, and constantly plotting against their master or mistress. In the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century romance *Kallimachos and Chryssorroi*, eunuchs are characterized as “evil” and “treacherous,” and undermine their female ruler despite their intended roles as trustworthy guards.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, in Constantine Manasses’ romance *Aristandros and Kallithea*, a viper dies after biting the much more poisonous eunuch: “The viper tasted blood much more poisonous than hers, [blood] that completely overpowered her death-bringing venom.”<sup>58</sup> The snake heavily associated with evilness, deceit, and trickery, Manasses’ portrayal of the venomous eunuch exemplifies their sinful and suspicious characterization. The increasingly unfavorable attitude towards eunuchs in language and narrative sources possibly contributed to an overall reluctance to use them, as these sources often cast aspersions on their loyalty and trustworthiness. It is important to note, however, that unfavorable characterizations of eunuchs had always been present, and this was not entirely new to the 13<sup>th</sup> through 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Depictions of eunuchs in source material from the Byzantine era had never been entirely positive, and negative images of eunuchs can be seen throughout the empire’s history. Therefore, one cannot attribute negative characterizations of eunuchs in later vernacular romances entirely to Western attitudes heightened after the Latin occupation. Moreover, narrative sources from the time also included positive descriptions of eunuchs. For example, eunuch Vetanos in the

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<sup>57</sup> *Kallimachos and Chryssorroi*, trans. G. Betts, *Three Medieval Greek Romances. Velthandros and Chrysandza, Kallimachos and Chryssorroi, Livistros and Rodamni* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 80.

<sup>58</sup> Constantine Manasses, *Aristandros and Kallithea*, ed. Otto Mazal (Vienna: 1967), cited in Shaun Tougher, *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond*, (London: Classical Press of Wales and Duckworth, 2002), 206.



romance *Livistros and Rhodamne* was portrayed as a faithful, honorable, and trustworthy servant.<sup>59</sup>

Just how the language and cultural shifts that may have impacted the standing of eunuchs cannot solely explain the eunuch's decline, the same can be said of the transition to aristocratic family rule after Alexios Komnenos. While they did diminish, politically powerful court eunuchs did not entirely vanish after this shift. This is exemplified through emperor Andronikos' continued appointments of eunuchs such as Eonopolites and Kallikrenites to significant military and diplomatic roles. Additionally, one could argue that an increase in family rule—the power of the home—would have placed more importance on eunuchs as guards and servants of the aristocratic household.<sup>60</sup> Ultimately, while the power, influence, and position of Byzantine eunuchs clearly diminished, they never completely disappeared from the social and court life of Byzantium.

After an investigation into the decline of the Byzantine eunuch, historical evidence and scholarly interpretation mark an initial shift away from the eunuch's political and social prominence following the transition to aristocratic family rule under the Komnenos dynasty and due to the lasting impacts of the Fourth Crusade on Byzantine culture. A newly emerging emphasis on concentrating imperial power in the aristocratic family pushed many eunuchs out of the emperor's close surroundings. With their positions at the emperor's side now occupied, eunuchs became increasingly associated with empresses and noblewomen. Though significant through their sphere of influence, empresses—like eunuchs before—were secondary sources of power to the emperor. Comparatively, fewer eunuchs rose to military and political prominence,

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<sup>59</sup> *Livistros and Rhodamne*, ed. J.A. Lambert (Amsterdam: 1935), cited in Shaun Tougher, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 124.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

with the last individually powerful Byzantine eunuch of his kind being Andronikos Eonopolites in the 13th century. Because the diminishing status of the eunuch corresponded with the Latin occupation of Constantinople and increased Western European thought in Byzantium, it is highly likely that negative Western attitudes implicating eunuchs with barbarism, orientalism, and effeminacy contributed to their fading even after the Palaiologoi recaptured the capital. Additionally, negative portrayals of eunuchs in vernacular romances and narrative materials may have corrupted Byzantine society and the imperial court's outlook on the loyalty and morality of eunuchs. Though the Byzantine eunuch's demise seemed to parallel the empire's own collapse, eunuchs remained a presence in political institutions, albeit an increasingly silent one. One factor limiting this exploration's research was the lack of primary source material from eunuchs or pertaining to their importance. Because eunuchs never entirely disappeared from Byzantine courts, the possibility that accessible sources omit or do not present the eunuch's full story persists.

Despite their decline, Byzantine eunuchs were able to gain great prominence and influence while simultaneously existing outside the gender binary for much of Byzantium's history. In fact, their gender ambiguity even afforded them uniquely powerful positions, whether that be in cultural, court, or religious spheres. Though their public perception remained divided—praised for purity, celibacy, and associations to the divine while also denigrated for supposed shiftiness, corruption, and weakness—eunuchs formed an integral part of royal courts, religious hierarchies, military commands, foreign policy relations, and imperial palace life, among other institutions. Ultimately, an exploration into Byzantine eunuchs proves inspirational in reminding historians to broaden their scope beyond social constructions of gender dichotomies in conversations about the past, present, and future understandings of gender.

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