



“FLUIDITY OF GENDER” IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES


NICMCR CONFERENCE

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NORMA AND NATURA

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- ▶ The term *norma* extends figuratively to refer to a rule or precept (of practice or behavior)
 - ▶ The question for further research is whether *norma* was used in relationship to sexuality or sexual behavior in the Middle Ages
 - ▶ Recent studies suggest that the determining term for sexuality is *natura*, with sexual activity judged according to whether it is natural or against nature



SCRIPTURES, CHURCH FATHERS AND THEOLOGIANS on gender

- ▶ “The women shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment; for all that do so are an abomination unto the Lord thy God” (Deuteronomy 22:5)
- ▶ St. Paul: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)
- ▶ Philo of Judaea: the male is superior to female because he represents the more rational parts of the souls, while the female represents the less rational; the easiest way for women to approach the male level of rationality is for them to deny their sexuality and remain virgins (*Questions and Answers on Genesis*, trans. Marcus, London 1961)
- ▶ St. Jerome: “as long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man.” (*Commentarius in Epistolam ad Ephasios*, PL XVI:657)
- ▶ St. Ambrose: “She who believes progresses to perfect manhood, to the measure of the adulthood of Christ.” (*Expositionis in Evangelium secundum Lucum*, PL XV:1938)
- ▶ St. Thomas Aquinas: “...woman is naturally subject to man” (*Summa Theologica*, New York 1947, 1, p. 92)

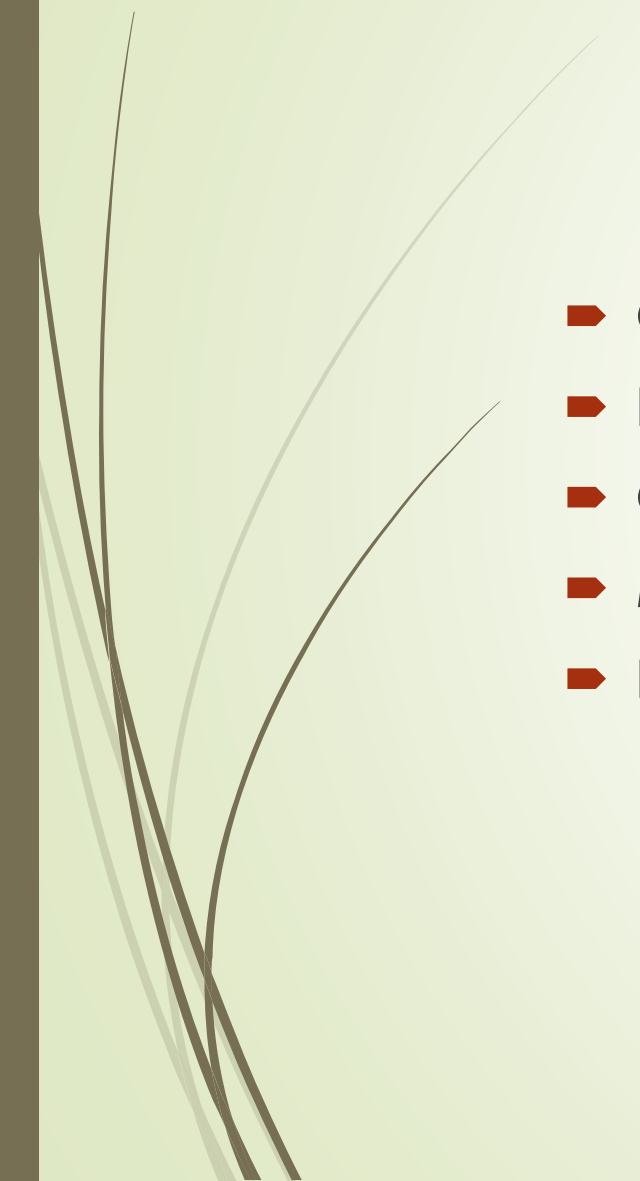


OLD TESTAMENT

- ▶ The only general prohibitions against male homosexuality in Hebrew scripture appear in Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 (in addition, Deut. 23:18 prohibits male and female cult prostitution)
- ▶ A passage of the Holiness Code in Leviticus, dated as postexilic, and was probably written in Judaea, not in Babylonia



ASCETICISM

- ▶ Greek and Roman philosophers
 - ▶ Early Christian ascetic literature
 - ▶ Gnostic writings
 - ▶ Monastic communities
 - ▶ Dualist heresies
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VIRGINAL SPIRIT: ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION – *anima vs spiritus*

- In the Gnostic texts (The Naassenes, The Valentinians)
- The Gospel of Thomas: “I will draw her (Mary Magdalene) male so that she also may become a living spirit like you males. For every woman who has become male will enter the kingdom of Heaven” (Jean Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics: An Introduction to the Gnostic Coptic Manuscripts discovered at Chenoboskion, with an English Translation and Critical Evolution of “The Gospel according to Thomas”* [New York, 1960], p. 370)
- Female transvestite saints can be seen as the female counterparts to those self-emasculated “Eunuchs for God” (Matt. 19:12)




CHALLENGING THE ESTABLISHED ORDER

- Transvestism spread in the Eastern church and represented a challenge to the established ecclesiastical and social order, similarly to heresy
- It was formally banned at the Synod of Gangra in ca. 350
- The Theodosian Code (in 435): Prohibition of female tonsure (12.2.17)
- Danger of the status loss and of the crossing of the boundaries
- Differently to male cross-dressing, female cross-dressing was tolerated



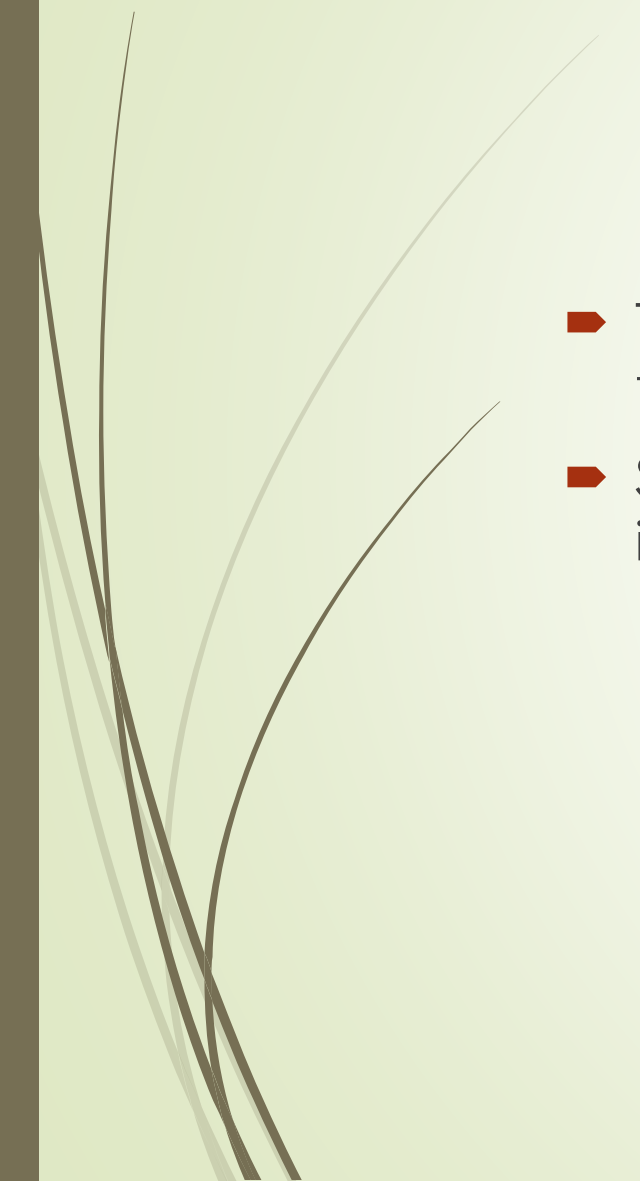
SYNOD OF GANGRA (ca. 350)

The Synod condemned:

- ▶ Women wearing men's clothing under the pretense of asceticism
 - ▶ Women cutting off their hair "from pretended asceticism"
 - ▶ Although merely a local synod, its decisions were later ratified by the Council of Chalcedon (451, the Fourth Ecumenical Council), which bore high importance for the early history of Christianity
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PATRISTICS

- The Patristic literature of the 4th and early 5th centuries shifted the focus by making virginity a major component of personal purity
 - Sexual abstinence replaced martyrdom as the prescribed means of imitating Christ, *imitatio Christi*
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HOMOSEXUALITY seen through the lenses of the Early Christian theologians

- Early Christian opposition to homosexuality reflected a broader rejection of sexual experiences which did not lead to procreation within marriage
- The even-handed treatment of heterosexual and homosexual offenses in the writings of the early church fathers (St. Basil of Nyssa, St. Gregory of Nyssa)



COUNCIL OF ELVIRA (309)

- ▶ The Council of Elvira was the first council to formulate canons for the regulation of sexuality
 - ▶ The one dealing with homosexuality specified that men who engaged in sexual relations with boys should not be admitted to communion even at death
 - ▶ Other canons specified the same rigorous penalties for adulterous women and women involved in prostitution
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HERETICS AND SEXUAL NORMS

- ▶ Homosexuality as such was not viewed as heresy, and heretics were not identified with homosexuals, but various heretical groups were accused of violating the norms of “sexual morality”, including homosexual relations
- ▶ This accusation was especially aimed at the Cathars (and members of other dualist movements), who refused marriage and procreation – and were consequently charged with preferring homosexual relations
- ▶ By these denunciations the heretics and homosexuals were often brought into one general aggroupation of sinners
- ▶ The opposition to homosexuals was bound to law, but they were not executed, as were the heretics
- ▶ By all means: heresy represented a greater sin than homosexuality



JUSTINIAN'S LEGISLATION (r.527-565)

- ▶ Homosexuality threatens not the individual sinner but the entire community
- ▶ *Novellae*: 77 and 141

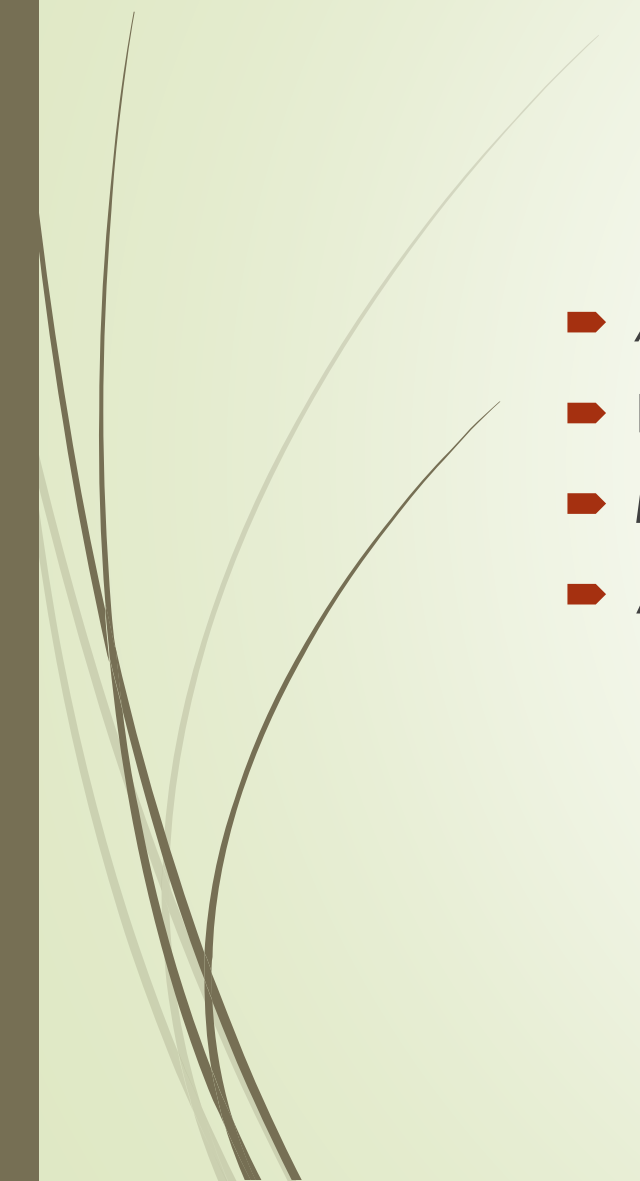


LEGISLATION OF LEO III (717-741)

- The *Ecloga* of Leo III on sexual crimes treats homosexuality among other punishable sexual acts, such as, among other:
- Adultery
- Fornication
- Incest




BLURRED BOUNDARIES

- *Adelphopoia*
 - Homoerotic
 - *Homophilia*
 - Aristotle's definition of friends: "two souls in one body"
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HOMOSEXUALITY IN CLERICAL CONTEXT

- The *Liber Gomorrhianus* (“Book of Gomorrah”) is a book authored by the Benedictine monk St. Peter Damian during the Gregorian Reformation, in ca. 1051
 - The issue of homosexuality within the clergy is deeply related to the dignity of the priesthood
 - Damian believed that the licentious behavior of the clergy undermined ecclesiastical authority and was beginning to provoke outbursts of violence from an outraged laity, which threatened civil order
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APPENDIX

TRANSVESTING IN PURSUIT OF ASSEXUAL VIRGINITY



TRANSVESTING FEMALE SAINTS (from the 2nd century onwards): bottom-lines

- ▶ THE THEME HAS ARISEN IN THE AMBIANCE OF THE EARLIEST CHRISTIAN ASCETICISM (*Historia lausiaca* and *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*)
- ▶ RE-APPROPRIATING THE ANGELIC ASSEXUALITY AND THE ANGELIC STATE OF PERPETUAL VIRGINITY
- ▶ PERFORMING A VIOLENT RUPTURE WITH A FORMER MODE OF EXISTENCE MADE IN THE SERVICE OF AN IDEAL OF ANDROGYNOUOS PERFECTION
- ▶ STATUS OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN AS AN *AEIPARTHENOS* – PERPETUAL VIRGIN: the Council of Ephesus in 431, upon which Mary was officially proclaimed Mother of God, *Theotokos*. Afterwards, in 553, the Second Council of Constantinople attributed the title *Aeiparthenos* to the Virgin, defining her as the Perpetual Virgin, and it was upon the Council of Lateran in 649 that Pope Martin I proclaimed the threefold character of Mary's virginity – before, during, and after the birth of Christ



HAGIOGRAPHICAL TRANSVESTISM: THE NARRATIVE SCHEME

- For different reasons, mainly in the aim of preserving the virginity, threatened by a marital union (or after having become a widow), a young girl or a woman decides to leave her family, put on the male clothes, and join the monastic community
- Usually it is only at her death that her true identity is being revealed
- The narrative is thus constructed with the following elements: escape – transvesting and ascetic life – discovery and acknowledgment of the real identity
- She was led by the deep urge to discover the angelic perfection
- Sociologically observing, there may have also been material difficulties to find a female convent at that precise moment




TRANSVESTED FEMALE SAINTS

- ▶ Saints Hilaria, Euphrosyna, Eugenia, Apollinaria, Antonina, Theodora, Pelagia, Matrona, Glaphyra, Euphemiana, Anastasia, Susanna, Anna, Marina
- ▶ Differently to St. Onesima, they were mistaken for eunichs, but in Onesima's case, the hermits knew that Onesima was "by nature a woman, not a man"



REPENTANT PROSTITUTES

- ▶ Pelagia was a prostitute in Antioch. She converted to Christianity. Not wishing to be identified with her past, Pelagia left Antioch dressed as a male, and found refuge on Mount Olivet, where she lived as a man known as Pelagius who was admired for his asceticism and holiness. It was only after her death that her gender was revealed
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ST. EUGENIA (end of 2nd century)

- ▶ Eugenia was a daughter of Philip, prefect of Alexandria under emperor Commodus, and received the finest liberal education in Latin, Greek and philosophy
- ▶ Although she has been raised by pagan parents, she became Christian in spirit
- ▶ She visited Christians living in the suburbs of Alexandria
- ▶ Since the bishop admitted no women to his community, Eugenia disguised herself as a man and approached the monastery. Eugenia was brought to the bishop.

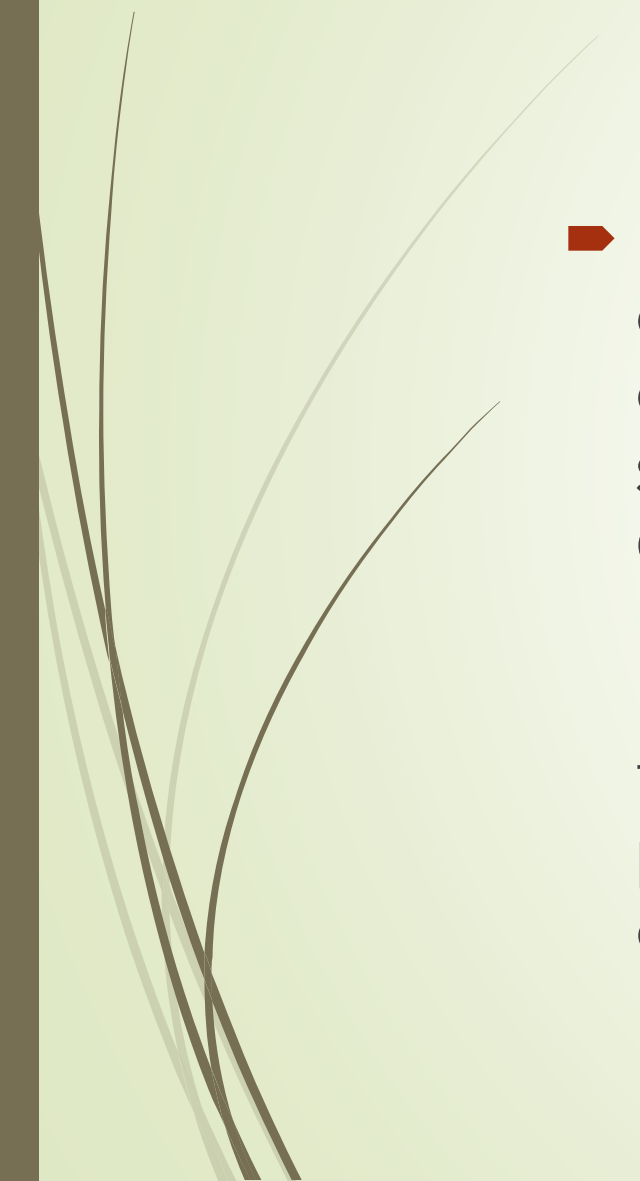



ST. EUGENIA – continued -

- The bishop, warned by a dream, allowed her to remain in the monastery in the male attire
- Eugenia became famous for performing miraculous cures
- A lady named Melanthia fell in love with her, and Eugenia rejected her advances
- Melanthia, enraged, accused Eugenia for misconduct
- The governor ordered the Christians put to tortures, but Eugenia, chained, swore her innocence before the prefect of the town (Eugenia's father)
- Eugenia finally removed her disguise and revealed her identity, her entire family was baptized and a new emperor, Severus, remitted harshness towards Christians



ST. EUGENIA'S SPEECH

- ▶ "...For so great is the power of his (Christ's) name, that even women who stand in fear of it achieve the dignity of men; nor can either sex claim a superiority in faith, since the blessed apostle Paul, the instructor of all Christians, says that in the Lord there exists no distinction between male and female, for we are all one in Christ. His rule I have wholeheartedly embraced and out of the faith I have in Christ, not wishing to be a woman but to preserve an immaculate virginity, I have steadfastly acted as a man."
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St. MATRONA's cross-dressing

- ▶ When her trans-dressing was revealed, she said: “When I kissed the brethren I looked on them as angels of God...I did not press the lips of men but of impassive (ἀπαθέσιν) beings”.
- ▶ Impassivity (ἀπάθεια)



ANNA EUPHEMIANA, AN EUNUCH-WIFE (END OF THE 8TH CENTURY)

- ▶ Anna was born in Byzantium, as a child of a pious deacon. At the death of her parents, her grand-mother married her to a pious man, but her uncle protested and was against her marriage, intending a divine service for her
- ▶ Her husband later died, as she was pregnant with their child. She left the child to her relatives and decided to take up the ascetic life and went to the monastery, after having put on male clothes, and changed her name to Euphemianos. The abbot of the monastery received her and permitted her to stay with them
- ▶ Later she started to produce miracles and miraculous healings, of which was even the Patriarch of Constantinople informed and allowed her to build another monastery to which she left
- ▶ After her true sex was revealed, she continued with her ascetic life



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