Some Disputes Surrounding Masculinity as a Legitimate Category of Historical Inquiry in the Study of Late Antiquity

Michael Edward Stewart

Abstract:

This paper examines the growth and some of the disputes surrounding "masculinity" as a legitimate category for both social and more traditional scholars seeking to understand Late Antiquity. It shows how investigations of masculinity often serve a political purpose. Some researchers delve into a topic such as "homosexuality" as a way of revealing how particular societies such as ancient Greece and Rome had greater tolerance towards same-partner sex than their modern counterparts. This agenda helps to explain why many studies on Late Antique masculinity focus on men as sexual beings. It might also account for the reluctance by some academics to accept social history as a legitimate historical tool.

If critics of social history have been correct in pointing out the dangers of letting our modern obsession with sexuality "cloud" our view of the past, it is just as vital to point out the androcentric nature of many ancient cultures in comparison to many modern western cultures. Indeed, living in a world of increasing gender equality can hinder our understanding of the ancient Romans. Indeed, one cannot understand the Roman past without understanding the central role that ideologies of masculinity played in this society.

Keywords: Late Antiquity, social history, masculinity

Geç Antik Dönem Çalışmalarında Tarihsel Sorgulamanın Geçerli Bir Kategorisi Olarak Erkekliği Çevreleyen Tartışmalar

Michael Edward Stewart

Özet:

Bu makale, geç Antik dönemi anlamaya çalışan hem sosyal bilimlerden hem de daha geleneksel disiplinlerden araştırmacılar için geçerli bir kategori olarak "erkekliği" çevreleyen bazı tartışmaları ve bu tartışmaların gelişimini inceler. makale özünde erkekliğe dair sorgulamaların nasıl politik bir amaca hizmet ettiğini ortaya sermektedir. bazı araştırmacılar, eşcinsellik gibi bir konuyu, Antik Yunan ve Roma gibi uygarlıkların nasıl da çağımız uygarlıklarından daha büyük bir hoşgörüye sahip olduğunu göstermek amacı ile didik didik ederler. Bu tavır, niçin geç Antik dönem erkekliğine dair bir çok çalışmanın erkekleri temelde cinsel varlıkları olarak ele aldığını açıkları bu durum aynı zamanda, bazı akademisyenlerin toplumsal tarihi, geçerli bir tarihsel araç olarak kabul etmedeki isteksizliğini de açıklar.
Şayet toplumsal tarihi eleştirenler, cinsellikle ilgili modern saplantımızın geçmişe yönelik görüşümüzü "gölgelemesine" izin vermenin tehlikelerine işaret ederken haklı iseler, günümüz modern batılı kültürleri ile kıyaslandığında birçok antik kültürün insan merkezli doğasını işaret etmek de aynı derecede hayatidir. Giderek artan düzeyde cinsiyet eşitliğinin olduğu bir dünyada yaşamak antik Romayı anlamamıza engel olabilir. Aslına bakılırsa, Roma toplumu içinde erkeklik ideolojilerinin oynadığı merkezi rolü anlamadan Roma tarihini anlamak mümkün değildir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Geç Antik dönem, toplumsal tarih, erkeklik

Sometimes, when I mention that I study "masculinity," or use the term in an abstract or paper, certain scholars can become somewhat defensive, or in the worst instances, downright dismissive. Such reactions should not surprise. Certainly, there continues to be a sharp divide in the study of Late Antiquity between those considered "traditionalists" and those labelled "social historians." Despite one's own views on the topic, one tends to be categorised as belonging to either one group or the other. Attacks launched from both sides frequently utilise harsh rhetoric. For example, in his recent work on the sixth-century Byzantine historian Procopius, Anthony Kaldellis scolds social and cultural historians for their supposed lack of understanding of the ancient Roman world and its literature (13-15). Some of this criticism is warranted. Indeed, much of my recent work has been devoted to balancing what I believe has been an overemphasis on sexuality in much of the recent scholarship on Late Roman and Early Byzantine masculinity. This paper takes a narrower look at both the growth of masculinity as a tool of historical inquiry and some of the disputes surrounding this methodology as a legitimate category for studying ancient Rome and early Byzantium.

The Study of Men as a Gender

In the historiographical tradition, one's gender was perceived as firmly rooted in biology; "one was born man or woman" (Pohl 23). Scholars long regarded the borders between man and woman as firm and impassable. In the past thirty years, this paradigm has changed. Scholars have shown convincingly that notions like gender are susceptible to various interpretations and instability (Searle 41-45). Therefore, the cultural environment that one grows up in plays a fundamental role in shaping one's perception of the world around one.

The study of men as a gender developed in the wake of advances made in women's studies in the past forty years. Linked indelibly with the social upheaval of this time, few topics in contemporary academia

have gained as much focus or generated as much enmity. Gender studies emerged from the women's movement of the 1960s-80s. Reacting to the dominance of men in historical writing, these works originally aimed to give women a place in the evaluation of the past (Smith 1-5). Scholarship in this area suggested that the degraded social role that women played in much of history remained closely connected with the idealisation of the "universalised masculine." While many cultures considered the masculine as essential and perfect, they saw the feminine as insignificant and flawed (Kuefler 2-3).

Somewhat ironically, building on the methods of these feminist scholars, researchers began to explore the construction of masculinity throughout history. Several of these studies noted that women represent only one of many groups that have been marginalised in the historical record. Many cultures— ancient and modern—have treated ethnic minorities, slaves, and members of the lower classes as the "equivalent to women because they were subordinated men" (Williams 135). While scholars like the philosopher Judith Butler recognise that men and women seldom make up homogeneous social groups, she suggests, "the feminine is always the outside and the outside is always feminine" (48).

Despite critiques of his work by some feminist scholars and classicists, the innovative research of the French philosopher Michel Foucault remains fundamental for modern works considering masculinity in the ancient Greek, Roman, and early Byzantine worlds. Foucault's proposal that concepts like sexuality both change over time and remain intimately connected with the symbiotic power relationships amongst all members of a society has influenced a generation of scholars (Behr 4-15). Additionally, his work showed that the old contrast of the sexually promiscuous "fun loving" pagan versus the chaste and "repressed" Christian was deeply flawed (Use of Pleasure 32). He pointed out as well, that ancient Greek and Roman forms of sexuality differed from modern concepts; Foucault argued that sexual orientation was an invention of nineteenth-century Western Europeans (History of Sexuality 43). In a viewpoint particularly embraced by gender scholars, for Foucault, masculine ideology remained at the core of ancient Greek

and Roman morality. These systems, he explained, represented "an elaboration of masculine conduct carried out from the viewpoint of men in order to give form to *their* behaviour" (Use of Pleasure 22-23).

Feminist scholars who continue to criticise the methodology of Foucault and/or the study of masculinity in general seem uncomfortable embracing a field that places men at the forefront of historical inquiry once more (Conway 9). Accounts of aristocratic men certainly dominate the historical record. So then how, and perhaps more importantly, why study men as a gender? Unlike the obstacles that stand in the way of scholars trying to find a "historical voice" for marginalised groups like women or the lower classes, the sources for the analysis of masculine ideologies are readily available. Nevertheless, this very abundance makes finding "real" men in history somewhat problematic. When one looks at the portraits of men found in the Roman and the early Byzantine periods, for example, quite often only stylised images emerge. This point is particularly relevant when examining the classicising and the ecclesiastical historians of the Late Roman and the early Byzantine eras. Similar to contemporary celluloid action-heroes and villains, the men depicted in these accounts frequently display rhetorical notions of ideal and non-ideal masculine conduct, producing men who often seem more like cartoon-characters than genuine human beings. Nonetheless, heroism itself serves as a sort of hyper-masculinity. What one finds in many modern gender studies of the ancient world is primarily a "public" view of codes of ideal manly conduct. Yet, just as the 1980s action-hero Rambo tells one about American notions of masculinity , foreigners, and the political environment of the Reagan era itself, the heroes, villains, and barbarians found in the ancient literature divulge significant aspects of the Roman and the Byzantine value systems. This popularity does not mean that everyone in these cultures adhered to the models of manliness and unmanliness found in these works. I would argue, however, that like the themes of hyper-masculinity and unmanliness seen in modern movies, these writings appealed to a diverse audience, and therefore reflect the values—of not only the hierarchy of these Empires, but also of large segments of their populations.

Of course, dissonances remained between men's expected social roles and the actual personalities of Roman and early Byzantine men. In the real world men consistently failed to live up to the stringent masculine ideal articulated in the literary sources of the day. The nature of the source material means that the private world of these men remains mostly hidden. Just like their female counterparts, the cultural construction of "man" was often insufficient to contain individual "men" (Cooper; Kuefler 2). I would suggest, however, that at times we may get a glimpse beneath the cracks and see the different ways these men "proved" their manliness.

Several other challenges confront the researcher attempting to separate the "real man" from the "constructed" one. Perhaps the most critical question is how does one define or study a topic as seemingly ambiguous as masculinity? By masculinity, scholars do not refer generally to the anatomical or biological features of the male body, which remain relatively constant among a range of societies and over time, but to the variety of meanings that these cultures place or have placed on persons with a male body. Therefore, a man may display "feminine" traits, yet remain biologically male. The "feminine" trait itself, however, may be transient and open to a wide range of interpretations. Behaviours that one culture, group or era labels as "masculine" might be called "womanly," "unmanly," or effeminate" (all three of these expressions mean essentially the same thing) in another society, group or period (Montserrat 153-58). For instance, excessive sexual encounters with women, which may be seen as a sign of manliness in contemporary western culture, commonly indicated "unmanliness" in the Roman world (Williams 143-44).

Scholars call this concept the social construction of gender. Simply defined, social construction means that one's knowledge of objects or ideas develops by interacting with the surrounding social order. Therefore, the cultural environment that one grows up in plays a fundamental role in shaping one's perception of a flexible notion such as masculinity. As John Searle argues, a twenty-dollar note is by its nature a worthless piece of paper; it holds no intrinsic value except the worth a

culture places upon it. It gains value (cultural meaning) because people communally experience money as having worth, and so come to attach value to it (41-45). Scholars apply this same argument to subjective constructions like masculinity and ethnicity. This is not to say that all human characteristics are socially constructed. This point is particularly true of sexual orientation, which may be non-voluntary and biologically orientated; nonetheless, how a culture understands and defines sexual orientation is socially constructed (Partner). It is more challenging to ascertain the value systems of individuals who act outside the established boundaries of conventional society. Masculine ideology is not always defined by a dominant paradigm, but can also be shaped by an individual's will and choice, which may be created through the effect of subcultures or other social groupings. Modern academics label these competing ideologies as subordinate masculinities (Connell; Karras 17-22).

Disputes

Investigations of masculinity often serve a political purpose. Some researchers delve into a topic such as "homosexuality" as a way of revealing how particular societies such as ancient Greece and Rome had greater tolerance towards same-partner sex than their modern counterparts. By showing that cultural views on masculinity are constantly evolving, these scholars seek to reveal how and why Christianity established a "hostile" ideology that condemned homosexuality, banned women in the clergy, and in the West prohibited the marriage of priests (e.g. Boswell; Jordan). By using historical texts against the Catholic Church, these activists hope to influence the Church's future platform towards these issues. They contend that the Church instituted these policies in reaction to the social concerns of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, and for that reason, its stance on these matters should be adapted to reflect a more inclusive and more progressive modern world (Smith 3-4). For these academics, the study of

history provides the opportunity to not only see the way things were, but also a chance for glimpsing the way things might be (Kuefler 297).

This agenda helps to explain why many studies on Late Antique masculinity focus on men as sexual beings. It might also account for the reluctance by some academics to accept social history as a legitimate historical tool. As we saw in the introduction, some of the criticism is scathing. The respected Byzantine scholar, Warren Treadgold, is another sceptic. He writes, "Byzantine thinking had little in common with today's Postmodernism, which looks for truth in panegyrics and saints' lives, for bias in historiography, everywhere for sexuality, and nowhere for religious faith" (preface 14). Even Peter Brown's masterful *Body and Society* has been accused of portraying bodies as predominantly sexual vessels (Louth). As John Behr warns, our modern preoccupation with sexuality has caused researchers like Brown to overstate the importance of this issue for our Late Antique writers (11-15).

Other critics of social history have accused many of its practitioners of using anachronistic methods in their research. In the field of ancient sexualities and masculinity, the debate between those labelled as Essentialists and Social Constructionists has been particularly visceral. The sceptics claim that many investigations on sexual difference in the Greco-Roman world are flawed because they project modern perceptions of sexuality and gender onto Greek and Roman societies where these concepts held greatly different meanings. Moreover, many classicists have frowned on the "gendered" approach to understanding ancient Rome and Greece. These critics suggest that much of the work by social historians has misunderstood, mistranslated, or stretched the meanings of important Greek and Latin terminology to support their theories. They maintain, as well, that many of these studies by social historians have focused too heavily on rhetorical sources and too narrowly on private aspects of masculinity, particularly sexuality (Behr; Kuefler, "Boswell Thesis," 1-25). In response, some social historians have reversed the charges by accusing their detractors of misinterpreting their work, and of using out-dated and anachronistic methods themselves. We find an example of this counter-attack in Bruce O'Brian's

contention that historians have always looked to the past to both illuminate contemporary concerns and to find "themselves." He suggests that no historian can achieve complete detachment. He and other social historians submit that at least they are aware of the dangers of interpreting the past through modern eyes (172-74).

Despite the acrimony at times between the two schools, scholars in the past fifteen years have attempted to reconcile the disparate methods preferred by classicists and social historians. Political events in the first decade of the twenty-first century led to an increased awareness that concepts like heroism and manliness mean different things in different societies and change over time. The aftermath of the attacks on the twin towers in New York city on September 11, 2001, in particular, saw an increased interest by academics on how ancient thinkers formulated the abstract concepts of manliness and courage (Rabieh 2-4; Sluiter and Rosen 1-2). These investigations have combined traditional historical, philological, and archaeological analysis with gender and socio-linguistics studies to explore Roman masculinity by examining the semantic range and gendered meanings of terms and concepts like *virtus* ("virtue," "manliness," courage") and ἀρετή ("goodness," "excellence," "virtue"). Most importantly, they have shown the fluidity of these concepts by revealing how "gendered" vocabulary like *virtus*, ἀνδρεία ("manliness," "manly spirit," "courage") and ἀρετή have shifted meanings over time and, at times, meant different things to different people according to the context they were used (Sluiter and Rosen 1-4). Other researchers based in classics have borrowed some of the techniques developed in gender history to investigate how masculine ideologies governed the public speech and behaviour of Roman and early Byzantine men (e.g. Edwards; Gleason; Williams; Foxhall and Salmon; Hobbs; Burrus; Kuefler).

The disputes concerning the validity of social history and the limitations of classical studies for understanding historical shifts represent just one front in the larger debates circulating in the field of Late Roman and early Byzantine history. At the heart of many of these arguments lie long-established controversies concerning the end of the

classical world, the advent of Christianity, and "the fall of the Roman Empire." In the historiographical tradition, these upheavals brought about both a decline in civilisation and the triumph of superstition over rationality (Goffart 230). The past forty years, however, has witnessed a surge of interest in seeing Late Antiquity as its own unique historical epoch. At the vanguard of this movement, Peter Brown's, *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971), presented a more optimistic vision of the breakup of the Roman Empire. Instead of seeing this period as an era of decay, leading to the "backward" Greek Byzantine Empire and the barbarised kingdoms of Western Europe, Brown and his followers present Late Antiquity as a complex period of cultural germination. These researchers have argued that developments in this era—particularly the intellectual growth and spread of Christianity—have helped to shape the modern as well as the medieval world.

Because of the increased focus on this era, in the past forty years, the period known formerly as the "Dark Ages," has become somewhat 'brighter." Scholars have reworked the model of Western Europe gradually crumbling into ignorance as the Empire retreated to the East and "barbarian" peoples flooded into the West. As we have seen above, this paradigm shift brought about a fecund period for Late Antique social historians, and in particular, those interested in uncovering ancient masculinities. In the past few years, however, several studies have questioned this more optimistic vision of the end of the Ancient World and the advent of the Early Middle Ages. So too have these works criticised what they see as an over-reliance on the newer historical methods preferred by social historians (e.g. Heather; Ward-Perkins). As the historian James O'Donnell remarks, there continues to be a division among those scholars who embrace innovative historical techniques, and those who largely reject them. He writes:

Followers of Peter Brown and Averil Cameron tend to focus on the eastern half of the Empire and see late antiquity not as merely the end of the classical world, but as the first period of the middle ages. They tend to show more interest in religious and cultural history, and are open to methods used in other humanistic disciplines. Their debunkers prefer

military and political history to the religious, and overall tend to distrust theory (O'Donnell).

My own research strives to use methodologies from both schools (Stewart). It integrates disparate secondary and primary sources to create a greater sense of how early Byzantine secular and ecclesiastical writers linked representations of military valour to their notions of the qualities that made up "true" manliness. Like many historians, my environment has influenced me. Indeed, the events surrounding 9/11/ and the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq provided me with the original impetus for trying to understand how a demilitarised segment of a population could embrace militarism and men's martial virtues as a type of hyper-manliness. Living in the United States in this period, I found myself bombarded on a nearly daily basis by a myriad of visual and literary images promoting the soldier's life as the epitome of the manly life. Even more interesting, were the various ways non-soldiers both publically admired and sought to connect themselves with the martial legacy of the state and the manly identity of its soldiers. The image of a President, who had avoided fighting in Vietnam as a youth, draping himself in manly martial imagery made me ponder the ways similarly non-martial emperors from the Later Roman and early Byzantine Empire, may have promoted their own martial and masculine ideology. In the highly patriotic world of post 9/11 America, the field of battle seemed to provide a realm where soldiers—who hailed largely from the less privileged classes—could establish a raw manliness superior to that of powerful executives, politicians, famous actors, and professional athletes. While appreciating the dangers of making anachronistic comparisons between a modern state like the United States and an ancient one like the early Byzantine, it made me consider the ways and some of the reasons why civilian members of a population could, not just admire, but seem to share in a "group" masculinity shaped by the exploits of a relatively small percentage of men.

I will close this paper by returning to the debate introduced in the introduction. If critics of scholarship examining ancient masculinities have been correct in pointing out the dangers of letting our modern obsession with sexuality "cloud" our view of the past, it is just as vital to point out the androcentric nature of Rome and Byzantium in comparison to many modern western cultures. I would argue that living in a world of increasing gender equality can hinder our understanding of the ancient Romans and the early Byzantines. Unquestionably many ancient Roman and Byzantine men from the ruling classes valued "true" manliness as a cultural ideal. Indeed, hegemonic masculine ideologies disseminated the views of a political elite intent on justifying and protecting the existing political order. While the past must always remain a "foreign country," familiarising ourselves with these ancient masculinities can provide us not only with a better understanding of ancient Rome and Byzantium, but also offer us essential insights into our own era.

Works Cited

Behr, John. *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print.

Boswell, John. *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Ear to the Fourteenth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. Print

Brown, Peter. *The Body and Society*: *Men Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1988. Print.

—.*The World of Late Antiquity AD 150-750.* London: Thames and Hudson, 1971. Print.

Burrus, Virginia. "*Begotten, Not Made": Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000. Print.

Butler, Judith. "Bodies That Matter," *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. Print.

Conway, Colleen. *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinities*. Oxford: Oxford Univeristy Press, 2008. Print.

Cooper, Kate. *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealised Womanhood in Late Antiquity.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996. Print.

Edwards, Catherine. *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure.* Trans. Robert Hurley. Vol. 2. New York: Vintage, 1985. Print.

—. *The History of Sexuality: The Care of Self*. Trans. Robert Hurley. Vol. 3. New York: Vintage, 1988. Print.

Foxhall, Lin and John Salmon. *When Men were Men: Masculinity, Power and Identity in the Classical Tradition.* London: Routledge, 1998. Print.

Gleason, Maude. *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995. Print.

Goffart, Walter. *Barbarians and Romans: A.D. 418 - 584; the Techniques of Accommodation.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

Heather, Peter. *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Hobbs, Angela. *Plato and the Hero: Manliness and the Impersonal Good*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Print.

Jordan, Mark. *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Kaldellis, Anthony. *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. Print.

Kuefler, Mathew. "The Boswell Thesis." Kuefler, Mathew. *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006. 1-31. Print.

—. *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity*. Chicago: The Univeristy of Chicago Press, 2001. Print.

Langlands, Rebecca. *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Print.

Mazzo Karras, Ruth. *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002. Print.

McDonnell, Myles. *Roman Manliness: Virtus and the Roman Republic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.

Montserrat, Dominic. "Reading Gender in the Roman World." *Experiencing Rome: Culture, Identity, and Power in the Roman World*. eds. Janet Huskinson. London: Routledge, 2000. Print

O'Brian, Bruce. "R.W. Southern, John Boswell and the Sexuality Of Anselm." Kuefler, Mathew. *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. 167-178. Print.

O'Donnell, James. *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*. July 2005. Internet. 10 may 2007.

Partner, Nancey. Speculum 68 (1993): "No Sex, No Gender." *Speculum* (1993): 419-443.

Pohl, Walter. "Gender and Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages." Leslie Brubaker and Julia Smith. *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 23-43. Print.

Rabieh, Linda. *Plato and the Virtue of Courage.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. Print.

Rosen, Ralph and Ineke Sluiter, eds. *Andreia: Studies in Manliness and Courage in Classical Antiquity*. Boston: Brill, 2003. Print.

Ruse, Michael. *Homosexuality: A Philosophical Inquiry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. Print.

Searle, John. *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: Free press, 1997.Print.

Smith, Julia. "Introduction: Gendering the Early Medieval World." Smith, Leslie Brubaker and Julia. *Gender in the Early Meival World: East and West, 300-900*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2004. 1-22. Print.

Stewart, Michael E. "The Soldier's Life: Martial Virtues and Hegemonic Masculinity in the Early Byzantine Empire." Diss. Queensland U, 2012. Print.

Treadgold, Warren. *A History of the Byzantine State and Society.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. Print.

Ward-Perkins, Bryan. *The Fall of the Roman Empire and the End of Civilization.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.

Williams, Craig. *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical* Antiquity. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.