Chapter 8
Eunuchs in the East, Men in the West? Dis/unity, Gender and Orientalism in the Fourth Century

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Introduction

In the narrative of relations between East and West in the Roman Empire in the fourth century AD, the tensions between the eastern and western imperial courts at the end of the century loom large. The decision of Theodosius I to “split” the empire between his young sons Arcadius and Honorius (the teenage Arcadius in the east and the ten-year-old Honorius in the west) ushered in a period of intense hostility and competition between the courts, famously focused on the figure of Stilicho.1 Stilicho, half-Vandal general and son-in-law of Theodosius I (Stilicho was married to Serena, Theodosius’ niece and adopted daughter), had been left as guardian of Honorius, but claimed guardianship of Arcadius too and concomitant authority over the east. In the political manoeuvrings which followed the death of Theodosius I in 395, Stilicho was branded a public enemy by the eastern court. In the war of words between east and west a key figure was the (probably Alexandrian) poet Claudian, who acted as a ‘propagandist’ (through panegyric and invective) for the western court, or rather Stilicho. Famously, Claudian wrote invectives on leading officials at the eastern court, namely Rufinus the praetorian prefect and Eutropius, the grand chamberlain (praepositus sacri cubiculi), who was a eunuch. It is Claudian’s two attacks on Eutropius that are the inspiration and central focus of this paper which will examine the significance of the figure of the eunuch for the topic of the end of unity between east and west in the Roman Empire.

Eunuchs became an institutional feature of the imperial court in the late Roman period.2 This phenomenon was especially associated with the east, an

1 For recent treatment of Stilicho see Natalie Kampen, Family Fictions in Roman Art (Cambridge, Eng., 2009), pp. 123–38.

association Claudian dwells on in his invectives on Eutropius. I will examine how Claudian presents Eutropius and how he utilises the eunuch to emphasise the contrast between east and west. In Greek and Roman writing there was a long history of deploying the figure of the eunuch (whose gender, as a castrated male, was ambiguous) as a marker and symbol of the feminine and effeminate east as opposed to the ‘normal’ masculine west. I will consider the roots of such orientalist discourse, but also consider its validity. I will ask, to what extent were court eunuchs an eastern phenomenon, and whether we see an end to unity between east and west in the matter of the nature of the imperial courts in relation to the use of eunuchs. I will argue that the situation is more complicated than the simple contrast Claudian creates, and that continuity of practice across both parts of the empire persisted beyond the fourth century. The orientalist discourse needs to be recognised, addressed and corrected, for modern historians themselves can compound its potency; in his inaugural lecture, on Claudian, Oswald Dilke summed up parts of the invectives on Eutropius as follows:

The so-called patrician has been nothing but a pander and a punkahwalla, who fanned an empress with peacock’s feathers ... Statues of this Pooh-Bah appear all over Constantinople, as judge, as consul, even as general, one of them dominating the senate-house.  

He adds later orientalist imagery to an already heady mix. Eunuchs were not just an eastern phenomenon, though it was easy to brand them as such. In reality they were a defining feature of Roman culture.

Claudian and Eutropius

The figures of Claudian and Eutropius, and their role in the history of the Roman Empire at the end of the fourth century, are well known. Claudian was the subject of a major monograph by Alan Cameron published in 1970. More recently, he has received scrutiny from Catherine Ware in her *Claudian and the Roman Epic Tradition*. The significance of the poet for court politics and

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