

Michał Zytka

"The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society", Shaun Tougher, Abingdon-New York 2008 : [recenzja]

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Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

SHAUN TOUGHER, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society*, Routledge: Abingdon–New York 2008, pp. XII, 244 [= Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies].

The reviewed book focuses primarily on the perceptions of eunuchs throughout the period of Byzantine Empire, with fragments devoted to eunuchs in other time periods serving to put the subject matter in context.

The book consists of a preface, a list of abbreviations, a map, an introduction, fifteen black-and-white plates, eight chapters and a conclusion, as well as two appendices, a bibliography and an index. The work is very well referenced and deeply engages with modern scholarship, such as the works of K.M. Ringrose¹; the comprehensive bibliography will certainly be helpful to all interested in studying the subject. It may be noted here that no major new works on the subject of eunuchs have been published since 2008; shorter texts include S. Tougher's article on the eunuchs' perspective on men², S.R. Holman's article on Meletius the Monk's sources for his *De natura hominis*³, and several articles by G. Sidéris⁴. A section partially devoted to perceptions and representations of eunuchs may be found in M. Hatzaki's 2009 work⁵. One may find several more general

works discussing the subject of gender, such as the latest publication of J. Herrin's collected essays on women in Byzantium⁶ (including three previously unpublished texts), or the collected volume *Questions of Gender in Byzantine Society*⁷.

It may also be of interest to the reader that a conference volume is being planned to follow *The Gender of Authority: Celibate and Childless Men in Power. Ruling Bishops and Ruling Eunuchs* conference that took place in August (28th to 30th) 2013 in Zurich.

In the introduction (p. 1–6), the author notes a surge of interest in eunuchs in popular culture in recent years, and discussed possible reasons for said interest. The introduction also includes an outline of the work and the geographical and chronological boundaries within which the subject matter is discussed.

The first chapter: *The eunuch in history. From antiquity to the twenty-first century* (p. 7–13) serves as a broader introduction to the subject, outlining the history of eunuchs across the world (including Persia, China and India, as well as Western Europe), the roles eunuchs performed in their respective societies, as well as some of the reasons for castration. It also includes a discussion of eunuchs in modern world, with particular reference to the Indian hijras. The chapter provides a wider context for the following discussion, elegantly outlining the majority of themes explored in the book.

Chapter two: *Approaching eunuchs. Attitudes, studies and problems* (p. 14–25) examines the attitudes towards eunuchs displayed by historians, both ancient and modern, noting the often hos-

¹ Most notably K.M. RINGROSE, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium*, Chicago 2003.

² S. TOUGHER, *Cherchez l'homme! Byzantine men: a eunuch perspective*, [in:] *The Byzantine World*, ed. P. STEPHENSON, Abingdon–New York–London 2010, p. 83–91.

³ S.R. HOLMAN, *On Phoenix and Eunuchs: Sources for Meletius the Monk's Anatomy of Gender?*, *J ECS* 16, 2008, p. 79–101.

⁴ G. SIDÉRIS, *Eunuques, Castration et Transidentité à Byzance*, [in:] *Les Assises Du Corps Transformé Regards Croisés Sure Le Genre*, ed. J. MATEAU, M. REYNIER, F. VIALLA, Bordeaux 2010, p. 63–94; IDEM, *Les eunuques de Byzance (IV^e–XII^e siècle): de la société de cour à la société urbaine*, [in:] *Dynamiques sociales au Moyen Âge en occident et en Orient*, ed. E. MALAMUT, Aix-en-Provence 2010, p. 89–116.

⁵ M. HATZAKI, *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium*, New York 2009, p. 86–115.

⁶ J. HERRIN, *Unrivalled Influence: Women and Empire in Byzantium*, Princeton 2013.

⁷ *Questions of Gender in Byzantine Society*, ed. B. NEIL, L. GARLAND, Farnham 2013. The volume includes an essay devoted to eunuchs: S. TOUGHER, *Bearding Byzantium: Masculinity, Eunuchs and the Byzantine Life Course*, p. 153–166.

tile treatment of eunuchs by the primary source authors, and attempts to trace the origins of this hostility. At the same time it provides an overview of modern literature discussing the subject of eunuchs – in general, as well as in respective societies. Subsequently, the author outlines the main problems encountered by a scholar dealing with the subject – such as biases of the earlier authors, or difficulty in successfully identifying eunuchs in the sources (both written and visual). Pointing out and analysing the methodological problems inherent in studying the subject of eunuchs is of great merit here, as it helps to inform the reader of the nuances and difficulties inherent to studying the subject.

Chapter three: *Castration* (p. 26–35) deals with the procedure itself. The author notes that it can be studied in its own right, separately from its importance for the subject of eunuchs. The wide variety of reasons for castration is discussed first; an overview of the possible variants and methods of castration follows (this includes accidents). Subsequently, the physiological and social effects of castration are discussed.

Chapter four: *The court eunuchs of the later Roman Empire* (p. 36–53) deals with the subject of eunuchs serving in the imperial administration during late antiquity, examining, among others, the reasons for the rise to power of the court eunuchs, the functions in which they served, and the positions, honours and titles they could hold. The final, and longest, part of this chapter discusses the reasons for which eunuchs were employed by the emperors; the commentary here is both insightful and compelling, and goes a long way to answering this question.

Chapter five: *Transformations. Byzantine court eunuchs, seventh to eleventh centuries A.D.* (p. 54–67) examines the evolution that the position of a court eunuch underwent during discussed period. As the state was changing, so did the roles, responsibilities and titles available to the eunuchs. Ethnic origins and social ties that the court eunuchs are also discussed here, as well as the matter of castration of Roman citizens (a deeply controversial issue at the time). Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of

this chapter is the discussion of the links between native, Byzantine eunuchs and the prominent families, which may have helped in integrating such eunuchs into the society.

Chapter six: *Eunuchs and religion* (p. 68–95) discusses the roles eunuchs played in the religious *milieu*, as well as attitudes toward eunuchs performing religious roles. Following a commentary about views on religiously motivated self-castration, an overview of eunuchs serving in priestly and monastic roles is provided. Subsequently, the links between important court eunuchs and religion are explored in some detail. Of particular interest here might be the intriguing observation on the portrayals of eunuchs and angels, in that they may have had an impact on one another – as both angels and eunuchs were perceived as genderless and, according to some authors, pure.

Chapter seven: *Images and identities of eunuchs* (p. 96–118) discusses the changing views on eunuchs from late Roman times, when these were strongly negative, ascribing to eunuchs all possible vices and presenting them as neither men nor women (and inferior to either), throughout the Byzantine history. In this chapter the author engages with some of the earlier theses concerning portrayal of eunuchs, posited by K.M. Ringrose, pointing out problems with interpreting sources such as hagiographies and presence of literary tropes leading to distorted images. Lack of self-presentation of eunuchs and „outsider” views of Muslims and Western Christians are also discussed.

Chapter eight: *The twilight of the Byzantine eunuch* (p. 119–127) discusses the presence of eunuchs in the later Byzantine empire – their decline under the Komnenoi dynasty and a possible resurgence under the Angeloi. The author argues that one possible cause of the decline in number and influence of eunuchs may be linked to the change of power structure in the imperial government (an increased reliance on imperial family members).

The conclusion (p. 128–130) reiterates the importance of adopting a broad, comparative approach for the studies concerning eunuchs, and underlines the role of eunuchs as a part of

the Byzantine society which held highly mixed views of them. Of the two appendices, the first one provides a list of the Byzantine emperors; it is the second one (pp. 133–171) that deserves a separate mention, as it provides the reader with a compact yet informative prosopography of 229 Byzantine and late Roman eunuchs.

The book is not an attempt at a definitive study of eunuchs in the Byzantine empire, as the author himself admits, but instead it serves to provide a general framework for the study of eunuchs during this period – and it is clear that this goal was fulfilled. The reader will find

in the work numerous insightful observations and conclusions, as well as an invaluable assistance for further study of Byzantine eunuchs. The book should also prove to be of considerable interest to those interested in studying perceptions of gender and gender roles, in both historical and modern context. The clear structure and style make the work easy to read and accessible, for both a scholar and layman alike.

Michał Zytka (Cardiff)