**Eunuchs**

*Most of those who were castrated to make them more desirable as slaves and their consent was not sought. Some youths and adults, however, castrated themselves as part of their religious devotion: the most famous of these for the Romans was the Galli, the priests of the Eastern goddess Cybele. Early Christians also sometimes self-castrated as part of their commitment to chastity, until the practice was outlawed by the church, but sources about them and the Galli will be found in the section on religious groups. Here we are discussing those not castrated for religious reasons.*

*Let us begin with the legal situation, which was complicated. Although the Romans were a prime market for eunuchs and paid high prices for them, they could be squeamish about the practice and sometimes preferred that it did not place within Roman territories. However the Emperor Vespasian supposedly made his money in trading eunuchs, who could cost phenomenal sums of money:*

The chance of the lot then gave him Africa, which he governed with great justice and high honour, save that in a riot at Hadrumetum he was pelted with turnips. It is certain that he came back none the richer, for his credit was so nearly gone that he mortgaged all his estates to his brother, and had to resort to trading in eunuchs[[1]](#footnote-1) to keep up his position; whence he was commonly known as "Mule driver." He is also said to have been found guilty of squeezing two hundred thousand sesterces out of a young man for whom he obtained the purple stripe against his father's wish, and to have been severely rebuked in consequence.

Suetonius, *Life of Vespasian* 4.3

*The Digest of Justinian, book 48, contains a number of laws in place on the castration of eunuchs, which was banned by Hadrian within the limits of the empire:*

**4. Ulpianus, On the Duties of Proconsul, Book VII.**

**(2) The Divine Hadrian[[2]](#footnote-2) also stated the following in a Rescript: "It is forbidden by the Imperial Constitutions that eunuchs should be made, and they provide that persons who are convicted of this crime are liable to the penalty of the Cornelian Law, and that their property shall with good reason be confiscated by the Treasury. "But with reference to slaves who have made eunuchs, they should be punished capitally, and those who are liable to this public crime and do not appear, shall, even when absent, be sentenced under the Cornelian Law. It is clear that if persons who have suffered this injury demand justice, the Governor of the province should hear those who have lost their virility; for no one has a right to castrate a free person or a slave, either against his consent or with it, and no one can voluntarily offer himself to be castrated. If anyone should violate my Edict, the physician who performed the operation shall be punished with death, as well as anyone who willingly offered himself for emasculation."**

**5. Paulus, On the Duties of a Proconsul, Book II.**

**Those also who make persons impotent[[3]](#footnote-3) are, by a Constitution of the Divine Hadrian addressed to Ninius Hasta, placed in the same class with those who perform castration.**

***6. Venuleius Saturninus, On the Duties of Proconsul, Book I.***

**He who delivers a slave to be castrated shall be punished by a fine of half his property, under a decree of the Senate enacted during the Consulate of Neratius Priscus and Annius Verus [97 CE].**

*The 2nd century CE Roman-Syrian author Lucian, who wrote in Greek and also identified as Greek and Syrian, wrote a dialogue called The Eunuch. In it two men of Athens meet and one, Lucinus (note the Latin name despite the Greek setting and language) reports back on a contest to be the chair of a philosophical school, a position which brought with it an imperial salary (there were four imperially funded chairs of the the four major philosophical schools in Athens; this was for the head of the Academy, the school founded by Aristotle. The work is a satire on the pretensions of philosophers, and one of the ways that Lucian does that is by attacking their sexual identities.*

Lucinus: …[[4]](#footnote-4)Many competitors took part in the funeral games of the deceased, but two of them in particular were the most favoured to win, the aged Diodes (you know the man I mean, the dialectician) and Bagoas,[[5]](#footnote-5) the one who is rumoured to be a eunuch. The matter of doctrines had been thrashed out between them already, and each had displayed his familiarity with their tenets and his adherence to Aristotle and his teachings; and by Zeus neither of them had come out on top. The close of the trial, however, took a new turn; Diodes, discontinuing the advertisement of his own merits, passed over to Bagoas and made a great effort to throw his private life at him, and Bagoas met this attack by exploring the history of Diodes in the same way. But when they had had enough of hard words and snarking at each other, Diodes at length said in conclusion that it was not at all permissible for Bagoas to lay claim to philosophy and the rewards of merit in it, since he was a eunuch; such people ought to be excluded, he thought, not simply from all that but even from temples and holy-water bowls and all the places of public assembly, and he declared it an ill-omened, ill-met sight if on first leaving home in the morning, one should set eyes on any such person. He had a great deal to say, too, on that point, observing that a eunuch was neither man nor woman but something composite, hybrid, and monstrous, alien to human nature.

Pamphilius: The charge you tell of, Lucinus, is novel, anyhow, and now I too, my friend, am moved to laughter, hearing of this incredible accusation. Well, what about the other man? Did he keep quiet? Or did he try to say something himself in reply to this?

**Lucinus:** At first, through shame and cowardice — for that sort of behaviour is natural to them — he remained silent a long while and blushed and was plainly in a sweat, but finally in a weak, effeminate voice he said that Diodes was acting unjustly in trying to exclude a eunuch from philosophy, in which even women had a part; and he brought in Aspasia, Diotima, and Thargelia[[6]](#footnote-6) to support him; also a certain Academic eunuch hailing from among the Pelasgians, who shortly before our time achieved a high reputation among the Greeks.[[7]](#footnote-7) But if that person himself were alive and made similar claims, Diodes would (he said) have excluded him too, undismayed by his reputation among the regular folk; and he repeated a number of humorous remarks made to the man by Stoics and Cynics regarding his physical imperfection. That was what the judges dwelt upon, and the point debated after that was whether the seal of approval should be set upon a eunuch who was proposing himself for a career in philosophy and requesting that he be put in charge of the education of boys. One of them said that presence and a fine physical form should be among the attributes of a philosopher and that above all else he should have a long beard that would inspire confidence in those who visited him and sought to become his pupils, one that would match the ten thousand drachmas which he was to receive from the Emperor, whereas a eunuch was worse than a castrated priest, for the latter had at least known manhood once, but the former had been marred from the very first and was an ambiguous sort of creature like a crow, which cannot be reckoned either with doves or with ravens.

The other argued that this was not a physical examination; that there should be an investigation of soul and mind and knowledge of doctrines. Then Aristotle was cited as a witness to support his case, since he tremendously admired the eunuch Hermias, the tyrant of Atarneus,[[8]](#footnote-8) to the point of celebrating sacrifices to him in the same way as to the gods. Moreover, Bagoas ventured to add an observation to the effect that a eunuch was a far more suitable teacher for the young, since he could not incur any blame as regards them and would not incur that charge against Socrates of leading the youngsters astray. And as he had been ridiculed especially for his not having a beard, he despatched this witticism to good effect — he thought so, anyhow: "If it is by length of beard that philosophers are to be judged, a he-goat would with greater justice be preferred to all of them!” At this juncture a third person who was present — his name may remain in obscurity — said: "As a matter of fact, gentlemen, if this fellow, so smooth of chin, effeminate in voice, and otherwise similar to a eunuch, should strip, you would find him very masculine. Unless those who talk about him are lying, he was once taken in adultery, in the very act, as the table of the law says.[[9]](#footnote-9) At that time he secured his acquittal by resorting to the name of eunuch and finding sanctuary in it, since the judges on that occasion discredited the accusation from the very look of him. Now, however, he may recant, I suppose, for the sake of the money that he can almost touch." Upon those remarks everyone began to laugh, as was natural, while Bagoas fell into greater confusion and was beside himself, turning all colours of the rainbow and dripping with cold sweat. On the one hand, he did not think it decent to plead guilty to the charge of adultery, yet, on the other, he thought that this accusation would not be without its usefulness for the case then in progress…

*Perhaps the most famous person classified as a eunuch in Roman antiquity was Favorinus. Born in Gaul, he was described by some as a ‘natural’ eunuch, while a writer called Philostratos called him a hermaphrodite. He was probably what we would call intersex, which the Romans (see above) struggled to understand. He was incredibly famous (and infamous) in the second century, and was friends with the Emperor Hadrian, until he was exiled by him in the 130s CE thanks to a (successful) accusation of adultery. The following is Philosotratus’ account of him from his Lives of the Sophists:*

8. Favorinus the philosopher, no less than Dio, was proclaimed a sophist by the charm and beauty of his eloquence. He came from Western Gaul, from the city of Arelatum which is situated on the river Rhone.. He was born double-sexed, a hermaphrodite, and this was plainly shown in his appearance; for even when he grew old he had no beard; it was evident too from his voice which sounded thin, shrill, and high-pitched, with the modulations that nature bestows on eunuchs also. Yet he was so ardent in love that he was actually charged with adultery by

a man of consular rank. Though he quarrelled with the Emperor Hadrian, he suffered no ill consequences. Hence he used to say in the ambiguous style of an oracle, that there were in the story of his life these three paradoxes : Though he was a Gaul he led the life of a Greek ; a eunuch, he had been tried for adultery ; he had quarrelled with an Emperor and was still alive. But this must rather be set down to the credit of Hadrian, seeing that, though he was Emperor, he disagreed on terms of equality with one whom it was in his power to put to death. For a prince is really superior if he controls his anger “when he is angry with a lesser man” and, “mighty is the anger of Zeus-nurtured kings” if only it be kept in check by reason. Those who endeavour to guide and amend the morals of princes would do well to add this saying to the sentiments expressed by the poets.

He was appointed high priest, whereupon he appealed to the established usage of his birthplace, pleading that, according to the laws on such matters, he was exempt from public services because he was a philosopher. But when he saw that the Emperor intended to vote against him on the ground that he was not a philosopher, he forestalled him in the following way. " O Emperor," he cried, " I have had a dream of which you ought to be informed. My teacher Dio appeared to me, and with respect to this suit admonished and reminded me that we come into the world not for ourselves alone, but also for the country of our birth. 2 Therefore, O Emperor, I obey my teacher, and I undertake this public service." Now the Emperor had acted thus merely for his own diversion, for by turning his mind to philosophers and sophists he used to lighten the responsibilities of Empire. The Athenians however took the affair seriously, and, especially the Athenian magistrates themselves, hastened in a body to throw down the bronze statue of Favorinus as though he were the Emperor's bitterest enemy. Yet on hearing of it Favorinus showed no resentment or anger at the insult, but observe : "Socrates himself would have been the gainer, if the Athenians had merely deprived him of a bronze statue, instead of making him drink hemlock."

He was very intimate with Herodes the sophist who regarded him as his teacher and father, and wrote to him: " When shall I see you, and when shall I lick the honey from your lips? " Accordingly at his death he bequeathed to Herodes all the books that he had collected, his house in Rome, and Autolecythus. 1 This was an Indian, entirely black, a pet of Herodes and Favorinus, for as they drank their wine together he used to divert them by sprinkling his Indian dialect with Attic words and by speaking barbarous Greek with a tongue that stammered and faltered.

The quarrel that arose between Polemo and Favorinus began in Ionia, where the Ephesians favoured Favorinus, while Smyrna admired Polemo; and it became more bitter in Rome; for there consuls and sons of consuls by applauding either one or the other started between them a rivalry such as kindles the keenest envy and malice even in the hearts of wise men. However they may be forgiven for that rivalry, since human nature holds that the love of glory never grows old; but they are to be blamed for the speeches that they composed assailing one another ; for personal abuse is brutal, and even if it be true, that does not acquit of disgrace even the man who speaks about such things. And so when people called Favorinus a sophist, the mere fact that he had quarrelled with a sophist was evidence enough; for that spirit of rivalry of which I spoke is always directed against one's competitors in the same craft.

Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* 8-28

*One of his friends, the Roman author Aulus Gellius, gives a better sense of how respected he was in his own day:*

The philosopher Favorinus once spoke in the following way to a young man who was very fond of old words and made a display in his ordinary, everyday conversation of many expressions that were far too unfamiliar and archaic: “Curius,” he said, “and Fabricius and Coruncanius, men of the olden days, and of a still earlier time than these those famous triplets, the Horatii, talked clearly and intelligibly with their fellows, using the language of their own day, not that of the Aurunci, the Sicani, or the Pelasgi, who are said to have been the earliest inhabitants of Italy. You, on the contrary, just as if you were talking today with Evander's[[10]](#footnote-10) mother, use words that have already been obsolete for many years, because you want no one to know and comprehend what you are saying. Why not accomplish your purpose more fully, foolish fellow, and say nothing at all? But you assert that you love the olden time, because it is honest, sterling, sober and temperate. Live by all means according to the manners of the past, but speak in the language of the present, and always remember and take to heart what Gaius Caesar, a man of surpassing talent and wisdom, wrote in the first book of his treatise On Analogy: 2 'Avoid, as you would a rock, a strange and unfamiliar word.'”[[11]](#footnote-11)

*Attic Nights* 1.10

*Philosophers like Favorinus were consulted on a wide range of matters, and in particular oratory. Gellius relates a time he went to him for advice in how to proceed in a case:*

I therefore ordered a postponement and from the bench I proceeded to go to the philosopher Favorinus, with whom I then associated a great deal at Rome. I told him the whole story of the lawsuit and of the men as I had heard it, begging that with regard both to the matter about which I was then in doubt, as well as to others which I should have to consider in my position as judge, he should make me a man of greater wisdom in such affairs.

Then Favorinus, after commending my scrupulous hesitation and my conscientiousness said: “The question which you are now considering may seem to be of a trifling and insignificant character. But if you wish me to instruct you as to the full duties of a judge, this is by no means the proper place or time for such a discussion involves many complex questions and requires long and anxious attention and consideration. To touch at once upon a few important questions for your benefit, the first query relating to the duty of a judge is this: if a judge chance to have knowledge of a matter which is brought to trial before him, and the matter is clearly known and demonstrated to him alone from some external circumstance or event, before it has begun to be argued or brought into court, but nevertheless the same thing is not proved in the course of the trial, ought he to decide in accordance with what he knew beforehand, or according to the evidence in the case? This question also,” said he, "is often raised, whether it is fitting and proper for a judge, after a case has been heard, if there seems to be an opportunity for compromising the dispute, to postpone the duty of a judge for a time and take the part of a common friend and peace-maker, as it were. And I know that this further is a matter of doubt and inquiry, whether a judge, when hearing a suit, ought to mention and ask about the things which it is for the interest of one of the parties to the suit to mention and inquire, even if the party in question neither mentions nor calls for them. For they say that this is in fact to play the part of an advocate, not of a judge.

"Besides these questions, there is disagreement also on this point, whether it is consistent with the Practice and office of a judge by his occasional remarks so to explain and set forth the matter and he case which is being tried, that before the time of his decision, as the result of statements which at he time are made before him in a confused and doubtful form, he gives signs and indications of the motions and feelings by which he is affected on each occasion and at every time. For those judges who give the impression of being keen and quick think that the matter in dispute cannot be examined and understood, unless the judge by frequent questions and necessary interruptions makes his own opinion clear and grasps that of the litigants. But, on the other hand, those who have a reputation for calmness and dignity maintain that the judge ought not, before giving his decision and while the case is being pleaded by both parties, to indicate his opinion whenever he is influenced by some argument that is brought forward. For they say that the result will be, since one emotion of the mind after another must be excited by the variety of points and arguments, that such judges will seem to feel and speak differently about the same case and almost at the same time.

6 “But,” said he, "about these and other similar discussions as to the duty of a judge I shall attempt to give you my views later, when we have leisure, and I will repeat the precepts of Aelius Tubero on the subject, which I have read very recently. But so far as concerns the money which you said was claimed before your tribunal, I advise you, by Heaven! to follow the counsel of that shrewdest of men, Marcus Cato; for he, in the speech which he delivered For Lucius Turius against Gnaeus Gellius, 7 said that this custom had been handed down and observed by our forefathers, that if a question at issue between two men could not be proved either by documents or witnesses, then the question should be raised before the judge who was trying the case which of the two was the better man, and if they were either equally good or equally bad, that then the one upon whom the claim was made should be believed and the verdict should be given in his favour. But in this case about which you are in [p. 31] doubt the claimant is a person of the highest character and the one on whom the claim is made is the worst of men, and there are no witnesses to the transaction between the two. So then go and give credit to the claimant and condemn the one on whom the claim is made, since, as you say, the two are not equal and the claimant is the better man.

This was the advice which Favorinus gave me at that time, as befitted a philosopher. But I thought that I should show more importance and presumption than became my youth and humble merit, if I appeared to sit in judgment on and condemn a man from the characters of the disputants rather than from the evidence in the case; yet I could not make up my mind to acquit the defendant, and accordingly I took oath that the matter was not clear to me and in that way I was relieved from rendering a decision. The words of the speech of Marcus Cato which Favorinus mentioned are these: “And I have learnt this from the tradition of our ancestors: if anyone claim anything from another, and both are equally either good or bad, provided there are no witnesses to the transaction between the two, the one from whom the claim is made ought rather to be credited. Now, if Gellius had made a wager 8 with Turio on the issue, ' Provided Gellius were not a better man than Turio,' no one, I think, would be so mad as to decide that Gellius is better than Turio; if Gellius is not better than Turio, the one from whom the claim is made ought preferably to be credited.”

*Attic Nights* 14.2

*Elagabalus was a member of the Severan Dynasty and ruled from 218-222. He was only fourteen when he came to the throne and he ruled about as well as one would expect a fourteen year old to do; in other words, he rather resembled Joffrey from Game of Thrones*. *He surrounded himself with a range of people the average Roman would not have thought fit company for an emperor, most of whom his successor, Alexander Severus, got rid of:*

All the dwarfs belonging to Elagabalus, both male and female, fools, catamites who had good voices, all kinds of entertainers at table, and actors of pantomimes he made public property; those, however, who were not of any use were assigned, each to a different town, for support, in order that no one town might be burdened by a new kind of beggar. The eunuchs, whom Elagabalus had had in his base councils and had promoted, he presented to his friends, adding a statement to the effect that if they did not return to honest ways, it should be lawful to put them to death without authority from the courts. Women of ill repute, of whom he arrested an enormous number, he ordered to become public prostitutes, and he deported all catamites, those with whom that scourge had carried on a most pernicious intimacy, being drowned by shipwreck.

Historia Augusta, *Alexander Severus* 34.2

1. The word used is *mangonicos*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hadrian was very good friends with the eunuch Favorinus, a famous orator and popular philosopher. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. By medical means or witchcraft (the Romans fully believed in witchcraft). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I have cut the opening section where the two speakers meet up and cut to Lucinus’ description of the opening parts of the competition. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Both of these are invented figures, though the most famous historical Bagoas was a eunuch and favourite of Alexander the Great. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Names of famous Greek women, all connected in various informal way (or possibly made up ways) to philosophy. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The reference is to Favorinus, on whom see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Aristotle’s father-in-law, who, despite what is said above, was most likely not a eunuch. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. If a husband caught a man having sex with his wife he could kill him. However, he had to catch him in the very act, and not just alone with her and without any clothes, for example. The law was quite specific. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Evander was a legendary Greek who was said to have lived on the site of Rome before there even was a Rome. So, *very* far back. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is Julius Caesar, the famous one. He wrote a book on grammar, which he dedicated to Cicero as part of the ongoing grammar wars of the Late Republic. (This is true. As well as being world conquerors the Romans had fierce battles about grammatical points.) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)