

Cambridge University Press

0521813476 - Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900

Edited by Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

*Introduction: gendering the early medieval world**Julia M. H. Smith*

In recent years few subjects have attracted as much attention – or as much hostility – as ‘gender’. Fewer still are the concepts whose meaning and significance are more hotly debated. Uncomfortable, subversive, threatening, contentious, it is also provocative, creative, multivalent and of immense analytic vigour. How can it help students of past societies achieve a fuller grasp of their subject? This volume of essays by leading specialists in a range of complementary disciplines answers this question with respect to the society of the late Roman empire and its successor civilisations, Byzantine, Islamic and western European. Through the prism of gender, these papers offer new perspectives on the institutions and ideologies of government, the allocation of economic resources, individual and collective identities, religious beliefs and practices, family life, death and burial, and the writing of history during the centuries from AD 300 to 900. Together, they argue for the ubiquity of gender in the ordering of social existence throughout this period.

The essays which follow are diverse in subject and pluralist in approach. It is fitting that they should be so, for they are located at the intersection of two fields of research which are different in focus but alike in liveliness and diversity. Simultaneously but separately, both fields took centre stage in academic debates from the early 1970s onwards. In 1971, Peter Brown’s *The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad* not only gave common currency to the expression ‘late antiquity’ for the centuries from c. AD 250 to 800, but inaugurated a thorough re-evaluation of this period and set the research agenda for a whole generation of scholars.¹ The following year, Ann Oakley’s *Sex, Gender and Society* launched a different

¹ For assessments of its impact, see Peter Brown, G. W. Bowersock, Averil Cameron, Elizabeth A. Clark, Albrecht Dihle, Garth Fowden, Peter Heather, Philip Rousseau, Aline Rouselle, Hjalmar Torp and Ian Wood, ‘SO Debate: the world of late antiquity revisited’, *Symbolae Osloenses* 72 (1997), pp. 5–90; Richard Lim and Carole Straw (eds.), *The Past Before Us: The Challenge of New Historiographies of Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, forthcoming).

Cambridge University Press

0521813476 - Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900

Edited by Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

intellectual revolution by turning the attention of political activists and scholars alike to the implications of the socially constructed asymmetries and differences between men and women. *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300–900* brings the two together by addressing the period of late antiquity with the methodology of gender studies.

For this double hinterland let us first turn our attention to the period in question. *The World of Late Antiquity* deliberately subverted conventional disciplinary boundaries between classical studies and Islamic studies and between ancient and medieval history. It marked out the Roman empire which emerged from the mid-third-century crisis as an empire with a political and cultural order fundamentally revised since the Principate (the first two centuries of the common era). It made religion – paganisms, Judaism, Christianity, Islam – the province as much of the social historian as of the theologian. And it ended forever the negative evaluation of the later imperial centuries which Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* had made central to the grand narratives of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment historiography. 'Late antiquity' thus signifies a world substantively different from prior times but not thereby in decline or decadence, as traditional paradigms of Roman history had mandated. It indicates too a cultural tradition and heritage which continued in many guises long after all the Roman empire except its north-eastern quadrant (the Byzantine empire) had ceased to be under Roman rule, a heritage as central to early Islamic society as to the emerging 'barbarian' successor kingdoms in the former western provinces of the Roman empire. In altering historical periodisation, *The World of Late Antiquity* revealed a coherence in the post-Roman early Middle Ages which had hitherto been lacking. That coherence renders it otiose to try to delimit the 'late antique' from the 'early medieval'; for most of the period covered by our essays, these terms are effectively interchangeable.

Scholars of the late and post-Roman worlds benefit greatly from the exceptionally rich and varied corpus of texts and material culture surviving from these centuries. Admittedly, distribution across place and time is uneven, but, in western Europe at least, any graph of surviving words per century would certainly show sharp peaks for the periods c. 350–450 and again c. 750–850. In Byzantium, the peaks are somewhat differently constituted – c. 350–550 and c. 800 on – while the Islamic world begins to generate massive textual evidence from the end of the eighth century. In part, these inconsistencies even out when we turn to material remains. The revisionist perspectives ushered in by *The World of Late Antiquity* coincided with new methodological approaches to visual communication, and

Cambridge University Press

0521813476 - Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900

Edited by Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: gendering the early medieval world*

3

a huge upsurge in the quantity and quality of material evidence available as archaeologists began to pay serious attention to periods and cultures other than the prehistoric or the classical. Increasing interest in urbanism and settlement patterns coincided with archaeological opportunities presented by the 1960s post-war reconstruction of European cities, the rapid modernisation of Middle Eastern cities and the growth of historical preservation and heritage movements. Together with rapidly developing scientific techniques of field research and laboratory analysis, these have effected multiple, overlapping transformations in late antique studies during four decades. As a result, the natural and built environments within which the women and men of the early medieval centuries lived, their technologies and trade routes, diseases and life expectancies, funerary practices and religious places are known to us as never before.

The textual and material evidence from the late and post-Roman worlds informs diverse and wide-ranging debates. Some of these concern the impact of first Christianity then Islam on the ancient societies of the Mediterranean. Others address the causes and consequences of political change, whether the crumbling of imperial rule in the western provinces which were subjected to Germanic migration and settlement, its transformation into the caliphate around the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean by Muslim conquerors, or its reshaping in Byzantine regions where Roman rule persisted for many centuries to come. Differently put, the formation of new identities, whether social, religious or ethnic, stands close to the heart of much recent work in this field. So too does the expression of those shifting identities in such institutions as family, city, kingdom or caliphate. The reception and renegotiation of Rome's legacy in the Islamic, Byzantine and western culture provinces is another long-standing subject of enquiry, as much concerned with the textual as with the material inheritance. Attention to the knowledge these texts transmit is now supplemented by exposing the discourses they sustain, just as artisanal, archaeological and architectural remains are interrogated for the identities and ideologies they betray as much as for their styles, motifs and technologies. All approaches stress that the late Roman and early medieval world was characterised by societies, cultures and polities in flux, however disputed the causes and consequences of those changes remain. Common to all debates, however, is an emphasis on symbiosis not caesura in both present-day scholarly circles and the political and cultural life of the period from 300 to 900.

'At the crossroads of many histories': thus the *Guide to the Post-classical World* characterised these centuries in 1999, a generation after the

Cambridge University Press

0521813476 - Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900

Edited by Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

publication of *The World of Late Antiquity*.² This *Guide* stands as a survey of a subject which hardly existed prior to 1971. Prefacing its alphabetically arranged entries, eleven introductory essays offer an overview of several key directions in late antique studies. Worth attention – as much for what is omitted as included – they are: ‘Remaking the past’; ‘Sacred landscapes’; ‘Philosophical tradition and the self’; ‘Religious communities’; ‘Barbarians and ethnicity’; ‘War and violence’; ‘Empire building’; ‘Christian triumph and controversy’; ‘Islam’; ‘The good life’; ‘Habitat’.³ Each reader can draw up an alternative contents list; for our purposes there are two significant silences. The first concerns markers of individual or group identity other than those of religion or ethnicity, such as status, class or sexual identity. The second is the human body in both its lifecycle from reproduction to death and its public presentation through moulding, dress, deportment and language. The central lacuna of this compendium is, in effect, the social and discursive construction of sexual difference.

That is the subject of this book of essays. We approach it by means of ‘gender’. This is not a thing or object waiting to be discovered, whether in the ground or a dusty archive. Rather, like ‘class’ or ‘race’, it is a concept capable of being put to various uses. As such it is inevitably shorthand, a single word that hints at possibilities and complications. And, like many other concepts used by historians, it has its own history – of shifting meanings and contested significances.⁴ At its simplest it refers to the disparities in all societies between the social roles permitted to men and women together with the wider cultural meanings associated with masculinity and femininity.

This has not always been its meaning, however. The English word ‘gender’ is from the common Latin word *genus* (Greek: *genos*). Meaning a

² Introduction, in G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown and Oleg Grabar (eds.), *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. xiii.

³ In addition to the extensive bibliographical guidance supplied in the *Guide to the Postclassical World*, consult the following for up-to-date interpretations: *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. xiii: *The Late Empire, AD 337–425*, ed. Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey, and vol. xiv: *Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, 425–600*, ed. Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward-Perkins and Michael Whitby (Cambridge, 1998–2000); *New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. ii: *c.700–900*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge, 1995); *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, vol. i: *Problems in the Literary Source Material*, ed. Averil Cameron and Lawrence Conrad, vol. ii: *Land Use and Settlement Patterns*, ed. G. R. D. King and Averil Cameron, and vol. iii: *States, Resources and Armies*, ed. Lawrence Conrad and Averil Cameron (Princeton, 1992–95). The numerous volumes of essays under the general editorship of Ian Wood in the ongoing series *Transformation of the Roman World* (Leiden, 1997–) are also relevant.

⁴ The full history of the concept remains to be written; for a clear outline of its development within the historical profession see K. Canning, ‘Gender history’, in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. ix (Amsterdam, 2001), pp. 6006–11; ‘Gender history: the evolution of a concept’, in Robert Shoemaker and Mary Vincent (eds.), *Gender and History in Western Europe* (London, 1998), pp. 1–20. On its contested significance, see the preface to Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, revised edn (New York, 1999), and Penelope Corfield, ‘History and the challenge of gender history’, *Rethinking History* 1 (1997), pp. 241–58.

Cambridge University Press

0521813476 - Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900

Edited by Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: gendering the early medieval world*

5

‘category, class or kind’, *genus* is etymologically closely related to *gens*, ‘a biological descent group, a race or people’, and *gignere*, ‘to beget’, and thus has connotations of procreation as much as of categorisation. Amongst its many uses in antiquity, *genus* was the grammarian’s term for the classification of all nouns and adjectives into groups including ‘male’, ‘female’, ‘neuter’ and ‘common’. The grammarian Servius (c. 370–c. 430) explained it thus:

Genders are so called from that which they generate, and thus there are only two principal genders, masculine and feminine, for biological reproduction generates these two alone. Genders [of words], however, are either natural or assigned by authoritative social usage. Natural genders are words such as ‘man’ or ‘woman’; those assigned by authoritative social usage are words such as ‘wall’ [*hic paries*: masculine] or ‘window’ [*haec fenestra*: feminine]. We recognise that these things do not have any natural sex, but we follow the sex which authority has established. The remaining genders, however, derive from the aforementioned, namely neuter, which is neither masculine nor feminine; common, which is both masculine and feminine; inclusive, which includes all the aforementioned genders, and finally epicene, which refers to creatures of either sex.⁵

With this complex semantic field referring to modes of categorising, both arbitrary (grammatical) and natural (biological), *genus* had passed into Middle English as ‘gender’ by the fourteenth century.⁶ Primarily (although not exclusively) a grammarian’s term, ‘gender’ must have puzzled generations of grammar school children curious as to why a window should be feminine but a wall masculine. Thus the term remained until the mid-twentieth century, when anglophone psychoanalysts turned their attention towards individuals whose social personality and sense of individual identity were discordant with their physiological sex. Disregarding the word’s etymological roots, they found ‘gender’ a convenient word for categorising these individuals’ social role, as distinct from their genital anatomy.⁷

⁵ *Commentarius in artem Donati*, ed. H. Keil, *Grammatici Latini*, vol. iv (Leipzig, 1864), pp. 407–8: ‘Genera dicta sunt ab eo, quod generant, atque ideo duo sunt tantum genera principalia, masculinum et feminum. Haec enim sexus tantum generat. Genera autem aut naturalia sunt, aut ex auctoritate descendunt: naturalia sunt, ut vir mulier; auctoritate descendunt, ut hic paries, haec fenestra. In his enim naturalem nullum intellegimus sexum, sed eum sequimur, quem firmavit auctoritas. Cetera vero genera a superioribus veniunt, ut est neutrum, quod nec masculinum est nec feminum, commune, quod et masculinum et feminum, omne, quod omnia supra dicta continet genera, epicoenon vero, quod confusum continet sexum.’ I am grateful to Karla Pollmann for discussion of this passage.

⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition, sv ‘gender’.

⁷ The Englishness of this word is important: no other language is capable of a similar sharp semantic distinction between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’. Cf. Gisela Bock, ‘Challenging dichotomies: perspectives on women’s history’, in Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson and Jane Rendall (eds.), *Writing Women’s*

Cambridge University Press

0521813476 - Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900

Edited by Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Thanks to Ann Oakley's *Sex, Gender and Society*, this meaning was taken up in the early phases of the 'second-wave' feminist movement, and from there spread rapidly throughout the social sciences, always referring to the socially organised relationship of women to men.⁸

Its adoption by historians owes much to Joan Scott's immensely influential paper of 1986, 'Gender: a useful category of historical analysis'.⁹ Since then, its conceptual and historical elaboration has been rapid, notably so in the USA. On the one hand, a renewed emphasis on the use of language to organise knowledge about sexual difference has entered historical scholarship under the influence of post-modern literary theories.¹⁰ On the other hand, historians have followed sociologists in exploring the relational aspects of gender from men's perspectives, thus opening up to analysis the cultural production of masculinities and the organisation of power hierarchies between different groups of men.¹¹ Notable here has been R. W. Connell's elaboration of the notion of 'hegemonic masculinity'. This refers to a dynamic masculinity which lacks fixed content but is rather the culturally specific legitimisation of the dominant form of masculinity within any particular gender order, by which femininities and other masculinities are marginalised or subordinated.¹²

Loosed from its earlier grammatical moorings, the word 'gender' has developed additional related but variant meanings. Sometimes regarded as synonymous with 'sex', it is more widely used to designate humans as

History: International Perspectives (Basingstoke, 1991), pp. 1–23 esp. p. 9, and Ruth Roded, *Women in Islam and the Middle East* (London, 1999), p. 14.

⁸ Ann Oakley has commented on the context in which she developed this usage in 'A brief history of gender', in Ann Oakley and Juliet Mitchell (eds.), *Who's Afraid of Feminism? Seeing through the Backlash* (New York, 1997), pp. 29–55 esp. pp. 31–3.

⁹ First published in *American Historical Review* 91 (1986), pp. 1053–75; reprinted in Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, pp. 28–50 and Joan Scott (ed.), *Feminism and History* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 152–80.

¹⁰ Pertinent to the period covered in these essays are Kate Cooper, 'Insinuations of womanly influence: an aspect of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy', *JRS* 82 (1992), pp. 113–27; Elizabeth Clark, 'The lady vanishes: dilemmas of a feminist historian after the "linguistic turn"', *Church History* 67 (1998), pp. 1–31; Gabrielle Spiegel, 'History, historicism and the social logic of the text in the Middle Ages', *Speculum* 65 (1990), pp. 59–86.

¹¹ The article which opened up this subject was T. Carrigan, R. W. Connell and J. Lee, 'Toward a new sociology of masculinity', *Theory and Society* 14 (1985), pp. 551–604 (reprinted in H. Brod (ed.), *The Making of Masculinities* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), pp. 63–100 and, abbreviated, in Rachel Adams and David Savran (eds.), *The Masculinity Studies Reader* (Malden, MA, 2002), pp. 99–118). For an up-to-date overview of recent work on masculinity within a contemporary British perspective, see Stephen M. Whitehead, *Men and Masculinities: Key Themes and New Directions* (Cambridge, 2002). Its emergence as a subject of historical enquiry was prompted by Michael Roper and John Tosh (eds.), *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800* (London, 1991). See also John Tosh, 'What should historians do with masculinity?', *History Workshop Journal* 38 (1994), pp. 179–202; reprinted in Shoemaker and Vincent (eds.), *Gender and History*, pp. 64–85. For further bibliography, see note 26 below.

¹² See further R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 76–81.

Cambridge University Press

0521813476 - Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900

Edited by Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: gendering the early medieval world*

7

belonging to one of two groups, either male or female. Common usage thus often blurs the distinction between biological and cultural categories, and is at variance with the meaning of the term established as normative in the social sciences from the 1970s onwards but unwittingly analogous to the word's etymological root.¹³ In this context, 'gender history' has often been women's history passing under a new name. 'Today', Ann Oakley comments, looking back on the political career of the word she had launched a generation previously, 'gender slips uneasily between being merely another word for sex and a contested political term'.¹⁴

Its contested nature stems directly from the fact that it is inherently political. Many of the conceptual advances stemmed explicitly from the political engagement of their originators, whether within the women's movement of the 1960s–80s or within more recent gay rights movements, pro-feminist men's groups and a wide range of minority rights political interest groups. Even more importantly, gender is in essence about power relationships and the language which legitimates or denies their existence. A gendered approach insists upon attention to hierarchies of power, and in so doing takes equal notice of institutional, cultural and discursive mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion. Additionally, it exposes understandings of the sexed human body as culturally conditioned. In dismantling any lingering idea of the 'naturalness' of gender, it contributes a sharpened sense of the ways in which even at a physiological level the sexed body is a malleable object of a politics of power and interpretation.¹⁵ In sum, whether we focus on socio-political modalities or on language as the medium which represents and interprets the world, the self and the human body, the concept of 'gender' indicates the rejection of any notion that 'male' and 'female' are essential, natural and objective distinctions. It divorces the gendered individual from genital anatomy, and in place of biological determinism it substitutes language, social situation and power.

Gender politics and gender studies originated in a specific political context – the final three decades of the twentieth century in the secularised western world. In that environment, they have become intimately associated with some of the fundamental issues of modern and post-modern philosophy: the nature and production of language, knowledge, power and selfhood. But because of that very context, 'gender' has also encountered

¹³ For a discussion of this slippage and its methodological implications, see Joan Scott, 'Some more reflections on gender and politics', in the revised edition of her *Gender and the Politics of History*, pp. 199–222.

¹⁴ Oakley, 'Brief history', p. 30.

¹⁵ Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories about Men and Women* (New York, 1985); Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York, 2000).

Cambridge University Press

0521813476 - Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900

Edited by Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

powerful challenges which have delayed its impact, renegotiated its terms or even denied it any validity at all.¹⁶ Whether propounded by opponents of secularisation or of westernising paradigms of political and social development, these refutations have constrained the development of concepts of gender, rendering their acceptance patchy. Even within the western world, gender studies are construed as far more radical in some countries and institutions than in others. The essays in this volume indirectly reflect this: our authors write in a wide range of specific political situations ranging from the American to the Middle Eastern, and in various religious milieux as well as self-consciously secular contexts. Although some write from a position of greater personal involvement in the politics of social equality than others, all of us know that the scholar as much as the object of study is gendered, and that none of us can deny our own bodily subjectivity or personal experience of gender.

Nevertheless, we all engage with a common understanding of 'gender', agreeing that it is both a method of analysing past societies and also a subject of study within them. Although some of the chapters which follow incline to one rather than the other, most deploy both together. As a group of essays, they take as their domain the human body, social institutions (family, marriage, church, state) and the rhetorics of sexuality; as their method, they search out both implicit and explicit ways in which sexual differences informed politics, culture, society and religion in the late Roman empire and its successor civilisations.

The driving impulse behind the spread of the concept of gender has been contemporary political action, and historians' efforts to explain the formation of modern, western gender systems have tended to concentrate their energies in the period from the French Revolution onwards.¹⁷ Nevertheless, historians, political theorists and sociologists alike are now far more sensitive than they were in the 1970s and early 1980s to the absence of any universals underlying the modern, western gender order. Indeed, anthropologists have made it abundantly clear how very different gendered roles, discursive practices and understandings of the sexed human body are in other cultures.¹⁸ There is now a general recognition that gender is historically contingent, expressed through and interacting with the cultural

¹⁶ Cf. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (revised edn), pp. ix–xiii, 211–18; Roded, *Women in Islam*, pp. 9–18; Barbara L. Marshall, *Configuring Gender: Explorations in Theory and Politics* (Peterborough, Ont., 2000), pp. 144–9.

¹⁷ See, for example, the essays collected together by Shoemaker and Vincent (eds.), *Gender and History*.

¹⁸ Of the vast literature, key works include Michele Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (eds.), *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford, 1974); Rayna Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (Stanford, 1975); Carol MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern (eds.), *Nature, Culture and Gender* (Cambridge,

Cambridge University Press

0521813476 - Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900

Edited by Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: gendering the early medieval world*

9

resources and social matrix particular to any given time and place. All that is remarkably constant is the presence of gender differences in all known human societies. Beyond that, gender is fluid, subject to constant challenge and reformulation, multivalent not monolithic and not easily susceptible to generalisation.

Approaching the centuries between AD 300 and 900 with this in mind, we also build on recent scholarship on women, men and sexuality in classical, western medieval, early Islamic and Byzantine societies. Over the past generation, this has followed a trajectory similar to that of women's and gender history in general, although with some notable modulations. Broadly speaking, there have been three historiographical phases since the 1970s. The initial one drew attention to women within existing modes of historical analysis and identified the realities of women's lives with their concomitant modes of subordination. The second phase was marked by conceptualisations of the distinctiveness of women's lives and cultural expressions which either established new interpretive agendas or claimed a different historical space for women. Most recently, attention to the social and cultural formations of gender relations has followed, somewhat belatedly, the agenda outlined above.¹⁹

In the early phase of women's history, in which the keynote was 'becoming visible', the women of some historical periods were nevertheless far more visible than of others. The comparative invisibility of women in traditional Eurasian societies contributed to retarding their emergence as historical subjects in their own right: the women of the centuries and cultures featured in this book were notably absent from the general histories of women composed in the 1970s–80s.²⁰ By the time the women of late antiquity, Byzantium and the early medieval west were gaining scholarly attention

1980); Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead (eds.), *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality* (Cambridge, 1981); M. Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift* (Berkeley, 1988); Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne (eds.), *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies* (London, 1994); Sherry Ortner, *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (Boston, 1996).

¹⁹ For overviews see Olwen Hufton, 'Women, gender and the *fin de siècle*', in Michael Bentley (ed.), *Companion to Historiography* (London, 1997), pp. 929–40, and Johanna Alberti, *Gender and the Historian* (Harlow, 2002). Note Hufton's comments on the differing American and European trajectories of women's and gender studies. Historiographical trends in classical and medieval studies are sketched by Allen J. Frantzen, 'When women aren't enough', in Nancy F. Partner (ed.), *Studying Medieval Women* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), pp. 143–69 esp. pp. 145–50; Liz James, 'Introduction: women's studies, gender studies, Byzantine studies', in L. James (ed.), *Women, Men and Eunuchs* (London, 1977), pp. xi–xxiv, and Maria Wyke, 'Introduction', in M. Wyke (ed.), *Gender and the Body in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 1–7. For a different framing of the literature, consult Janet L. Nelson, 'Family, gender and sexuality in the Middle Ages', in Bentley (ed.), *Companion to Historiography*, pp. 153–76.

²⁰ Neither Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Coon, *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, 1st edn (Boston, 1977), nor Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women*

Cambridge University Press

0521813476 - Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900

Edited by Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith

Excerpt

[More information](#)

IO

JULIA M. H. SMITH

in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it had become problematic to study the women of more recent historical periods as a single, relatively homogeneous group at all.²¹ Indeed, medieval Islamic women could be described as 'becoming visible' only as recently as 1999.²² For the period and cultures under discussion here it is possible to fracture the category of 'women' along lines of ethnicity, status and class, but the extreme scarcity of any direct evidence for women's activities and experiences makes attempts to dissolve it into multiple subjectivities exceptionally difficult.

Instead, scholarly impulse has come from rather different directions, on the one hand the institutional and theological history of Christianity and on the other the history of sexuality. From the 1960s onwards, attention to the role of women within contemporary churches, Catholic and Protestant alike, prompted both re-evaluation of the roles of women within the early Christian church and reappraisal – often searing – of the development of patristic teaching about women and gender order.²³ One consequence of this has been lay and academic fascination with the high-profile women saints of late antique and medieval Christianity; another, a sophisticated body of scholarship on the gendered aspects of Christian ethical and moral teachings.²⁴ To the extent that injunctions to sexual abstinence – and indeed

in *Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, 2 vols. (New York, 1988), nor Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society*, 2nd edn (London, 1996) devotes more than a handful of pages to them.

²¹ Cf. Denise Riley, 'Am I that Name?' *Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Basingstoke, 1988).

Groundbreaking titles on women c. 300 to 900 include Averil Cameron and Amélie Kuhrt (eds.), *Images of Women in Antiquity* (London, 1983); Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1983); Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1984); Suzanne F. Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500–900* (Philadelphia, 1985); *Storia delle donne in occidente*, vol. 1: *L'Antichità*, ed. Pauline Schmitt Pantel (Rome, 1990) [English translation: *A History of Women in the West*, vol. 1: *From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints* (Cambridge, MA, 1992)]; *Storia delle donne in occidente*, vol. 11: *Il Medioevo*, ed. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (Rome, 1990); [English translation: *A History of Women in the West*, vol. 11: *Silences of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA, 1992)]; Joëlle Beaucamp, *Le Statut de la femme à Byzance, IVe–VIIe siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1990–2); Werner Affeldt (ed.), *Frauen in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter: Lebensbedingungen – Lebensnormen – Lebensformen* (Sigmaringen, 1990); Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1993); Léonie Archer, Susan Fischler and Maria Wyke (eds.), *Women in Ancient Societies: An Illusion of the Night* (London, 1994). For an overall assessment, see Julia M. H. Smith, 'Did women have a transformation of the Roman world?', in P. Stafford and A. B. Mulder-Bakker (eds.), *Gendering the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2001) [also published as a special issue of *Gender and History* 12, 3 (2000)], pp. 22–41.

²² Cf. Gavin R. G. Hambly, 'Introduction. Becoming visible: medieval Islamic women in history and historiography', in Hambly (ed.), *Women in the Medieval Islamic World* (Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 3–27. See also Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (eds.), *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender* (New Haven, 1991).

²³ For example, Rosemary R. Ruether, *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York, 1974); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York, 1983).

²⁴ A short selection: Caroline Walker Bynum, 'Women's stories, women's symbols: a critique of Victor Turner's theory of liminality', in R. L. Moore and F. E. Reynolds (eds.), *Anthropology and the*